

Kindly Fictions:
Rereading Loss in the Writings of
Hélène Cixous, Jean Rhys, Virginia Woolf, and Denise Riley

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*'I could spend hours trying to write [this] as it should be written'*¹

¹ Virginia Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', *Moments of Being: Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Jeanna Schulkind (London: Pimlico, 2002), p.79.

‘I, Mary Hannity, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.’

Abstract

This thesis explores the response to loss through attention to a distinctive set of narrative texts written by Hélène Cixous, Jean Rhys, Virginia Woolf and Denise Riley. What connects these different writers, across time and place, is not only that each responds to loss in writing, but that each writer does so in a manner contesting prevalent associations of melancholia and trauma, giving place to an alternate ethics of mourning. Freud's seminal essay, 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917), established the groundwork for contemporary critical examinations of loss, both a source of definitions and a framework to be revised. In particular, melancholia has been reappraised extensively as an ethically privileged response of fidelity following loss. However, as a number of critics elsewhere have noted, the moral economy of the melancholic risks reifying loss in subject-formation and, consequently, risks aggressive and exclusionary attempts at identity reconstruction and consolidation. Associated with an appeal to trauma transfigured as ethically originary, the critical ascendancy of melancholia is one from which this thesis departs. As I show, Cixous, Rhys, Woolf and Riley emphasise instead the ways in which loss can be playfully and pleasurably set in motion in the present, as each chapter argues in differing ways. Articulating loss through the framework of fiction, broadly conceived, allows us to avoid the effects of vicarious identification with loss and trauma, while strategies of displacement resist the assumption of an uncritical empathy. The attitude of multidirectional encounter at work across this thesis (with loss; with the 'other'; across genre, time, and writing) is, what's more, an attempt to mitigate the paradigm of non-approachability and unsharability when it comes to the loss and trauma of others that, as Denise Riley contends, isolates the bereaved in contemporary life to 'the inhuman remote realms of the "unimaginable"'.

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Impact Statement

This thesis has potential for impact both inside and outside academia. The benefits of this thesis within academia include the presentation of new readings of particular texts, specifically work on Virginia Woolf's relatively overlooked autobiographical attempt 'A Sketch of the Past' (1939/1940) and Denise Riley's *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (2012), on which a range of critical analysis has yet to be published. Drawing together research on Hélène Cixous and Jean Rhys has developed connections between these two writers which can be put to use in future scholarship and curriculum. Outside the scope of literary analysis and education, this thesis has the potential to impact upon broader cultural conceptions of loss and the understanding of mourning within society. Loss pertains to a broad spectrum of experience and impacts upon all of us at different times, in differing ways. One of the aims of the thesis is to counter the 'structural barriers to telling' that, according to Riley, prohibit the response to loss and the bereaved in twenty-first century cultural life. This thesis thus foregrounds loss as imaginable and sharable – in literature and language, and between communities and individuals. This thesis therefore has potential quality-of-life social benefit for those suffering from loss and trauma by conceptualising critical forms of empathy and encounter through which loss may be broached and approached. Further work would be required in order to achieve this over time. Through, for example, public engagement and workshop activities within communities and one-to-one; via disseminating outputs such as written publications and podcasts (following the 'Griefcast' podcast and books such as Julia Samuel's 2017 *Grief Works: Stories of Life, Death and Surviving*); and through collaboration with therapists and training within therapeutic, counselling and analytic practices.

Introduction: Kindly Fictions

*'I'll not be writing about death, but about an altered condition of life'*¹

These lines by Denise Riley, written in response to loss, provide a fitting introduction to this thesis, which explores the response to loss through attention to a distinctive set of narrative texts by Hélène Cixous, Jean Rhys, Virginia Woolf and Denise Riley. What connects these different writers, across time and place, is not only that each responds to loss in writing, but that each writer does so in a manner contesting prevalent associations of melancholia and trauma, giving place to an alternate ethics of mourning. I establish in this introduction the terms of my study (namely mourning, melancholia, trauma and pleasure); my approach to the selected texts; and the relevant critical field. In so doing, I present a rereading of Sigmund Freud's seminal 1917 study of loss.

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Writing in her memoir 'Waiting' (1985), Denise Riley states that 'no ameliorating reconstruction' of the past is possible: 'There is cruelty which cannot be dissolved into history or sympathetic sociology. To claim "understanding" would be a kindly fiction'.² This thesis does not claim to know the experience of loss and trauma of the other, nor does it hold out hope of redemptive reconstruction. Yet my title *Kindly Fictions* stresses the 'fictionality' of the response to loss insofar as the past *can* be creatively reworked in the present, as each chapter argues in differing ways.

The term 'fiction' is thus understood broadly. This thesis in fact explores not only fictional narrative texts but what I describe in chapter three as the heterogeneous genres of mourning: two of my primary texts, Woolf's 'A Sketch of the Past' (1939/1940) and Riley's *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (2012), are not fictional but more properly memoir and/or diary (Riley herself is a poet and philosopher). The primary subject of chapter one, Hélène Cixous's *Or, les lettres de mon père* (1997), cannot be comfortably (nor absolutely) designated as fictional or a novel: conventional plot, narrative voice and diegesis are not easily established; characters and events can be closely identified with

¹ Denise Riley, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (London: Picador, 2019), p.7.

² Denise Riley, 'Waiting', *Truth, Dare or Promise: Girls Growing Up in the Fifties*, ed. Liz Heron (London: Virago, 1985), pp.237-248, p.247-248.

biographical details of Cixous's life or are drawn from well-known historical figures (such as Freud), or indeed characters from other fictions (such as Hamlet); and, what is more, sense is not straightforwardly established given Cixous's characteristic use of word play, neologism, and proliferating synonym and homonym – especially for someone who is not strictly a scholar of French Studies such as myself.³ If the most properly 'fictional' text, or writer of fiction, explored in this thesis is then Jean Rhys with *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), which is the primary subject of chapter two and a re-writing of Charlotte Brontë's classic novel *Jane Eyre* (1847), it remains the case that even Rhys's fiction is internally displaced and non-identical to itself. As will be argued in due course, Rhys's text continually overlaps with, both displaces and incorporates, the complex social histories and identities that are at stake, which are underscored by Rhys as themselves narratives that can be told and retold, or else are subject to silencing and shutting up.

'Fiction' is thus a term that attaches to and encompasses others: 'narrative'; 'novel'; 'work of literature'; 'work of imagination'; 'story'; 'text'; even poetry, theory, and autobiography. The very openness of 'fiction' toward its others indicates, as is developed in chapters one and three, an attitude of encountering difference that is characteristic of this thesis, which moves through and between the parameters of texts, and the boundaries of genre and temporal periodisation (and to a lesser extent those of language). While Riley suggests that the pain of the past cannot be integrated through reconstruction, such as takes place in narrative telling and writing, she nevertheless stresses elsewhere the necessity of attempting an imaginative encounter with loss and the other (and the losses of the other) of the like that occurs in this thesis. As is ultimately argued in chapter four, Riley's recent work in response to the death of her adult son, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow*, encourages the reader to 'try to imagine' the 'unimaginable' losses of others – 'it's not so difficult' – in order that suffering not be compounded, nor the 'impassable structural barriers to telling' of loss and death be sustained.⁴ The attitude of kindly encounter across this thesis (with loss; across genre and writing; with the 'other') is therefore also an attempt to mitigate a prevalent paradigm of non-approachability (unspeakability and

³ Yet even for Jacques Derrida, writing of his contemporary, collaborator, and close friend Cixous: '[her writing is] literally ... untranslatable, therefore not far from being unreadable'. Jacques Derrida, *H.C. for life, That Is to Say ...*, trans. Laurent Milesi and Stefan Herbrechter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), p.65.

⁴ Riley, *Time Lived*, p.18; p.65..

non-representability) of the loss and trauma of others that, as Riley contends, even in the twenty-first century isolates the bereaved to ‘the inhuman remote realms of the “unimaginable”’.⁵ To stress the *fictionality* (in the sense of the imagined or creative/contingent nature) of “understanding” the past and the experience of the other may then be vital, so as to avoid the effects of vicariously identifying with victimhood, or assuming an uncritical empathy.

If this is to establish the parameters of my use of the term fiction, what then of the term ‘kindly’? The modern sense of the word ‘kindly’ suggests that there is something warm-hearted or tender about the fictions (understood broadly) to be discussed in this thesis: that they go about their business as fictions in a kind manner, with tenderness. But a work such as *Wide Sargasso Sea* is not easily associated with notions of kindness or compassion, whether in terms of the diegesis of the novel or its relation to the reader. In her novels, Rhys actively undermines expressions of sympathy as forms of bourgeois sentiment and racist social reproduction, and my discussion of friendship in *Wide Sargasso Sea* suggests its structural impossibilities. Yet if ‘kindly’ gets at questions of anthropomorphism – the attribution of a ‘kindly’ character to works of literature and fiction – it also begs questions of similarity and difference, class and race, that are pertinent to readings of Rhys’s representation of racial dynamics and the inscription of the environment in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

‘Kind’ comes from the Old English *cynde* and *gecynde*, meaning native or natural, and is related to *cynn* or ‘kin’, meaning one’s family relations or kinsfolk.⁶ Paradoxically, it is through the *refusal* of kinship and the thwarting of identification that *Wide Sargasso Sea* is most able to expand the space of kinship, making room for forms of relationality that do not centralise the assumptions of Rhys’s white protagonists and their impositions upon the Caribbean people and landscape. My title prompts us in this regard to consider the very nature and extent of the designation ‘human’, and the reach of what is meant by ‘humankind’. For Timothy Morton, ‘kindness’ is an acknowledgment of non-humans, such as the environment, involving ‘the deliberate forging of links between humans and

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.18.

⁶ Thank you to Professor Matthew Beaumont for pointing out the etymological connection between ‘kind’ and ‘kin’. Thank you also to Professor Nicholas Royle for bringing to light the implications of anthropomorphism in relation to my title.

nonhumans' who always and already share worlds.⁷ It is not so much that one is trying to *be* kind but that '[k]ind has to do with what we are. We have specific qualities ... but in such a way that we can't abstract some bland (usually white, male) essence of "human" from the parts of being human. Being kind means being-in-solidarity with nonhumans: with *kind-red*.'⁸ In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the refusal of the Caribbean landscape to provide a reflection of European agency and will resists the centrality of the singular ego 'I' and its attendant taxonomies, articulating spaces of solidarity and possibility that remain *otherwise*. It is not that we can say for sure where we are taken in such moments of reading, which refuse precisely our efforts of control and capture. Sitting with such sites of possibility, however discomfiting, nevertheless engages us in the existence of alternatives – in the existence of the otherwise –, which is to equip readers with the foundations for future change.

*

This thesis therefore proposes a reading model of decentring. It will be quickly apparent that my corpus is not arranged chronologically. This has to do with the non-linearity of mourning experience, which can cause, as Riley writes, a 'cut through any usual feeling of chronology'.⁹ An investigation of the literary valences of mourning can therefore furnish us with new forms of periodisation, or rather refuses the impulse to settle our literary objects in any singular positioning. My decision also has to do with the understanding of 'kindliness' that I am elaborating. Calling into question linear arrangements and the debt to reproduction, the non-sequential ordering of my corpus intends to investigate the possibility of affiliations across time – precisely, forms of kin across time.

The result is a rather unruly temporality. A quality of veering is produced by my (dis)ordering of the chronological past. As Nicholas Royle elaborates in his exploration of the term 'veering' and the possibilities it opens for responding to the experience of reading, "'veering" has a curious capacity for antithetical meaning: it can be intentional (an exercise of or in control, as in veering to avoid something) but it can also be unintentional (a failure to control, a lack or loss of control).'¹⁰ Veering is a fitting form for a literary study that inscribes a field of enquiry with agency and intention but

⁷ Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (Verso: London, 2017), p.245.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.245.

⁹ Riley, *Time Lived*, p.31.

¹⁰ Nicholas Royle, *Veering: A Theory of Literature* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2011), p.68-69.

without wishing to enclose its objects in a realm imagined to be isolated, absolute or impartial, able to be fully controlled, and that questions the very desire for coherent narratives. Periodisation is viewed from this perspective as a function of self-positioning in the present, rather than as confirmation of an implicitly well-arranged and orderly past that is bracketed off from the future. The ordering of this thesis thus opens the way for ‘cross-temporal identification[s]’ according to which we, readers and thinkers in the present, are emphasised as agents who are already implied in the makings of the past and a future we cannot fully grasp yet.¹¹ The time of anticipation (and its associated pleasures) is therefore privileged over the time of traumatic repetition. The particular works I bring together all exhibit a temporal desire for futurity, whereby the endings inaugurated by loss are articulated as sites of possibility for new readings and imaginings in the present. Such is the space of mourning, reconceived less as a retroactive working over of the past and more a sphere of openness toward possible futures: an old world has ended, new worlds are still to come.

Insofar as my selected works nevertheless inscribe a field of enquiry and establish a literary environment or community – insofar as they are *kindly* or *of a kind* – the body of work presented remains attentive to the possibilities of ‘veering within’.¹² As Royle continues to clarify, there is ‘a powerful desire or even compulsion ... to construe veering as a shifting or turning *around*, in other words to impose order, structure and centre on the thought of veering’, meaning that the word ‘veer’ is often associated with the figure of the circle, and formations that encircle or enclose.¹³ This centrism (‘logocentrism, anthropocentrism, egocentrism’) prioritises the narrative ‘I’, or the human subject herself, and yet the boundaries establishing enclosure, the inside and the outside, may themselves be on the move: a ‘non-teleological de-centring’ therefore ‘haunts’ the capacity to veer, ‘keeps it going, makes it veer’.¹⁴ Inasmuch as I veer in this thesis, changing temporal direction, I develop a reading model of de-centring that calls into question unidirectional teleologies and the

¹¹ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.89.

¹² Royle, *Veering*, p.68. As Royle points out, the very word ‘environment’ pivots on the second syllable ‘vir’ which is the same as ‘veer’, from the French *vire* (‘to turn’). Thus ‘[t]here is no “environment” without veering’ (*Ibid.*, p.69).

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.69.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.69.

systems of identification that they uphold, as well as the exclusionary postulation of a constitutive outside. The disturbance of the difference between internal and external that I detect across my corpus troubles the absent-presence of melancholic externality, returning us precisely to the question of what is *kin* in ‘kindly fictions’.

We might say that Cixous, Rhys, Woolf and Riley are kin in the paradoxical sense that each writer shares a sense of that which is errant or fugitive in affiliation. The inferred ‘kindly disposition’ of my title refers us to the relations of non-appropriation of self and other that I argue are at stake in the writings of Cixous, Rhys, Woolf and Riley, demonstrating not only the attentiveness of these works to what is wayward about cross-temporal encountering, but at the same time making room for difference and meaning without seeking to enclose what it names (or, in the case of Rhys, emphatically does *not* name). Such forms of cross-temporal kinship do not fail to admit that which may be uneasy in the bonds that can arise in the refusal of sense-making projects and their terms of legibility. Following on stylistically from Cixous, the French word for meaning/sense may itself offer in its plurality a fitting signifier for the type of multidirectional approach at work in this thesis, in which I emphasise proliferation and promiscuity over pinning down. ‘Sens’ in French means not only ‘sense’ (as in meaning) but also ‘direction’ (as in way), pointing to the different directions in which meaning, and temporality, may take us, and to the creative and politically meaningful insight of contingency, which implies that present and future need not be determined by a harmful past. We can also think about *senses*, given my attention to the themes of pleasure and touch, as well as the creative and ethical place of jokes and comedic excess (the ‘sense’ of humour), that I find to be at work in a pivotal way within the response to loss. ‘Sens’ is also a quasi-homonym with ‘sans’ in French, meaning ‘without’ or ‘wanting’, returning us then to the *absence* of the lost object and to loss itself, i.e. the inevitability to which the writings under discussion in this thesis respond.

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Sigmund Freud’s short essay ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ (1917) is a foundational text (especially terminologically) for contemporary critical examinations of loss.¹⁵ The binary Freud attempts to

¹⁵ A large number of contemporary studies address mourning and melancholia across different contexts in cultural studies, political life, and for literary analysis. Many are addressed across this thesis. For now, see for

demarcate between his two titular terms, however, reveals instead their originary overlap and interaction. The ‘origin’ thus involves an encounter with difference or displacement, and this is an insight to which this thesis returns repeatedly. It is at first necessary to trace Freud’s two terms and their critical implications. In doing so, I present a rereading of Freud’s 1917 essay.

Mourning is a term used to describe the experience of grief in response to loss. Freud introduces the concept of mourning as somewhat self-evident, a precursor to his investigation into the analogous, yet pathological, state of melancholia. Staying with the former term for now, ‘the work of mourning’ is according to Freud’s essay the piecemeal process of libidinal detachment from a love object that ‘Reality-testing’ has proven to be lost.¹⁶ Freud’s examples of loss range from a ‘betrothed girl’ who has been ‘jilted’, i.e. the loss or absence of a particular person but not necessarily through death, to the loss of ‘some abstraction which has taken the place of [a loved person], such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on’.¹⁷ (In due course I will comment upon the movement from particularity to abstraction here, and the difference between loss and absence that is becoming evident.) The ‘work of mourning’ is piecemeal, taking place ‘bit by bit, at great expense of time and cathectic energy’, in order that the mourner can in time attach to other love objects.¹⁸ In this respect, mourning has a ‘very specific task to perform’ which is, as Tammy Clewell describes, the conversion of emotional energies and remembrances into ‘a futureless memory’: mourning can be said to be overcome when the mourner no longer expects satisfaction from the lost object in the present or future, and when emotional ties are free to attach elsewhere, ‘accepting consolation in the form of a substitute for what has been lost’.¹⁹ Mourning thus defines the past as *past*; desirable, ‘healthy’,

example, Wendy Brown, ‘Resisting Left Melancholia’, *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2003); Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Massachusetts: MIT, 2002); Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (Columbia University Press, New York: 2005); Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005); Love, *Feeling Backward*; Alessia Ricciardi, *The Ends of Mourning: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Film* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1987), p.253.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.253; p.252.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.253.

¹⁹ Tammy Clewell, ‘Mourning Beyond Melancholia: Freud’s Psychoanalysis of Loss’, *JAPA: Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 52:1 (March 2004), pp.43-67, p.44.

‘normal’ mourning demarcating a temporal trajectory toward forgetting and replacement. ‘The fact is’, Freud writes, ‘that when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again’.²⁰

‘An unpalatable implication of this account of mourning would be’, as Timothy Secret expresses, ‘that it appears the best mourning is amnesia’.²¹ Challenging this implication of forgetting, Jacques Derrida stresses neither mourning nor melancholia as an ethical response to loss, positing instead the intermittent perpetuation of the relation to the lost object by means of ‘demi-deuil’ (‘mid-’ or ‘semi-mourning’).²² Derrida’s conception of mourning or ‘mid-mourning’ – at stake in this thesis in the form of intermittence – is dispersed across his writings, and relates to his deconstructive approach to Freud and psychoanalysis.²³ While ‘mid-mourning’ is precisely not a binary between mourning and melancholia but an ethical double bind generated by loss, in which grief and forgetting oscillate, Derrida’s stress on an impossible fidelity nevertheless relates to the connection between ethics and trauma that will be critiqued in what follows, embodying the ‘faithful continuing melancholic attachment’ to loss that I will interrogate shortly.²⁴

Indeed, if Derrida challenges Freud’s binary model of mourning, we can still turn attention (in Derridean fashion) to what Freud’s text *does* as well as what it *says it does*. That mourning is ‘piecemeal’, temporally speaking, is already to somewhat disorganise the ostensible self-evidence of the concept and its triumphant trajectory toward completion.²⁵ An instability enters from the outset of Freud’s essay, which begins with Freud’s ‘admission, as a warning, against any over-estimation of the

²⁰ Freud, ‘Mourning’, p.253.

²¹ Timothy Secret, *The Politics and Pedagogy of Mourning: On Responsibility in Eulogy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p.144. For my review of which see Mary Hannity, ‘On Responsibility in Eulogy’, *Textual Practice*, 30:2 (2016), pp.373-376.

²² Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p.328-333 (p.333 for ‘mid-mourning’).

²³ Derrida’s work on mourning and melancholia is compiled in his writings on the loss of his own loved ones and friends in Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, ed. and trans. Pascale-Anna Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); see also Jacques Derrida, *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde* (Paris: Galilée). On the impossibility of faithfully rendering the lost other see also Jacques Derrida, *Memories for Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava, and Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); Sean Gaston, *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida* (London: Continuum, 2006).

²⁴ Jennifer Rushworth, *Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch, and Proust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p.6.

²⁵ Freud, ‘Mourning’, p.253.

value of our conclusions ... We shall, therefore, from the outset drop all claim to general validity for our conclusions'.²⁶ Freud is not necessarily being prescriptive about mourning, but rather makes an observation, when he writes that 'It is also well worth notice that, although mourning involves grave departures from the normal attitude to life, it never occurs to us to regard it as a pathological condition and to refer it to medical treatment'.²⁷ Mourning might just as well be pathological, then, if only it occurred to us, and by presupposition that which 'is' pathological is likewise a matter of context and perception. Thus, demonstrating the 'distinguishing features of melancholia' as a pathological condition in distinction from mourning, Freud in fact demonstrates that 'with one exception, the same traits are met with in mourning', and goes on to list the ways in which mourning and melancholia are 'the same'.²⁸ The 'normal' course of mourning itself involves 'grave departures from the normal attitude to life' and, further, 'It is a matter of general observation that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning'.²⁹ Thus, while 'Normally, respect for reality gains the day ... its orders cannot be obeyed at once', for the demands of reality, and the reconciliation to loss, 'arouses understandable opposition'.³⁰ The opposition to mourning – of which mourning consists – can then be read as more 'understandable' than mourning itself: 'It is really only because we know so well how to explain [mourning] that this attitude does not seem to us pathological' and 'It is remarkable that this painful unpleasure is taken as a matter of course by us'.³¹ Freud follows this sentence, which highlights the contingent and contextual nature of knowledge of mourning, with an explicit assertion of 'fact' ('The fact is, however, that when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again').³² Reading the text attentively, it's clear that Freud's 'fact' ought itself not be taken as 'a matter of course': mourning is posed as a self-evident concept at the same time as the concept is allowed to unravel, becoming unfamiliar in Freud's very attempt to define it.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.251.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.252.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.252.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.253.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.253.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.252; p.253.

³² *Ibid.*, p.253.

The definition of mourning as a trajectory toward completion that is explicitly stated by Freud in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ is therefore undermined, or set in play, by and through the Freudian text. The trajectory of mourning, conceptually and textually, does not itself end according to the Freudian text of psychoanalysis *tout court*. Secret writes that ‘Although the direct discussion of mourning makes up only a tiny fraction of Freud’s textual archive, one could argue that the dominant subject matter of psychoanalysis is nothing other than how to cope with a sequence of losses’ such as the ‘traumatic letting-go of a loved object [that] plays a productive role at the very opening of our existence’.³³ While I contest the implication of a universal traumatic subjectivity in chapter one, the point remains that ‘mourning’ is discursively at play across the Freudian text, or is constitutive of it, and so does not conform to its own (apparent) trajectory of completion, de-cathexis, and laying to rest.

Nor even is such an ending established according to the textual confines of ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ – which ends with an indication of the illusion or impossibility of *any ending* that does not give rise to new beginnings and rereadings. ‘As we already know, the interdependence of the complicated problems of the mind forces us to break off every enquiry before it is completed – till the outcome of some other enquiry can come to its assistance’.³⁴ ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ ends (insofar as it ends at all) by asking to be *reread* by and through its others. The trajectory toward completion that Freud has associated, in this same essay, with mourning is open-ended, according to a logic of perpetual rereading, which presupposes and promises the arrival of another (‘some other enquiry can come to its assistance’). The attitude of encounter characteristic of the approach to genre and writing at work in this thesis is thus already evident in Freud’s ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, and the promise of the other, at the end of Freud’s essay, relates to the promising anticipation that is at stake in chapter one. As will become clear., *Or, les lettres de mon père*, in which Freud features as a character, details the late arrival of a boxful of letters written by the narrators long dead father, and ends with her promise to read these letters the next day; ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ ends with a

³³ Secret, *Politics and Pedagogy*, p.141.

³⁴ Freud, ‘Mourning’, p.268.

similar stress upon the promising futurity of its object, according to which the promise of reading is a promise of *rereading*, the ending predicated upon the possibility of return.

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What of melancholia? The demarcation of Freud's titular terms (mourning and melancholia), or rather Freud's struggle to demarcate his titular terms, and the critical dissemination of and persistent grappling with these two terms since Freud, demonstrates the prevalence of an economy of management and moderation – the policing of the point between balance and excess, success and failure, 'norm' and pathology – with which the response to loss has been approached. Commenting that such determinations (between sufficiency and excess) are 'crucial to nearly all discursive managements of grief' Louise O. Fradenburg concurs that what is at stake is 'the *creation* of a set of distinctions, whose instability is nevertheless apparent'.³⁵ What is interesting is not so much how mourning may be distinct from melancholia, but the desire to distinguish the terms as distinct in the first place, which we can understand as a desire to master, as well as the inability to do so. Freud's essay thus remains remarkable for defining (for attempting to define) melancholia as distinct from mourning.

Melancholia is, according to Freud's essay, the more complicated and pathological response to loss, analogous with mourning but involving 'loss of a more ideal kind'.³⁶ In melancholia, 'one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost' and the loss is unconscious: we may know *whom* we have lost but not *what* we have lost in them.³⁷ Freud makes an elision at this point: 'The difference [with mourning] is that the inhibition of the melancholic seems puzzling to us because we cannot see what it is that is absorbing him so entirely'.³⁸ Just as the melancholic 'cannot see' what is lost, nor can the analyst/observer ('we cannot see what is it'), thus evidencing in an initial way the tendency of melancholia to confuse outside and in (and so to become all-encompassing, as will be problematised

³⁵ Louise O. Fradenburg, "'Voice Memorial': Loss and Reparation in Chaucer's Poetry, *Exemplaria*, 2:1, (March 1990), pp.169-202, p.181.

³⁶ Freud, 'Mourning', p.253.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.254.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.254.

in chapter one):³⁹ if in mourning ‘it is the world which has become poor and empty’, in melancholia it is ‘the ego itself’ which is ‘worthless’.⁴⁰ When Freud writes (remarkably) that ‘the shadow of the object fell upon the ego’ the suggestion is that an identification has taken place between the ego and the lost object, the ‘outside’ has made its way ‘in’, melancholia behaving in this sense ‘like an open wound’, attracting identifications ‘from all directions’ in order to preserve the lost object.⁴¹ As will be stated in more detail in chapter one, Judith Butler thus explains that the reappearance of the lost object ‘in’ the ego occurs ‘as a scene of self-beratement that reconfigures the topography of the ego’.⁴²

This ‘identification of the ego with the abandoned object’ in melancholia brings melancholia into association with the inception of the superego as internalised moral law.⁴³ Identifying with the lost object so as to preserve it, melancholia has been read as a form of ‘endless ... fidelity’ allowing for ‘a continuous engagement with loss and its remains’.⁴⁴ By virtue, however, of its very representativeness – that is, the invitation to melancholic identification – and due to its association with moral “‘character’” and “‘conscience’”, melancholia has historically come to signify an ethically superior response to loss and thus a privileged form of suffering.⁴⁵ In this thesis, melancholia thus figures as not only an experience of and response to loss that lingers, as defined above, but a

³⁹ Evident here is also the crucial factor of context (the ability to ‘see’) which is key to my argument in chapter four.

⁴⁰ Freud, ‘Mourning’, p.254.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.258; p.262. The preservation of the lost object has a ‘magical’ quality about it, according to Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, the psychoanalysts who reformulated Freud’s distinction between mourning and melancholia as a distinction between ‘introjection’ and ‘incorporation’. The latter term, which I use at times in this thesis in relation to traumatic inaccessibility, is, like melancholia, related to hallucinatory and fantastical fulfilments according to which the reality of loss is refused and change avoided. The lost other is incorporated in an unavowable and inexpressible way, a foreign element within the psyche that cannot be accessed (a ‘crypt’). See Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word: A Cryptonymy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

⁴² Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (California: Stanford University Press, 1997), p.180. The internalised relation is one of self-beratement because, as Butler explains, ‘The internalised losses of the ego are re-established as part of this agency of moral scrutiny, the internalisation of anger and blame originally felt for the object in its external mode. In the act of internalisation, that anger and blame, inevitably heightened by the loss itself, are turned inward and sustained’ (*Ibid.*, p.171-174).

⁴³ Freud, ‘Mourning’, p.257-258.

⁴⁴ Rushworth, *Discourses*, p.5-6; David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, ed., *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p.4.

⁴⁵ Freud, ‘Mourning’, p.256. In ‘The Ego and the Id’ (1923) Freud states the ‘we did not [previously] appreciate the full significance of [melancholic identification] and did not know how common and how typical it is’. Sigmund Freud, ‘The Ego and the Id’, *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1987), p.367.

discursive signifier of social order and exclusionary identification related to trauma, as I will now explain.

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Much prior to Freud's 1917 rendering of melancholia as pathological mourning is Aristotle's contention that black bile saps great men.⁴⁶ As developed in chapter one, melancholia has traditionally been associated with an exceptional access to truth and self-knowledge, as evident in Freud's claim that '... [the melancholic] has a keener eye for the truth than others who are not melancholic ... for all we know it may be that he has come pretty near to self-knowledge; we only wonder why a man must become ill before he can discover truth of this kind'.⁴⁷ Freud's observation that 'A good, capable, conscientious woman will speak no better of herself after she developed melancholia than one who is actually worthless; indeed, the first is actually more likely to fall ill of the disease than the other, of whom we too should have nothing good to say' suggests that feminine worth and propriety ought to be measured against susceptibility to a male melancholic standard.⁴⁸ Due to its association with exceptionality, truth, and genius, melancholia and melancholy aligned with maleness at the expense of the abjected feminine, linked to the finite and undignified body, whose boundaries may be troubled and can be hard to control (as in weeping, or the contortions of laughter).⁴⁹ The symptomatic female

⁴⁶ A history that is parsed in brief by Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p.6-9. In the classical humoral theory of the body, melancholia is a physiological condition (not yet a reaction to loss) resulting from an excess of 'black bile' that causes the body to become cool and ill tempered. On the history of melancholia in particular (as distinct from mourning, and including the humoral theory), see for example Stanley Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression: From Hippocratic to Modern Times* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Jennifer Radden, ed., *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). The seminal and encyclopedic early seventeenth-century work of melancholy is of course Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Thomas C. Faulkner, Nicolas K. Kiessling, and Rhonda L. Blair (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989-2000).

⁴⁷ Freud, 'Mourning', p.255. The essays in the edited collection *Loss* are, as Eng and Kazanjian state, 'written 'In the spirit of Freud's wonder ... engag[ing] the keen complexity of a truth of this kind' and focussing 'In particular ... upon the shifting meanings of melancholia' (Eng and Kazanjian, *Loss*, p.23; p.2.). My work in this thesis rather attempts to play with the privileging of melancholia and the melancholic, as is becoming clear in the above.

⁴⁸ Freud, 'Mourning', p.255. Related to which is the early psychoanalytic conception of woman as lack or lacking, or in other words the failure of orthodox psychoanalysis to adequately conceive of 'woman' at all. See Juliet Mitchell's 1970s text for an example of the revaluation of the Freudian relation to femininity and feminism. Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: A Radical Reassessment of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (London: Penguin, 1987).

⁴⁹ 'Melancholia' and 'melancholy' are synonyms for sadness in response to loss that lingers and, as is becoming clear in this introduction, the terms also refer to culturally constructed discourses of value and privilege regarding loss and difference. The former term, 'melancholia', is associated in particular with the Renaissance and heightens the association with pathology and disease. I use both terms fairly interchangeably so as not to

body, unable to achieve transcendence, is in turn associated with biological death, as distinct from a simultaneous symbolic death that, according to Maurice Bloch, perpetuates an eternal social order associated with the rule of men.⁵⁰ Juliana Schiesari has thus argued that melancholia emerged as a cultural order foundational of discourse that at the same time excluded meaningful female participation in discourse.⁵¹ According to which schema, the male melancholic represents a privileged form of suffering and an enduring response to loss, one adequate to human suffering and history, whilst female sadness is simply that. ‘The category of genius’, as Jennifer Radden puts it, ‘had no more place for woman than had the category of melancholy’.⁵²

Dominick LaCapra has noted the association between melancholia and the critical and aesthetic emphasis upon trauma as a predominant contemporary mode of perceiving subjectivity and the past.⁵³ The apparent binarisation of mourning and melancholia is thus disrupted further by the concept of trauma, the force of which triangulates the theoretical place of mourning and melancholia in this thesis. Numerous works attest to the contemporary investment in trauma, to the point that Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, in their important historical study of social trauma, work to denaturalise the concept.⁵⁴ Ruth Leys charts how the concept of trauma developed from reference to the impact of bodily shock in victims of freight railway accidents in the 1860s, to gaining more

embed my argument in the pathology paradigm, although ‘melancholia’ is more applicable to the focus on Freudian mourning and melancholia. For more on the terminology of melancholy and melancholia, see Mary Cosgrove, *Born Under Auschwitz: Melancholy Traditions in Postwar German Literature* (New York: Camden House, 2014), p.8-9.

⁵⁰ Maurice Bloch, ‘Death, Women, and Power’, *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, ed. Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p.214-22.

⁵¹ Juliana Schiesari, *The Gendering of Melancholia: Feminism, Psychoanalysis and the Symbolics of Loss* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992). Schiesari’s work on melancholia differs from other theorists of gendered melancholia, such as Kristeva and Kaja Silverman, due to Schiesari’s reading of melancholia as not only a pathological condition but a cultural order. Schiesari cites Kristeva’s ‘uncritical overestimation of the male term’ and rhetoric of violence against the maternal in general, and notes that Silverman does not perceive of melancholy as part of a cultural order (*Ibid.*, p.91; p.74). Along with Kristeva’s *Black Sun* see also Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

⁵² Radden, *The Nature of Melancholy*, p.40; see also, p.39-44.

⁵³ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

⁵⁴ Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*, trans. Rachel Gomme (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). See also, Roger Luckhurst, ‘TraumaCulture’, *New Formations*, 50 (2003), pp.28-47; Dominick LaCapra, ‘Trauma, History, Memory, Identity: What Remains?’, *History and Theory*, 55 (October 2016), pp.375-400; Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press); Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London: Routledge, 1992); Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer, *Between Witness and Testimony: The Holocaust and the Limits of Representation* (New York: State University Press of New York, 2001).

psychological meaning, at the turn of the century, as a ‘wounding of the mind’ after sudden extreme events that, it was thought, could not be integrated into ordinary awareness or emotion, a meaning that was related to the work of Jean Martin Charcot, Pierre Janet, Josef Breuer, Freud and others.⁵⁵ Trauma thus has parallels with aesthetics of silence, aporia, and the ineffable sublime, insofar as the traumatic experience is not available to conventional language, representation, reason, or narrative temporality. *Nachträglichkeit* or ‘deferred action’ was a term introduced by Freud in his case study of the ‘Wolf Man’, who received as a child ‘an impression to which he is unable to react adequately’ until twenty years later, through Freudian analysis, ‘he [is] able to grasp with his conscious mental processes what was then going on in him’.⁵⁶ In relation to events that have assumed the status of cultural trauma, trauma has been argued to contain the possibility of a paradoxical form of testimony, via ‘the enigmatic language of untold stories – of experiences not yet completely grasped’, which can communicate, argues Cathy Caruth, precisely ‘through what they do not directly comprehend’.⁵⁷ Thus ‘a new mode of seeing and of listening ... *from the site of trauma* – is opened up to us’.⁵⁸ Trauma ‘in this [psychoanalytic] reading is not simply the consequence of unbearable experiences, but also in itself a testimony – a testimony to what has happened to the human ... that also bears witness to the persistence of the human’ in events that threaten dehumanisation.⁵⁹

This thesis shows how such prevalent categories related to loss, such as trauma and melancholia, are sustained or set in motion across my corpus, analysing what is made possible when the ‘conventions of sorrow’, and the modes of identification and expectation that they uphold, are complicated, challenged, or circumvented.⁶⁰ While I make space in this thesis for the aspects of loss and trauma that we cannot know directly, I also move away from orthodox interpretations of trauma

⁵⁵ Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p.4-5. It was not until after the Vietnam war, following the work of psychiatrists, activists and social workers, that the combat shock of American Vietnam war veterans was acknowledged by the inclusion of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the 1980 third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders*, which abandoned the term ‘neurosis’ to describe traumatic responses (*Ibid.*, p.5). This was significant, as it removed trauma from moral context – perpetrators could experience PTSD as well as victims. (The categories are indeed overlapping.)

⁵⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Case Histories II*, The Pelican Freud Library, Vol.9 (London: Penguin, 1979), p.278.

⁵⁷ Caruth, *Unclaimed*, p.58.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.58.

⁵⁹ Fassin and Rechtman, *Empire*, p.20.

⁶⁰ Virginia Woolf, ‘A Sketch of the Past’, *Moments of Being: Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Jeanna Schulkind (London: Pimlico, 2002), p.105.

as shattering, unapproachable, and untellable. For, as is underscored elsewhere, the radical association – implied by Caruth – between ethics and trauma, universalises traumatised subjectivities such that trauma can become ‘a foundational experience for identification with others ... [and] a basis of our common humanity ... [that is] central to our status as ethical beings’.⁶¹ By way of a loss of distinction between the historically specific and the structural, value is lent to the assumption that individuals occupy the same position in relation to events, and ‘victimhood’ is read as a psychological category rather than an ethical and socio-political status related to context.⁶² Insofar as this thesis proposes and investigates various encounters with loss and the telling of trauma, then, such encounters are emphasised not in terms of traumatic psychic shattering, but through counterintuitive forms of promise, pleasure, or performative play, as well as through critical forms of displacement, self-positioning, and empathy.

Indeed, the tendency in melancholia toward emotional excess and inhibition-loss, plus the ‘satisfaction’ the melancholic finds in ‘self-exposure’ which is ‘without a doubt enjoyable’, renders unstable the restriction of melancholia to binary thinking and categorisation, regarding not only gender difference but the boundaries of pleasure and pain.⁶³ Thus melancholia, tending toward emotional excess, can in fact ‘drift’ into representational modes associated with ‘feminine’ pleasure, as will be key to my contributions in this thesis (in particular in chapters one and three).⁶⁴ Pleasure indicates the exploratory ‘drift’ of melancholy away from itself, and as such the possibility of approaching loss and the past through articulations other than those of melancholia and trauma. A counterintuitive form of continued relation to the lost object and the passing of time, pleasure also serves to indicate the pleasurable relation to reading and texts that I have adopted throughout this thesis. Relatedly, the visual embodiment of melancholia as female, most notably in Albrecht Dürer’s

⁶¹ Stephanie Bird, *Comedy and Trauma in Germany and Austria after 1945: The Inner Side of Mourning* (London: Routledge, 2015), p.13-15.

⁶² LaCapra, *Writing History*, p.79. Thus for LaCapra perpetrator trauma does not involve identification between ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’ (*Ibid.*, p.79).

⁶³ Freud, ‘Mourning’, p.255; p.260.

⁶⁴ Bird, *Comedy and Trauma*, p.23; p.19; p.86. On melancholy as a performative discourse in the context of a post-Holocaust literary language of remembrance, see Cosgrove who writes that ‘Rather than being merely a naïve expression of emotion, then, melancholy discourse enables critical investigation of cultural norms and values and offers an arsenal of motifs and figures of shifting import that transmit the effort to grasp what exceeds ordinary understanding’ (Cosgrove, *Born Under Auschwitz*, p.8).

engraving *Melencholia I* (1514), which has been taken to represent the femininising effect of sorrow within men, ‘a metaphor of male sorrow’ or the very ‘*cause and source* of male melancholy’, in fact indicates, I would suggest, the instability of the gendered opposition onto which melancholia is made to map – hence the force with which it is policed – and thus the excess of melancholia over its own demarcations.⁶⁵ The values ascribed to melancholia are therefore ‘neither ridged nor uncontested’.⁶⁶ Thus, while I have selected texts written by women in this thesis, this is a designation that each writer under discussion shows to be contested, constructed or open to rearticulation.⁶⁷ The conditional phrase in Woolf’s famous line from *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), that ‘We think back through our mothers if we are women’, indeed actually serves to offer an opportunity for identification *outside of* the category of ‘women’.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, focussing on texts written by woman enables a challenge to the male melancholic mode. If, as Dana Luciano states in reference to psychoanalysis, ‘Woman’s loss, the loss that is “woman”, is delegitimated in comparison to men’s melancholic display of loss; as themselves the sign of loss, or lack, women can have no agential relationship to it’, in this thesis I show that women’s reaction to loss can be not only agential, but can involve pleasure as a

⁶⁵ Radden, *Nature of Melancholy*, p.40. On Dürer’s famous engraving see also Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977); Raymond Kilbansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art* (London: Nelson, 1964). See also the *Malinconia* engraving from Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia* (1603) for another visual representation of melancholia as female or feminine.

⁶⁶ Bird, *Comedy and Trauma*, p.23.

⁶⁷ Each primary writer under discussion in this thesis has a specific relation to the designation ‘woman’, particular to their time of writing. Virginia Woolf’s writing, thinking, and biography tracks the changing status of women from the Victorian domestic sphere into political and professional life; Jean Rhys’s writing – which to some extent responds to Woolf’s blind spot when it comes to race – presents an intersectional understanding of the discursive social production of gender identity. Hélène Cixous is well known for her association with 1970s post structural feminism in France and *l’écriture féminine* (a term Cixous coined). In more contemporary works, such as *War in The Nursery: Theories of the Child and Mother* (1983) and *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of ‘Women’ in History* (1988), Denise Riley presents materialist histories of ‘woman’ as a shifting, politically contingent social category in the context of post-war childcare and Thatcherite Britain. See Denise Riley, *War in The Nursery: Theories of the Child and Mother* (London: Virago, 1983); Denise Riley, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of ‘Women’ in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1988).

⁶⁸ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas*, ed. Anna Snaith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Judith Halberstam counters the wide interpretation of Woolf’s phrase from *A Room of One’s Own* as a founding statement of a new matrilineal aesthetic lineage. Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p.2; p.125.

transformative possibility, not least the pleasures of creative reading and writing, that situate the subject in the present and anticipate a promising future.⁶⁹

Thus, in order to bring alternate perspectives into play, I have selected texts written by women associated with the elevation of suffering (Cixous); female victimhood (Rhys); pathological trauma (Woolf); and the outright refusal of dictions of mourning and trauma in relation to grave loss (Riley). Such a multidirectional approach as encountered in this thesis, across genre and time, could well be read under the remit of trauma, the genealogy of which does not unfold as a continuous narrative but rather is 'irruptive' and 'episodic' in its development.⁷⁰ However, my multidirectional approach takes insight from the often playful temporal unsettling to narratives of the past that will become evident in the work of Cixous, Rhys, Woolf, and Riley, as remains to be seen in this thesis.

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Chapter one opens with a wager. Claiming that 'women do not mourn', Cixous encourages her reader to take up 'the challenge of loss in order to go on living'.⁷¹ This chapter establishes the terms of melancholic identification in relation to Cixous's writing and conception of the past, before turning to notions of trauma, pleasure, and promise in her 1997 text *Or, les lettres de mon père*. As I show, *Or, les lettres de mon père* sets loss in lively motion, enabling Cixous's distinctive response to death and loss that ultimately mitigates implications of traumatic rupture and sublimity. Dynamics of melancholic identification and disavowal, established in chapter one, continue to be key in my second chapter, which turns to Rhysian strategies of displacement in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). As Marianne Hirsh has made clear, strategies of displacement and distancing are key to mitigating spectatorial over-identification with loss.⁷² With strong psychoanalytic association, 'displacement' further relates to an overriding question that begins in chapter one, as to how we might 'give place' to the lost other through writing and remembrance. Contributing to debates regarding Rhys's representation of race

⁶⁹ Dana Luciano, 'Passing Shadows: Melancholic Nationality and Black Critical Publicity in Pauline E. Hopkins's *Of One Blood*', *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p.157.

⁷⁰ Leys, *Trauma*, p.10.

⁷¹ Hélène Cixous, 'Castration or Decapitation?', *Signs*, 7:1 (Autumn 1981), pp.41-55, p.54.

⁷² Marianne Hirsch, 'Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy', *Act of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. M. Bal, J. Crewe and L. Spitzer (London: University Press of New England, 1999).

and affect, chapter two argues that *Wide Sargasso Sea* subtly displaces identification with the dominant scripts of history, all the while scrutinising ‘race’ and racism as powerful projections of plenitude and loss. This does not mean, however, that equal scrutiny is at work in the critical space surrounding *Wide Sargasso Sea*, suggesting that (literary) history is no progress narrative. Chapter three investigates Woolf’s relatively overlooked autobiographical attempt ‘A Sketch of the Past’ (1939/1940), bringing to light a playful refusal of coherency in her performative narration of traumas past and present. Recounting experiences of patriarchal violence, childhood sexual assault, multiple deaths, as well as contemplations of suicide under conditions of war, Woolf nevertheless expresses her ‘enjoy[ment]’ in narrating the painful experiences of her past and dwindling present.⁷³ Focussing on Woolf’s unruly and haptic relation to temporality, I argue that ‘A Sketch of the Past’ exceeds temporal drives to contain, conserve, or unidirectionally progress, thereby disrupting the terms of mourning and laying to rest with which Woolf’s ‘Sketch’ has been associated. Situating ‘A Sketch of the Past’ alongside Woolf’s critique of nationalism in her final, anti-fascist novel *Between the Acts* (1941), clarifies an association established between notions of unidirectional historical progress and the total recuperation of the past, and the rising fascism pertinent to Woolf’s time of writing, and our own. Finally, in chapter four, Riley’s notion of ‘imagined empathy’ from *Time Lived, Without It’s Flow* (2012) is interrogated so as to establish an alternative to understandings of trauma and the pain of loss as incommunicable and unsharable.⁷⁴

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Chapters one and three explore the personal losses of the past and how these can be creatively reimagined in the present, through writing; chapters two and four interrogate questions of identification and empathy when it comes to the loss and trauma of others. In this way, my thesis moves between personal loss and loss on a more collective or historical scale. This movement, which I attempt to nuance throughout, is already anticipated in Freud’s comment that mourning involves the reaction to the loss of a loved person or ‘some abstraction which has taken the place of [the loved

⁷³ Woolf, ‘Sketch’, p.82.

⁷⁴ Riley, *Time Lived*, p.47.

person], such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on'.⁷⁵ Two weeks after the death of her son 'J', Riley writes that an 'instant enlargement of human sympathy' followed loss, 'put[ting] me in mind of those millions whose children were and are lost in natural disasters, starved, drowned, or systematically obliterated in wars'.⁷⁶ Moving from her own proximity to the death of a loved one, caused by undiagnosed cardiac complications, to the losses entailed by systematic obliteration elsewhere, Riley's response to loss occasions an ethical opportunity of self-extension toward even distant others through an experience of 'imagined empathy'.⁷⁷

Communities, contends Benedict Anderson in 1983, are to be distinguished not by the status of their authenticity or falseness, but according to the fashion in which they are imagined.⁷⁸ All communities are to some extent imagined, according to Anderson, and the drawback of expressing community or nation in terms of falsity/genuineness, as opposed to articulating their imagined nature, is the implication that a true or total community can exist that, presumably, one would not need to imagine. Emphasising the *imagined* nature of empathetic community and consolation, Riley ultimately does not postulate a 'true' or total empathy that would involve the eradication of alterity and the over-riding of loss in absolute consolation. While it is necessary to interrogate the practical and ethical efficacy of the imaginative alliance with others, as I do across this thesis, 'Kindly Fictions' ultimately, and playfully, proposes the space of writing as one of creative and critical encounter with one's own losses, and the losses of others. In a letter to Ludwig Binswanger of 1929, after the death of his daughter Sophie, Freud complicates further the meaning of mourning and melancholia, writing that 'Although we know that after such a loss the acute state of mourning will subside, we also know we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute. No matter what may fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else. And actually this is how it should be ... [I]t is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not want to relinquish'.⁷⁹ Rather than

⁷⁵ Freud, 'Mourning', p.252-253.

⁷⁶ Riley, *Time Lived*, p.22.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.47.

⁷⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

⁷⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Letters of Sigmund Freud 1873-1939*, ed. Ernst L. Freud, trans. Tania and James Stern (London: Hogarth Press, 1970), p.386.

reduce loss to an object of study, this thesis gives space to explore what this 'something else' might be.

1. Promise of Forgetting: Hélène Cixous's *Or, les lettres de mon père* (1997)

In the essay 'Castration or Decapitation?' (1981) Hélène Cixous claims that 'women do not mourn': and this is where their pain lies! When you've mourned, it's all over after a year, there's no more suffering. Woman, though, does not mourn, does not resign herself to loss. She basically takes up the challenge of loss in order to go on living: she lives it, gives it life, is capable of unsparing loss. She does not hold on to loss, she loses without holding onto loss.¹

Cixous's statement requires some unpacking. It follows her deconstruction of western patriarchy as an order based on the fear of expropriation i.e. the castration complex. Mourning, in this cultural order, means 'not losing' insofar as mourning is the work by which one's investments in the lost object are hastily recovered. The work of mourning therefore facilitates the masculine economy of property exchange in which all losses are made good: 'Mourning, resigning oneself to loss, means not losing. When you've lost something and the loss is a dangerous one, you refuse to admit that something of yourself might be lost in the lost object. So you "mourn," you make haste to recover the investment made in the lost object'.² Woman does not mourn because she is constitutively outside the cultural system of opposition, exclusion and assimilation that constitutes patriarchy (as in: 'she does not enjoy what orders masculinity – the castration complex').³

If 'women do not mourn', are they subject to a ceaseless melancholy? Accepting the premise that to be an excluded term in the patriarchal order is to suffer varied losses, it is nevertheless possible that in constructing femininity as 'capable of unsparing loss' Cixous repeats the psychoanalytic paradigm she wishes to side-step, whereby woman signifies loss, lack or an ineffable excess (*jouissance*).⁴ What is more, Cixous's apparent derision of mourning elevates the capacity to suffer

¹ Hélène Cixous, 'Castration or Decapitation?', *Signs*, 7:1 (Autumn 1981), pp.41-55, p.54.

² *Ibid.*, p.54.

³ Cixous conceives of patriarchy as the scene of perpetual 'war' between oppositional hierarchical couplings in which 'death is always at work' in the sense that 'one of the terms of the couple is destroyed in favour of the other'. Within this system 'woman ... is death' understood as a radical externality or loss of access to symbolic meaning (*Ibid.*, p.44-48).

⁴ As Cixous puts it, 'in the end woman, in man's desire, stands in the place of not knowing, the place of mystery. In this sense she is no good, but at the same time she is good because it's this mystery that leads man to keep overcoming, dominating, subduing, putting his manhood to the test, against the mystery he has to keep forcing back' (*Ibid.*, p.49).

(‘When you’ve mourned, it’s all over after a year, there’s no more suffering’) and so conforms to prominent interpretations of melancholia as an ethically privileged response to loss, befitting suffering’s ‘unsparing’ nature because it refuses to forget. Discourses of melancholia and melancholy do indeed have repercussions for Cixous’s conception of ‘woman’: according to Julia Schiesari, the ‘gendering of melancholia’ functions through the production of male dignity and grandeur in response to loss at the expense of the maligned feminine abject.⁵ The melancholy man’s ‘keener eye for the truth’, as Freud writes in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ (1917), contributed to the discursive production of melancholy as representative of social and moral distinction associated with male creative genius and critical faculties, with the suspicion that ‘truth itself [might] be gloomy’, over and above debased feminine sorrow or melodrama, tied closely to the inescapable and undignified female body.⁶ The continued actualisation of loss in melancholia, in which ‘the existence of the object is psychically prolonged’,⁷ enabled melancholia to serve historically as the affective embodiment of a broader symptom or malaise, such as ‘the repressed relation between individual and society’

⁵ Juliana Schiesari, *The Gendering of Melancholia: Feminism, Psychoanalysis and the Symbolics of Loss* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992). As noted in my Introduction, ‘melancholia’ and ‘melancholy’ are synonyms referring to sadness in response to loss that lingers, as well as to culturally constructed discourses of value and privilege regarding loss and difference. ‘Melancholia’ is associated in particular with the Renaissance and heightens an association with pathology and disease. I use both terms fairly interchangeably here so as not to embed my argument in the pathology paradigm, although ‘melancholia’ is more applicable to the focus on Freudian mourning and melancholia in this thesis.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1987), p.254; Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p.76. Stephanie Bird confirms that ‘historically melancholy has been seen as a particularly apt form of representation for male creativity as the artist uses his insight to transform suffering into a culturally valorised work of art. As an “exceptional individual”, the melancholy man is a suitable heir to tragedy’. Melodrama functions for Bird as the debased female equivalent of melancholy due to melodrama’s unabashed relationship to pleasure, not truth. Stephanie Bird, *Comedy and Trauma in Germany and Austria after 1945: The Inner Side of Mourning* (London: Routledge, 2015), p.19. In Virginia Woolf’s ‘A Sketch of the Past’ (1939-1940), the subject of my third chapter, Woolf highlights the interaction between melancholy and melodrama. Woolf satirises the Victorian ‘men of genius’ in relation to her twice-widowed father and his performative display of melancholy. The ‘gloomy’ father is *feminised* by Woolf because of his grief, ‘like the Queen in Shakespeare – “here I and sorrow sit”’ – as Woolf’s quotation from Shakespeare’s *King John* (1598) indicates. Melancholy and melodrama are thus not strictly binarised by Woolf but rather the solipsism of melancholy slips into the excess and pleasure of melodrama. Virginia Woolf, ‘A Sketch of the Past’, *Moments of Being: Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Jeanna Schulkind (London: Pimlico, 2002), p.117-118; p.104. The subversion/satire of melancholia as a privileged masculine discourse will be seen later in this chapter in relation to Cixous’s fictionalised representation of Freud. On melodrama, see Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976); Michael Hays and Anastasia Nikolopolou, eds., *Melodrama: The Cultural Emergence of a Genre* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996).

⁷ Freud, ‘Mourning’, p.258. According to Freud, the libido that through mourning becomes ‘free and uninhibited again’ is in melancholia drawn into the ego, which becomes cloaked in the cathexis once directed towards the other (the melancholic being in this sense more faithful than the mourner). There has been an ‘*identification of the ego with the abandoned object*’ (*Ibid.*, p.253).

according to Schiesari.⁸ In ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ Freud does indeed suggest that melancholia instigates critical agency itself, ‘the agency commonly called “conscience”’, insofar as the ego internalises the object and thus instigates an internal partition, ‘a cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification’, which is to describe the onset of the superego and its punitive injunctions.⁹ As Judith Butler explains, and due to the presence of ambivalence,¹⁰ the relation to the lost object reappears ‘in’ the ego, the object is ‘brought inside’ the ego, and this occurs ‘as a scene of self-beratement that reconfigures the topography of the ego’.¹¹ Consequently, we cannot presuppose the existence of the ego prior to melancholic loss and identification, as ‘our ability to refer to the psyche through tropes of internality are themselves effects of a melancholic condition’.¹²

Melancholia therefore risks reifying loss in subject-formation by virtue of its very representativeness and, consequently, risks aggressive and exclusionary attempts at identity reconstruction and consolidation (such as the abjected feminine key to this chapter; the postulation of racial lack and plenty key to chapter two; and as in Butler’s thesis of the melancholy of gender).¹³ The

⁸ Freud, ‘Mourning’, p.258; Schiesari, *Gendering*, p.51. According to Freud, the libido that through mourning becomes ‘free and uninhibited again’ is in melancholia drawn into the ego, which becomes cloaked in the cathexis once directed towards the other (the melancholic being in this sense more faithful than the mourner). There has been an ‘*identification* of the ego with the abandoned object’ (Freud, ‘Mourning’, p.253).

⁹ Freud, ‘Mourning’, p.256; p.258. On the obscenity of the super-ego’s injunctions see Adam Philips, *Unforbidden Pleasure* (London: Penguin, 2015).

¹⁰ According to Freud’s essay, ambivalence is at once the particular condition of melancholia and an attribute of our every attachment. Ambivalence is best understood not as mixed feelings but as the interdependence and commonality of contradictory attitudes regarding the other. It is described by Freud in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ as a ‘precondition’ of melancholia, what gives mourning its ‘pathological cast’, but also as ‘an element of every love relationship’ (Freud, ‘Mourning’, p.258). Freud writes that ‘The loss of a love-object is an excellent opportunity for the ambivalence in love-relationships to make itself effective and come into the open’ (*Ibid.*, p.260). The critical agency of the super ego arises when the conflict of ambivalence between the ego and the lost object turns inward, creating ‘a cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification’ (*Ibid.*, p.260).

¹¹ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (California: Stanford University Press, 1997), p.180. The internalised relation is one of self-beratement because, as Butler explains, ‘The internalised losses of the ego are re-established as part of this agency of moral scrutiny, the internalisation of anger and blame originally felt for the object in its external mode. In the act of internalisation, that anger and blame, inevitably heightened by the loss itself, are turned inward and sustained’ (*Ibid.*, p.171-174).

¹² Butler, *Ibid.*, p.171.

¹³ On the melancholy of gender see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990). Butler contends that ‘The process of internalising lost loves becomes pertinent to gender formation’ because in the scenario of oedipal rivalry the incest taboo ‘initiates a loss of a love-object for the ego’ which ‘recuperates from this loss through the internalisation of the tabooed object of desire’ (*Ibid.*, p.79). In the case of heterosexual desire, the object is denied but the modality of desire is retained and deflected onto other objects of the opposite sex, ‘But in the case of a prohibited homosexual union ... both the desire and the object require renunciation and so become subject to the internalising strategies of melancholia’ (*Ibid.*, p.79-80).

non-linear, disorganised temporality implied by the melancholic ‘tropes of internality’, whereby loss takes primacy over the ego, is crucial to the investigation across this thesis of unruly originalities and temporalities. In this first chapter, and in spite of Cixous’s placement of woman in the position of pain (the melancholic implications of which I have outlined above), we can at the same time consider what it might mean for Cixous to ‘take up the challenge of loss’ understood as a statement set *against* the punitive injunctions of the superego and the order of the castration complex. This chapter therefore attends not only to Cixous’s implication in the ascendancy of melancholic identification as a privileged response to loss and the ensuing production of the feminine object, but also to the limitations of such terms when it comes to aspects of Cixous’s writing that actively anticipate a future, emancipating the present from traumatic repetition and melancholic retrospection.

Firstly, I turn to Cixous’s conception of writing to point out an emphasis on the moral economy of the melancholic in Cixous’s ethics of encounter and response to loss. I argue that Cixous’s *Or, les lettres de mon père (Gold, My Father’s Letters)* (1997) invokes not only the belated temporality of traumatic experience but the melancholic paternal sublime. *Or, les lettres de mon père* details the discovery or ‘arrival’ of a boxful of letters written by the narrator’s long-dead father, given to her by her brother, who has kept them unopened since their father’s death. Beginning with a meditation on the pleasures of reading and forgetting, *Or* ends with the narrator’s promise to read her father’s letters the very next day. Therefore, as I go on to argue, if *Or* stages an (ethics of) encounter, then this is finally to be understood not in terms of traumatic inaccessibility, nor as a melancholic moral paradigm, but consists instead in the pleasurable anticipation of encounter itself. *Or*’s logic of anticipation in relation to the promise of reading and writing mitigates any emphasis on traumatic rupture and melancholic identification, making possible Cixous’s ethical thinking of encounter (with alterity, with death, with writing) which need not take on the terms of trauma, and whereby trauma might itself contain the promise of encounter.

*

Cixous’s attempt to represent the losses of the past through an appeal to a melancholic paradigm is suggested by her statement that writing is an ‘obligation of fidelity’ to the ‘scandals’ of former

times.¹⁴ Due to the retention of the lost object through a process of psychic internalisation, the obscurity that surrounds the nature of loss, and the non-delimited temporality of melancholic affect, melancholia would gain influence precisely as an aptly faithful response of fidelity to the catastrophic nature of twentieth-century nationalisms and the perceived crisis of meaning under the terms of postmodernism. For in melancholia ‘loss is not simply forgotten with time and the pain of suffering remains actual’.¹⁵

However, the ethical ascendancy of melancholia, and the conflation of loss and absence through which melancholia emerges, poses issues for ethics itself, as clarified by Dominick LaCapra.¹⁶ LaCapra warns that in melancholia the capacity to adequately work through what is lost in the here and now is hindered. ‘[T]he depressed, self-berating, and traumatised self, locked in compulsive repetition, is possessed by the past, faces a future of impasses, and remains narcissistically identified with the lost object’.¹⁷ LaCapra contends that the apparent ineffability and unrepresentability of traumatic experience, with which melancholic impasse is associated, is part of a tendency to transfigure trauma and melancholy in terms of the transcendental sublime and, as Bird expands, this transfiguration bestows ethical value onto trauma and melancholy *per se*. The subject is marked as ethical, as constituted by alterity, through confrontation with an absolute and ungraspable alterity irreducible to the subject’s possibilities and self-presence, thereby involving ethics with traumatic rupture (as in Levinasian ethics, to which this chapter will turn, whereby the encounter with the other is shattering; and as in dominant philosophical conceptions of death as non-appropriable, which this chapter will ultimately work to counter).¹⁸

¹⁴ Hélène Cixous, ‘From the Scene of the Unconscious to the Scene of History’, *Future Literary Theory*, ed. Ralph Cohen (London: Routledge, 1989), pp.1-18, p. 11.

¹⁵ Bird, *Comedy and Trauma*, p.19.

¹⁶ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014). LaCapra notes that the ability to distinguish between absence and loss is an aspect of the complex processes of working through, and that while loss and absence are not an oppositional binary, loss and absence are rapidly conflated. This conflation is naturalised with ethically dubious results according to LaCapra, including ‘the impasse of endless melancholy impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted’ (*Ibid.*, p.46).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.66.

¹⁸ Bird, *Comedy and Trauma*, p.13. See also Naomi Mandel, who writes that in trauma theory the unspeakable and unrepresentable are identified as responsible forms of relation to historical reality, echoed in the assumption that trauma theory ‘is a vehicle for an active engagement with history, an engagement codified as an ethical wrestling with the past via the very vocabulary of silence that trauma theory engenders’. Naomi Mandel,

Presenting a further danger for LaCapra is the facilitation through melancholia of an elision of socially and historically specific loss with timeless absence, enabling identification with states of victimhood by those who are not victims.¹⁹ The positing of a link between trauma and ethics, and the conflation of loss and absence therein, thus ‘severs the connection of ethics with reason’ according to Bird,²⁰ as well as eliding the specificities of social and historical context: as in psychoanalysis, in which necessary separation from the mother is thought in terms of constitutive trauma or, somewhat differently, as in the link made by Cixous above between woman and pain, in which loss becomes a constituent of ‘feminine’ identity underscored by pain (‘and this is where their pain lies!’). We can say that Cixous supports the ethical injunction to remember that constitutes the moral economy of the melancholic and its privileged cultural place when she relates an anecdote involving the ‘great Russian poetess Akhmatova’ who, with one husband shot and the second dying in deportation, is standing in line outside the prisons of Leningrad. Cixous celebrates the poet’s response of creative affirmation concerning the miseries of the present, the expression of which facilitates recognition:

a faceless woman turns back toward her because the woman with no face in front of her tells her: Akhmatova, the great poetess, is standing behind you. And the faceless woman asks: could you know how to describe this? Akhmatova responded: yes ... Yes, she could know how to describe the indescribable, she would know how to give the gift of recognition to these people who had become faceless as a result of the greatest misery, the one which makes us into strangers to ourselves.²¹

Subscribing to notions of art’s redemptive and transcendental nature in relation to suffering, Cixous celebrates the aesthetic ability to describe, and so to transform, the indescribable nature of human suffering through symbolic confrontation with it. By ‘giving the name ... to pain’ the writer, according to Cixous, transforms collective suffering and its effects of estrangement into the capacity for common human identification.²² But the gift of recognition, or commemoration, is not exactly

Against the Unspeakable: Complicity, the Holocaust, and Slavery in America (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), p.53.

¹⁹ Bird, *Comedy and Trauma*, p.85.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.13.

²¹ ‘Scene of the Unconscious’, p.8.

²² *Ibid.*, p.8.

free: the capacity for identification that Cixous posits via the work of art is ironically based on the artist's exceptional expressive abilities over and above the 'faceless' masses, thereby ratifying the privileged position of the artist as one able to retain their 'face' (which is to say, in Levinasian terms, their ethical grounding or relation) in *the* face of suffering.²³ That Cixous's exceptional figure is female, however, is already to mitigate the melancholic paradigm and its male emphasis, and we may further note the conditional nature of Akmatova's affirmative promise ('yes ... Yes, she could know how to describe the indescribable, she would know how to give the gift of recognition ...').

Cixous describes writing as 'the occasion of the other' to whom the writer has 'open[ed]...completely'.²⁴ Cixous thus describes an act of empathy or melancholic incorporation in and through writing. If, as Freud writes in 'Mourning and Melancholia', the 'wound' of melancholia is 'open', then it becomes the site of identification (openness) with or through suffering.²⁵ Thus in 'Albums and Legends' (1994), her most explicitly autobiographical work, Cixous appears to melancholically *become* the dead of history when she adopts and ventriloquises the voice of her dead German Jewish grandfather, writing: 'I am so dead'.²⁶ The starkly truncated Jewish family tree reproduced by Cixous in this text is further testament to the collective and extensive loss to which melancholia is perceived as a privileged ethical response, with Cixous at one point interpreting history as a universal 'genealogy of graves' in relation to which her writing offers faithful 'echoes'.²⁷ We might say then that for Cixous writing *is* the 'open wound' of melancholic identification: stating that in writing she is 'invaded by a whole people, very specific persons whom I didn't know in the least

²³ Rosemary Arrojo's argument concerning Cixous's championing of the Brazilian novelist Clarice Lispector may also hold sway regarding Cixous's relationship to the Russian poet. Arrojo points out that Cixous may be more 'possessive' than open to Lispector's alterity, noting that Cixous largely uses Lispector's lesser-known and non-European work to advance her own claims. Rosemary Arrojo, 'Interpretation as Possessive Love: Hélène Cixous, Clarice Lispector, and the Ambivalence of Fidelity', *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Susan Bassnett and Hanish Trivedi (London: Routledge, 1999), pp.141-161.

²⁴ 'Scene of the Unconscious', p.9.

²⁵ 'The complex of melancholia behaves like an open wound' (Freud, 'Mourning', p.262.).

²⁶ Mireille Calle-Gruber and Hélène Cixous, *Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (London: Routledge, 2003), p.186.

²⁷ As Cixous writes in *Rootprints* regarding the deportation and diaspora of her family: 'My life begins with graves. They go beyond the individual, the singularity. I see a sort of genealogy of graves ... When I speak today in terms of genealogy, it is no longer only Europe that I see, but, in an astral way, the totality of the universe. The families of my mother, very large as Jewish families often are, had two fates: the concentration camps on the one hand; on the other, the scattering across the earth. This gives me a sort of world-wide resonance. I have always felt it because the echoes always came from the whole earth. From all the survivors' (*Ibid.*, p.189).

and who became my relatives for eternity’, Cixous imagines the writer’s body and the text it produces as conduit for collective incorporation and transcendental (eternal) recognition, as the very melancholic ‘refuge’ that will shelter those who have suffered: ‘My texts are filled with these peoples who suffered, who fell or pulled themselves up’.²⁸ But as Saidiya Hartman states, ‘we need to ask why the site of suffering so readily lends itself to inviting identification. Why is pain the conduit for identification?’²⁹ The elision of difference or loss of distinction that melancholic identification effects is itself inscribed in Cixous’s latter phrase, which speaks the difference between those ‘who suffered, fell or pulled themselves up’ as a somewhat disconcerting similarity. One that risks, I would add, not only an elision of suffering bodies but the reproduction of the site of suffering in the work of art: do the ‘specific persons’ that ‘fill’ Cixous’s text retain their specificity once they have been reconfigured as phantasmatic ‘relatives for eternity’, i.e. assimilated?³⁰

According to LaCapra the loss of distinction, in particular the loss of conceptual distinction between loss and absence that the rhetoric of melancholia invokes, inhibits processes of working through loss, in part because present and future are rendered inaccessible, as in the experience of trauma:

When loss is converted into (or encrypted in an indiscriminately generalised rhetoric of) absence, one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted. To blur the distinction between, or to conflate, absence and loss may itself bear striking witness to the impact of trauma and the post-traumatic, which create a state of disorientation, agitation, or even confusion and may induce a gripping

²⁸ ‘Scene of the Unconscious’, p.13; Freud describes how in melancholia the love object ‘takes refuge’ in narcissistic identification (Freud, ‘Mourning’, p.260); ‘Scene of the Unconscious’, p.11.

²⁹ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.20.

³⁰ Hartman notes ‘the dangers of an all too easy intimacy’ with the suffering other (*Ibid.*, p.20). Likewise, LaCapra notes that ‘a difficulty arises when the virtual experience involved in empathy gives way to vicarious victimhood, and empathy with the victim seems to become an identity’ (LaCapra, *Writing History*, p.69). Elsewhere, Matthias Fritsch contends there is a late-modern cult of the victim that ‘witnesses all parties vying for the desired status of victim’ and that ‘such memory can easily lend itself to oblivion, or even justification, of violence inflicted upon others’ due to ‘the faulty reasoning that petrifies a victim’s identity [and according to which] victims and their descendants are incapable of themselves becoming perpetrators’. Matthias Fritsch, *The Promise of Memory: History and Politics in Marx, Benjamin and Derrida* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), p.3.

response whose power and force of attraction can be compelling. The very conflation attests to the way one remains possessed or haunted by the past, whose ghosts and shrouds resist distinctions (such as that between absence and loss). Indeed, in post-traumatic situations in which one relives (or acts out) the past, distinctions tend to collapse, including the crucial distinction between then and now wherein one is able to remember what happened to one in the past but realise one is living in the here and now with future possibilities.³¹

In the following section, I read Cixous's *Or, les lettres de mon père* in terms of this slippage between loss and absence, and the ensuing elaboration of melancholy and trauma. I then turn to the aspects of *Or, les lettres de mon père* that counter such an emphasis, along with its gendered paradigm, and actively inscribe a future.

*

Cixous stresses that writing is an '*anti-oubli*' able to 'include' even the omissions of memory.³² 'What I am recounting here (including what is forgotten and omitted) is what for me is indissociable from writing'.³³ That which is 'forgotten and omitted' may still be recounted, and writing is itself 'the way to remember' and the 'creation of a recognition-work'.³⁴ Thus while Cixous states that 'One must not forget', thereby aligning herself with the melancholic refusal to forget, the stability of meaning of memory and forgetting is not itself assured when 'what is forgotten' forms an 'indissociable' part of 'the way to remember': that is, highlighting the insinuation of forgetting within narrative and memory, Cixous suggests that writing presupposes forgetting, and that forgetting lends ethical weight to writing understood as an act that 'makes room' for the other through recognition and remembrance.³⁵ Writing becomes the space for interaction with the lost and forgotten others of history, or rather writing enables an ethical *spacing* of encounter 'that doesn't feel the need to enclose

³¹ LaCapra, *Writing History*, p.46-47. LaCapra defines absence as the foundational absence of an absolute that was never there but that is commonly elided with a real loss (of innocence, full community or unity with the mother), while loss is defined as the outcome of particular historical events and circumstances (*Ibid.*, p.43-64). In the conflation of absence into loss, historical particularity and accountability can be obscured. Further, implications of lost plenitude can constitute a nostalgic or totalising politics that would seek to reinstate a once purportedly full but now lost community or union through the (possibly violent) eradication of difference.

³² 'Scene of the Unconscious', p.7.

³³ *Rootprints*, p.203-204.

³⁴ 'Scene of the Unconscious', p.8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.7; p.13.

what it names in the confines of the already-known'.³⁶ Beyond the co-implication of memory and forgetting as unstable terms, indeed beyond the possibility of forgetting as an ethical injunction distinct from melancholic memorialisation, the conception of writing as the (non-enclosing) inclusion of a lost or forgotten object is pertinent to *Or, les lettres de mon père*, which explores the possibilities and consequences of encountering a forgotten boxful of letters written by the narrator's long dead father.³⁷

For forty years 'forgotten by the living' and 'outside of thought', in *Or* the father's letters move inwardly from an exterior, forgotten place, likened to an army that 'invades' the narrator's home just as in writing, according to Cixous, the writer is 'invaded' by lost historical others.³⁸ It comes as no surprise then that *Or* exhibits a melancholic language of incorporation (interpenetration, consumption and regurgitation): the narrator senses something of herself is 'in' the letters; her home is 'invaded' by their arrival; she is 'hungry' for her father; whose 'voice' and 'soul' are 'in' the letters; and her brother 'regurgitates' the letters which he must have symbolically consumed.³⁹

The terms of invasion are themselves suggestive of the traumatic content of the narrator's relationship to the past and the impact of her encounter with it on the possibilities and/or limitations of the present. The traumatic past here is not straightforwardly that of the narrator's family but is also the past of the nation: the terms of invasion in *Or* indicating the displaced socio-political circumstances of Cixous's childhood in French-colonised Algeria (Oran and Algiers). In Algeria the Cixous family were identified both with invasion insofar as they were French, and with dispossession insofar as they were Jewish. Cixous's neologism 'Algériance' describes a sense of originary exile, whereby arrival and return are impossible or postponed, as expressed in the suffix *-ance* that connects to Derridean *différance* or the postponement of interpretation.⁴⁰ "The whole time I was living in

³⁶ Mairéad Hanrahan, *Cixous's Semi-Fictions: Thinking at the Borders of Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p.3. Hanrahan notes how Peggy Kamuf differentiates between 'space' and 'spacing' with regards the place of the other in Cixous's writing. For Kamuf, Cixous's writing is attentive to how to write 'on' the other without enclosing or 'crushing' the other. Peggy Kamuf, 'To Give Place: Semi-Approaches to Hélène Cixous', *Yale French Studies*, 87 (1995), pp.68-89, p.74.

³⁷ Hélène Cixous, *Or, les lettres de mon père* (Paris: *Des femmes*, 1997), p.16. Translations of *Or* in this chapter my own.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.32; p.29; p.33; 'Scene of the Unconscious', p.13.

³⁹ *Or*, p.29; p.51; p.31; p.37; p.29.

⁴⁰ Mireille Rosello, *Postcolonial Hospitality: The Immigrant as Guest* (California: Stanford University Press, 2001), p.114

Algeria I would dream of one day arriving in Algeria, I would have done anything to get there, I had written, I never made it to Algeria”, as Cixous writes in *Les Rêveries de la femme sauvage: Scènes primitives (Reveries of the Wild Woman: Primal Scenes)* (2000).⁴¹ The temporality of a postponed or impossible arrival is evidently at stake in *Or*, albeit more modestly or microscopically, in which the question of how to receive, in the present, the possibly traumatic content of the past is posed by the late arrival of the father’s letters from forty years ago, and in which the various meanings of *recevoir* (to receive) are at play: to receive as one receives a letter, but also to receive as one receives, or hosts, a guest, stranger, or other.⁴² To receive as in receiving the sacrament, or taking holy orders, is another meaning that will become relevant to this chapter’s later discussion of the sublime and the Eucharist.

Or depicts the narrator’s response to the discovery of letters written by her father Georges, who died when she was a child, to his fiancée (the narrator’s mother, Eve), given to the narrator by her brother Pierre. The lateness of these letters – delayed by forty years – serves to amplify the constitutive discontinuity between composition and arrival that threatens to make all letters into apt signs of the traumatic and belated nature of attempts to write the present.⁴³ In their dramatic belatedness, these letters suggest the temporal dissonance of trauma understood as a shattering experience that may be accessed only belatedly as a consequence of repetition.⁴⁴ Thus the narrator ‘reçoit mon père alors qu’il n’est plus là’ (‘receives my father when he is no longer there’) and the letters mark the inaccessibility of the present because they begin to degenerate immediately after reading: ‘Une fois lues elles commencent à perdre leur sève leur souffle leurs cris leurs griffes. Pas seulement les lettres: tout ce qui arrive et ne repart pas’ (‘Once read they begin to lose their sap their breath their cries their claws. Not only letters: all that arrives and does not come back’).⁴⁵ Yet it is also the case that the dissonant or dwindling present is a source of plenitude and possibility for the narrator in *Or*. Playing upon the temporal structure of the letter and the double meaning of *arriver* in French

⁴¹ Hélène Cixous, *Reveries of a Wild Woman: Primal Scenes*, trans. Beverly Bie Brahic (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006), p.3.

⁴² On postcolonial hospitality in the Algerian context see chapter three of Mireille Rosello, *The Reparative in Narratives: Works of Mourning in Progress* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010).

⁴³ *Or*, p.37.

⁴⁴ As stated in my Introduction, the notion of deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*) was introduced by Freud in his analysis of the Wolf Man. See Sigmund Freud, *Case Histories II*, The Pelican Freud Library, Vol.9 (London: Penguin, 1979).

⁴⁵ *Or*, p.81; p.63.

(to arrive; to happen), Cixous suggests that letters present the possibility of *another* presence hidden in the present ('la possibilité de cette autre présence') that, like a letter, or the rupture of traumatic recall, can discontinuously arrive or happen (*arrive*).⁴⁶ From the perspective of this other present, the lost object can therefore 'va et vient' ('come and go') in an oscillating or intermittent tempo that will be relevant to my reading of Virginia Woolf in chapter three, and that remains non-total with respect to loss, absence and presence.⁴⁷ Consequently, there is a sense of 'anticipation cachée dans le pli' ('anticipation hidden in the fold') of temporal structure for the narrator in *Or* that counters the degenerative effects of loss upon the present.⁴⁸

Despite the possibilities implied in a pluralisation of the present tense, the disorganised temporality associated with the arrival of the father's letters in *Or* does tend toward an elevation and generalisation of the traumatic status of loss and time, inscribing the slippage that LaCapra warns against. The following describes the belated nature of the present that the letters expose for the narrator of *Or* and the aporia of the attempt to write it:

Toute la difficulté pour moi est d'arriver à écrire sur des tablettes versatiles dans une position d'énonciation intenable en réalité, avec le futur de la révélation en train de se dérouler très en arrière de mon présent, tout étant arrivé avant d'arriver. C'est à cause de ces lettres.⁴⁹

(The whole difficulty for me is to get to write on versatile tablets in an untenable position of enunciation in reality, with the future of the revelation in the course of unfolding behind my present, everything having arrived before arriving. It is because of these letters.)

A backward-facing present and future in which everything has happened before arriving, or has arrived before happening: this is the temporal structure of the traumatic subject ever unable to catch up with herself, her present a chronically missed moment.⁵⁰ If trauma is constituted by, precisely, an experience too sudden to integrate into the subject's present, and so one that she may experience only belatedly, i.e. something that has always 'arrivé avant d'arriver', then it does indeed confound what it

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.81.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.81.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.81.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.81.

⁵⁰ On chronically missed moments see Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2016).

means for an event to ‘arrive’ or ‘happen’ (arrive) in precisely the way that LaCapra construes as ethically dubious.⁵¹ To render trauma at a structural level, indeed in this example as the very condition of the present, is to risk the loss of specificity of social and historical meaning. What we get instead of specificity is the postulation of a generalised discourse of absence (of self-presence, for example) that obscures the possibility of addressing losses in adequately specific terms.⁵² The undecidability in *Or* inscribed in the central word *arriver* would itself express this point in a compact way: in the double meaning of *arriver* the very notion of a temporally delineated event could be said to slip away from itself.

Evidencing then the temporal disorientation that is a central feature of traumatic experience, as LaCapra points out, is Cixous’s description of a ruptured present that ‘rouler dans le ravin’ (‘will roll down the ravine’) and in which the earth opens and that which was ‘enfoui dans les entrailles a jailli’ (‘buried in the entrails sprang forth’).⁵³ A present without integrity then, a present that is not present to itself. The narrator thus finds herself paradoxically both inside and outside of time as she stays ‘Longtemps ... immobile entre les temps’ (‘for a long time ... immobile between time’) and further she expresses a panicked imperative that time wait for her as if it is running on and leaving her behind: ‘Attends! Attendez!’ (‘Wait! Wait!’).⁵⁴ In keeping with the anachronistic element of trauma, the letters constitute a kind of haunting or ‘apparition’ (‘apparition’) that resists definition and distinction and projects an allusive address: ‘aujourd’hui c’est à moi que leur apparition s’adresse’ (‘today it’s to me that their appearance is addressed’).⁵⁵ Further, the letters are depicted as unnameable and via a logic of negation: ‘Comment s’appellent ce jour ni passé ni present, ces lettres sans âge, ces êtres qui ne connaissent pas la mort ni le temps, ces échappées?’ (‘How to name this day, neither past nor present, these letters without age, these beings that know neither death nor time,

⁵¹ This being what Ruth Leys names the ‘mimetic’ theory of trauma. ‘The idea is that the traumatic experience in its sheer extremity, its affront to common norms and expectations, shatters or disables the victim’s cognitive and perceptual capacities so that the experience never becomes part of the ordinary memory system’. Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p.298.

⁵² LaCapra, *Writing History*, p.46-49

⁵³ *Or*, p.33; p.32.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p.83; p.35.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.42.

these escapees?').⁵⁶ Knowing neither death nor time, in a day that is neither past nor present: this is again the temporal logic of the traumatic (and the related anti-logic of the Freudian unconscious).

The emphasis upon discontinuity and the loss of distinction, both of which are understood as the effects of trauma, that *Or* in this way evidences, would appear to preclude the conditions for an adequate working through of loss inasmuch as the object cannot be adequately identified, as in melancholia, and thus the past repeats – the letters return – or rather the present is out of access, as in trauma. Rather than work through the loss that the dead father's letters pertain to and in some sense re-instate, there is a movement of identification with it: the hole in the father's body caused by the tuberculosis that will eventually kill him becomes his daughter's own ('j'avais un trou' / 'I had a hole');⁵⁷ an abstraction ('Qu'est-ce qu'un trou?' / 'What's a hole?'); and a wound in or of the earth itself ('la grande coupure saignante de la terre' / 'the big bloody cut of the earth').⁵⁸ The loss of the father and the particularity of his body elide into an abstract question of absence ('What's a hole?').

An elision between loss and absence is associated with the symptoms of trauma, as noted at the beginning of this chapter. The absence of the text of the father's letters from the text of *Or* registers the specific loss of the man who wrote them, Georges, as a broader textual emptiness or 'hole' from the perspective of the reader. This is an absence that the text is nonetheless structured around and attempts to represent by way of an empty place upon the page:

IL NOUS MANQUAIT UNE LETTRE. Il y avait une lettre. C'était la dernière et l'unique,
elle manquait

...

Si nous avons été mon père, j'aurais laissé avant de partir une lettre absolue. Une lettre pour toutes les ténèbres ... La dernière phrase. Je la voyais très bien. J'imaginai cette lettre ...

Elle dirait:

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.34.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.58.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.143; p.58.

(WE WERE MISSING A LETTER. There was a letter. It was the last and the only one, it was missing

...

If we had been my father, before leaving I would have left an absolute letter. A letter for all darkness ... The last phrase. I saw it well. I imagined this letter ... It would say:

)⁵⁹

The organisation of text around an empty centre or missing term is a trope of the writing of trauma. The father's letters are the condition of possibility for *Or*, their event or arrival its central conceit. Yet equally the father's letters are the lost object of *Or* insofar as they do not appear or are 'missing'. This aporia upon which *Or* depends reproduces loss, in this instance the missing letter, at the level of structure as a textual absence (of the letters).

The writing of W.G. Sebald at this point provides a fitting example of how the writing of mourning and trauma is organised around an absent centre or missing term. In texts such as *The Rings of Saturn* (1998), Sebald eschews direct confrontation with traumatic content, adopting a tangential and oblique approach to the experience of trauma at the level of style and as part of an ethical project oriented toward the victims of the past. In an interview given a week before his death in 2001, Sebald stated that it is 'practically impossible' to write about the concentration camps, which is to say that a central concern of his work, taken to be the Holocaust and modern histories of destruction, goes 'undeclared' within it. Rather the traumatic content occurs as the 'invisible subject' or 'silent presence' of Sebald's writing.⁶⁰ For example, the many photographs reproduced throughout *The Rings of Saturn* interrupt the written narration without necessarily illuminating what is written. The relation between image and text is often oblique, the images at once signalling and obscuring traumatic

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.189-190.

⁶⁰ W.G. Sebald interview with Michael Silverblatt, *Bookworm*, KCRW Radio (December 2001) [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSFcTWIg-Pg>]. Accessed Nov 6th 2017.

historical content (as when a series of images moves from vast piles of fish to piles of human bodies amongst trees, creating an obscure connection).⁶¹ As reproductions or photographs of photographs the images are indirect and their origin obscure. They do not generate meaning clearly. Nonetheless, the inclusion of photographs assists in sustaining a melancholic attitude toward the past by emphasising the moral injunction to remember, the photographs functioning as ghostly testimony to what is dead and lost. Equally, however, the ‘thingness’ of the photographs, which are mostly of objects not humans, does insist upon a tangible and enjoyable present, eluding the attribution of melancholic solipsism to Sebald’s writing and narrator, and contributing occasionally an element of comedy via incongruity and eccentricity.⁶²

The haptic quality highlighted here will be relevant in chapter three as we come to discuss Virginia Woolf’s queer temporal ‘touch’ in ‘A Sketch of the Past’ (1939/1940), and indeed Woolf in *Three Guineas* (1938) presents a dense image-text structured around eighteen textual references to absent photographs of ‘dead horses and ruined houses’ from fascist atrocities that took place during the Spanish Civil War. Although Woolf does not include these photographs, their repeated rhetorical invocation from the narrator’s memory elicits an alternative transactional memorialisation between the narrator and reader/spectator as part of a counterdiscourse to the visual history of institutionalised patriarchy represented by the public newspaper photographs that Woolf *does* include in the text (of generals, an archbishop, professors, a judge and heralds). In respect of which, Susan Sontag, in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), misses the force of Woolf’s critically performative use of these absent photographs, which does not so much subside into naïve anti-war consensus in the onlookers, as Sontag reads it, so much as cause the onlooker to interrogate received documentation of violence and power by undermining photographic realism in a complex play between text and image, narrator and spectator.⁶³ In her textual reiteration of the absent photographs of the war dead, Woolf invokes

⁶¹ W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (London: Vintage, 2002), p.54; p.60.

⁶² On Sebald’s use of photographs see Bird, who argues likewise that the photographs included in Sebald’s texts emit a haptic, tangible quality that serves to open an ethical space that eludes the broader construction of a solipsistic and melancholy narrator (Bird, *Comedy and Trauma*, p.104-105).

⁶³ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2003), p.6.

absence with a critical difference, meaning absence is not reified and the reader/spectator takes up an active position in the production of alternate memorialisation tactics.⁶⁴

To conclude my comments on Sebald, and despite (or because of) the inclusion of many photographs and their complex function for the reader in *The Rings of Saturn*, the text ends with a discussion of mourning silks and a final description of the veiling or ban on images in mourning, as if the text ultimately and ironically prohibits the very medium it has allowed to proliferate:

it was customary, in a home where there had been a death, to drape black mourning ribbons over all the mirrors and all canvasses depicting landscapes or people or the fruits of the field, so that the soul, as it left the body, would not be distracted on its final journey, either by a reflection of itself or by a last glimpse of the land now being lost for ever.⁶⁵

The ban on images unsettles the melancholic function of photography. Due to Sebald's idiosyncratic decision to include many photographs in his narrative works, we can deduce significance in the decision to describe the veiling of the image in mourning at the close of *The Rings of Saturn*. The text so full of images, occasionally of landscape, ends with the veiling of the image in mourning. The lack of a photograph at the end of a text filled with photographs is ironic; the exclusively textual representation of the draping of images, as if images are eclipsed by loss, emphasises that the text is ending or being lost to the reader, that the book is being shut. Further the veiling of the image is a specific literary act of mourning for the narrator's wife's father, whose death is announced on the previous page, occurring on the same day that the narrator/writer is 'bring[ing] these notes to a conclusion'.⁶⁶ In this sense, and against prevalent readings of Sebald's melancholy, the ending note of *The Rings of Saturn* enables the opening of an ethical space outside of melancholia insofar as the reader is reminded of the duty of the living to allow the dead to depart.⁶⁷ Yet indicated equally is the end of the attempt to represent (the veiling of the image, the final absence of photography); the end of

⁶⁴ On Woolf's use of photographs see Maggie Humm, 'Memory, Photography, and Modernism: The "dead bodies and ruined houses" of Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*', *Signs*, 28:2 (Winter 2002), pp.645-663.

⁶⁵ Sebald, *Rings*, p.296.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.294-295.

⁶⁷ Sontag describes Sebald's writing in the melancholic terms of sublimity and the loss of futurity. Sebald himself comes close to a melancholic man of genius in Sontag's depiction. Susan Sontag, 'A Mind in Mourning', *Times Literary Supplement* (February 2000), p.14.

the enjoyment in ‘thingness’ and the pleasure of the image; and the perhaps unavoidable suggestion that every prior photograph in the novel was always and already veiled as in mourning. (It is known that Sebald photocopied his photographs repeatedly to deplete the image and level of documentation. I suggest this photocopying functions as a further form of mourning veil or image ban.)⁶⁸

Sebald – via photography and the hastening of the depletion of the image – nonetheless places an unexpected stress upon *forgetting* in works largely read in terms of the melancholic attempt to remember the victims of European history. In fact, to return to Cixous’s *Or*, the literary trope of the missing or oblique term as exemplified here by Sebald is well illustrated with reference to photography. A pertinent comparison with Cixous’s *Or* is *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1990) by Roland Barthes, whose writings are relevant to the writing of trauma and mourning.⁶⁹ In *Or* the letters of the dead father Georges are discovered but neither analysed nor included by Cixous; in *Camera Lucida* a photograph of Barthes’s deceased mother as a five-year-old child is discovered by Barthes but is not included in the text (Barthes’s representation of this photograph is purely textual).⁷⁰ The absence of the famous ‘Winter Garden Photograph’ is emphasised by the presence of other photographs, in particular several family portraits, in a book about photography. In *Or* the absence of the father’s letters to his fiancée is likewise emphasised by Cixous’s choice to include references to Freud’s letters to *his* fiancée, as if they act as a substitute, as well as the empty place Cixous marks upon the page where the missing or ‘absolute’ letter would be.⁷¹ As with the absent but structural photograph in *Camera Lucida*, *Or* thus appears compelled by an object that remains traumatically inaccessible to and within it.⁷² There is no ‘absolute’ letter, no final word, no totality of the other: in

⁶⁸ The ban on images at the end of the novel can further be read as the oblique inscription of Jewish life and history in the text.

⁶⁹ Roland Barthes’s essay ‘The Death of the Author’ (1967) contributed to the poststructuralist rhetoric of loss (of metaphysical foundations of meaning, for example), and Barthes’s late work is tied to issues of silence and Barthes’s mourning for his mother. See Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977); Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Notting Hill Editions, 2011).

⁷⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage Books, 2000), p.67-69.

⁷¹ *Or*, p.190.

⁷² Ratifying this lack of access is Jacques Derrida’s notion that Cixous’s writing itself is ‘literally ... untranslatable, therefore not far from being unreadable’ namely due to her prolific use of homonym and synonym, which could be said to render Cixous’s whole *oeuvre* under the rubric of the inaccessible (Derrida, *H.C. for Life*, p.65). To be clear, the point about homonym relates to the proliferation of meaning in Cixous’s writing rather than the silence that shrouds expression in for example aspects of Sebald’s work. This kind of

Or Cixous leaves an empty place upon the page, as if the longed-for letter or lost other might enter there, acknowledging all that the text, which is made of *letters*, cannot contain. The empty place upon the page is not unlike a memorial or moment of silence in memory of the other that *Or* will neither render nor appropriate.

*

The organisation of text around an empty centre or missing term correlates to an emphasis on an indirect approach to the object. Cixous favours an indirect approach to the object at recurrent moments in *Or* which registers, as Martha Segarra notes, a desire ‘to encounter the object/other without appropriation’.⁷³ The epigraph of *Or*, which is itself oblique, that Cixous selects from Franz Kafka introduces us to a father named ‘Georg’ – so almost, but not exactly, *the* father Georges – and describes a scene in which this other father is recognised or ‘glimpsed’ and approached by a man who moves toward him from the side: ‘Il s’arrêta. “Georg”, dit-il lentement, comme s’il avait à ramener graduellement de vieux souvenirs à la surface; en avançant la main, il approcha de côté vers mon père’ (‘He stopped himself. “Georg”, he said slowly, as if he had to bring old memories gradually back to the surface; advancing his hand, he approached my father sideways’).⁷⁴ This return of old memories slowly to the surface as described in *Or*’s epigraph introduces the reader to the motion of mourning qua retrospective memory-work at the very inauguration of the text, indeed in advance of it, as if mourning precedes the work of writing or is the condition of possibility of writing. The multivalent theme of the side, shore or rib (*côté*) constitutes a large part of Derrida’s reading of *Or* in *H.C. for Life, That is to Say....* At a later moment in *Or* the narrator takes a sideways approach to a painting by Rembrandt, head bent and eyes lowered in ‘humilité’ (‘humility’), describing this as ‘un regard en coin’ (‘a corner gaze’) of her own invention: ‘on a l’humilité de s’approcher de côté, la tête légèrement inclinée’ (‘One has the humility to approach sideways, the head (s)lightly inclined’). ‘Il serait ruineux et présomptueux’ (‘It would be ruinous and presumptuous’) to approach the object head

difference is important in relation to my concluding remarks. On the relation between mourning, trauma and translation, albeit in a quite different context, see Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

⁷³ Martha Segarra, ‘Cixous, Derrida and Psychoanalysis: The Principle of Intermittence, or Dwelling on the Angle’, *Paragraph*, 36:2 (2013), pp.240-254, p.249.

⁷⁴ *Or*, n.p.

on, 'de se planter en face du Visage' ('to plant (oneself fully) in front of the face'), like an appropriative or greedy gaze 'devant une vitrine de magasin' ('before a shop window'). Better to approach with stealth and discretion 'caché comme d'un tigre' ('hidden like a tiger').⁷⁵

The indirect, sideways approach to the object can be associated with an ethics of encounter that interprets alterity through an appeal to trauma. Cixous's reference to the face ('Visage') recalls the work of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinasian philosophy posits encounter with radical alterity as the source of the ethical, and thinks ethics as a priori.⁷⁶ For Levinas the 'face' of the other posits a point of exposure to an excessive alterity, an alterity that exceeds the sphere of the Same, the sphere of the self, and that in its very excess can only be encountered indirectly; an alterity, like that of death, that is always out of the subject's reach.⁷⁷ The face is 'the condition of possibility' for ethics understood as a shattering and traumatic encounter with alterity.⁷⁸ This leads to the 'bestowing of ethical value on to trauma per se'⁷⁹ insofar as trauma becomes universalised as an ethical basis.⁸⁰ While this chapter ultimately counters Bird's notion that Cixous 'typifies' the elevation of tragedy as ethical catharsis,⁸¹ Cixous does appear to subscribe to the philosophical assumption of encounter as inherently traumatic and to the implication that trauma is itself ineffable, in ways I have already begun to describe.

The emphasis on an indirect, sideways approach to the object can imply encounter with the other as a shattering experience *tout court*, and therefore the identification of trauma as a structural universal. Thus in the epigraph of *Or* we do not encounter Georges directly but rather his oblique semblance, Georg. The fragments of the name Georges that Cixous scatters throughout *Or* and to which her title suggests a reference – GeORges – speak to the qualities of excessive dissemination (a

⁷⁵ *Or*, p.85-86.

⁷⁶ Ethics precedes ontology for Levinas. The subject is constituted by way of an ethical encounter with alterity, in the form of the face and the radical alterity of death. Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

⁷⁷ On Levinasian ethics and the face see Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.5.

⁷⁹ Bird, *Comedy and Trauma*, p.12-15.

⁸⁰ On trauma, mourning and Levinas see Tina Chanter, who writes that trauma can be understood as 'the central orchestrating event of Levinas's philosophy' in *Time, Death, and the Feminine: Levinas with Heidegger* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p.211.

⁸¹ Bird, *Comedy and Trauma*, p.6.

kind of *jouissance*) and a disjunctive access to the other that this form of ethical thinking elaborates.⁸² Indeed in *Or* we do not encounter Georges directly but as a ‘vision’ (‘vision’) that retreats, enveloped in silence,⁸³ and as ‘mythe’ (‘myth’) and memory in which he is subject to the illusory, blurring effects of ‘la brume’ (‘mist’).⁸⁴ Rather than figuring as whole, Georges is predominately manifest through the fragments of him that may be traced in his letters, meaning not only his textual correspondence but the letters of the proper name GeORges. ‘Or’ means ‘gold’ in French and is a conjunction that can translate as ‘furthermore’. Likewise George’s ‘*lettres*’ present a play upon the ontological notion of being or ‘l’être’. As the narrator points out ‘... nous ne savons pas quand nous disons lettre s’il faut l’écrire lettre lettres ou l’être. Que vais-je faire? Ecrire une lettre, ou bien La Lettre?’ (‘... we don’t know when we say letter if we have to write letter, letters or being. What will I do? Write a letter, or The Letter?’).⁸⁵ The linguistic elision expressed in French via the homonyms *lettre*, *lettres* and *l’être* itself mimics the movement from the level of the specific or material to that of the structural or ontological (the movement from letters to being) that enables trauma to be understood as constitutive of existence in an indiscriminate way.

A consequence of the implication of encounter as shattering and traumatic is the invocation of the sublime. The lost object or other is inaccessible, excessive, and can only be glimpsed obliquely or approached tangentially.⁸⁶ LaCapra speculates that ‘the sublime may itself be constructed as a secular displacement of the sacred in the form of a radically transcendent, inaccessible, unrepresentable other (including the alterity of radical evil). The typical response it evokes is silent awe’.⁸⁷ Indeed in *Or* the narrator associates her dead father with silence and the sublime body of Christ with his very own crown of nails.⁸⁸ The following passage on the arrival of the father’s letters can be read in terms of an encounter with sublimity in excess of knowledge and representation:

⁸² In *H.C. for Life*, Derrida points out that ‘OR is obviously the fragment of a proper noun, or so many proper nouns, starting with Georges’ (78).

⁸³ *Or*, p.29.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.58.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.74.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.85.

⁸⁷ LaCapra, *Writing History*, p.93.

⁸⁸ *Or*, p.29; p.132. Further, in Cixous’s autobiographical writings in *Rootprints* her father is likened to a non-religious ‘saint’ (*Rootprints*, p. 197).

Bienvenue, dis-je avec une dévotion hésitante, car je ne sais pas comment s'accueillent de si adorables et sur-désirables synecdoques, comment les appeler avec quel empressement, quels soins, quelles inquiétudes, ni restes ni souvenirs ni vestiges ni photos si proches mes semblables son souffle ses vérités naïves ses fragments d'âme, ce n'était pas une lettre, c'était son sang, celui qui ne sèche pas⁸⁹

(Welcome, I said with a hesitant devotion, because I don't know how to welcome such adorable, over-desirable synecdoches, what to call them with what willingness, what care, what worry, neither remains nor memories nor vestiges nor photos so close my likenesses his breath his truth his fragments of soul, it was not a letter, it was his blood, which doesn't dry)

The passage stresses the element of contiguity prevalent in the letters that problematises the question of whether or not to read them, of how best to approach, welcome and encounter them. If they relate to the soul ('âme') of the dead man who once wrote them, the letters open onto a transcendent, intangible entity that, as in a form of negative theology, cannot be attributed any positive content ('ni restes ni souvenirs ni vestiges ni photos' / 'neither remains nor memories nor vestiges nor photos') because this entity exceeds all representation and even, in this case, desire (being 'sur-désirable' or 'over-desirable'). Negative theology inscribes a space beyond access and thus the reification of absence. Negative theology therefore relates to conceptions that render trauma absolute, such as the psychoanalytic.⁹⁰

In terms of negative theology, it is striking that the letters of the dead are emphatically 'ni photos' ('not photos'). Related to negative theology is the ban on images, a rendition of which might be at work in *Or* given the negations through which the object is represented.⁹¹ At one point, the narrator recalls how her father once removed a photograph of his fiancée, the narrator's mother, from its position on the mantelpiece, because in it she seemed to be losing her smile, and placed it inside a drawer where the woman's image would be only intermittently glimpsed.⁹² Again the object is not accessed directly. This is described as a gesture that saves the image from deterioration (contra

⁸⁹ *Or*, p.35.

⁹⁰ On this point see Leys.

⁹¹ *Or*, p.29; p.35; p.37.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p.63-65.

Sebald), allowing for the pleasure of deferral and reunion. Also at work is a reverential attitude toward the lost feminine object resulting in prohibitions upon it. The obfuscation or veiling of a woman's image is a theme from elsewhere in Cixous's writing that relates, more broadly, to the veiling of the body, images and objects in rituals of mourning. Oran, Cixous's place of birth in Algeria to which the title of *Or* suggests a reference, is described by her as *inter alia* 'a veiled woman' that she is 'lost within'.⁹³ That this suggests both the 'disappearance of the maternal body', as does the placement of the fiancée's image in the drawer, and the loss of self within that body through union with it, appears to posit a lost feminine place of plenitude such as the psychoanalytic imaginary, itself a variation of the sublime.⁹⁴ We might ask then if *Or* entails an attitude of redemption with respect to loss, and question the gendered implications of this.

Implications of lost plenitude can constitute a nostalgic or totalising politics that would seek to reinstate a once purportedly full but now lost community or union through the eradication of difference.⁹⁵ Such a claim seems stark in relation to Cixous, whose entire work could be described as a project of difference or *différance*. But that there is a place for such thinking in Cixous's writing is presupposed by scholars who read moments of her work as 'inaugural scenes' in the psychoanalytic sense of a birth into the symbolic from a pre-oedipal state of unity or plenitude, such as that associated with the maternal body. If Susan Sellers takes the sense of interiority that constitutes much of *Dedans (Inside)* (1969) as a metaphor for a 'state prior to separation' then she posits the primacy of the 'inside' and thereby the postulation of a lost unity or space of plenitude, and in turn the desire to redeem that space in possibly totalising ways.⁹⁶ *Or* is indeed, in several ways, a story of resurrection, one that cites Lazarus and the ability of the dead to return.⁹⁷ The connotation of the Eucharist in the quotation above – the blood that doesn't dry – implies an element of redemption with respect to loss by relating the lost object to the paradigmatic suffering, purifying body of Christ.⁹⁸ The Eucharist is

⁹³ *Rootprints*, p.89.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.89.

⁹⁵ LaCapra, *Writing History*, p.48.

⁹⁶ Susan Sellers, *Hélène Cixous: Authorship, Autobiography and Love* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p.26. For an alternative reading of the opening of *Dedans* see Hanrahan, *Semi-Fictions*, p.31.

⁹⁷ See for example *Or*, p.13; p.33; p.23; p.21.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.35.

itself a ritual founded upon the possibility of return (of the body of Christ). In *Or* the father is said to (messianically?) return by way of his letters: ‘Il revient’ (‘He returns’).⁹⁹ If the letters are ‘not letters’ but the ‘blood’ of the father that does not dry then they are, so the logic of transubstantiation would go, not like the body but *the* body, as the bread in the Eucharist is the body of Christ (accordingly the letters are a form of ‘synecdoche’).¹⁰⁰ Relatedly, the narrator expresses ‘une faim infinie’ (‘an infinite hunger’) for, precisely, ‘du pain de mon père’; she has ‘la faim du pain de mon père’ (‘hunger for my father’s bread’).¹⁰¹ However, rather than redemption, or totalising desire that would enclose community or communion, the inscription of the Eucharist at the same time evidences Cixous’s ‘desire for communion *outside* one’s community, a communion that would transcend the limits of any specific community’, as Hanrahan has argued in relation to Cixous’s *Les Rêveries de la femme sauvage*, and as can now be extended to *Or* in this chapter.¹⁰² The inscription of the paradigmatically Christian Eucharist by ‘a writer whose Judeity is so central to her sense of identity’ is indeed representative of Cixous’s readiness for an otherness which will be welcomed, provided only that it comes.¹⁰³ One ‘receives’ the host as one receives a letter, yet ‘hôte’ in French means both host and guest: the undecidability between giving and receiving, nourishing and being nourished, ‘seems circular’ as Hanrahan points out, and this will be relevant to my concluding remarks in this chapter regarding the reciprocal promise of writing in *Or*, along with Cixous’s representation of Freud in *Or* as both nourished and nourishing.¹⁰⁴

Yet for now it is the paternal body that is rendered sublime – sublime object of desire, in this last instance – along with the heteronormative practices for which the Father stands as a cultural ‘synecdoche’.¹⁰⁵ For example when the narrator, trembling with ‘confiance’ (‘trust’), mentions a ‘contrat’ (‘contract’, or ‘agreement’), it appears to be not only a contract between the living and the dead, a ‘contract’ of mourning, but also the contract of marriage (as in ‘confiance’: ‘fiancer’ (to

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.32.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.35.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p.51.

¹⁰² Hanrahan, *Semi-Fictions*, p.177.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.177.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.177.

¹⁰⁵ *Or*, p.35.

betroth) and ‘fiancé’ (engaged)).¹⁰⁶ Further the opening section ends with the suggestion of an engagement that the narrator has made and must keep;¹⁰⁷ a contract that she is signing;¹⁰⁸ a promise is proposed;¹⁰⁹ and a pact is in place.¹¹⁰ Written by the narrator’s father Georges, the letters approximate him: they are ‘proche’ (‘close’) to him, a fragment or piece of him, and so are like ‘proches’ (‘relatives’) to the narrator.¹¹¹ (According to this logic of letters as ‘proches’, Kafka’s letters to Milena are also his sisters.)¹¹² The very circulation of the letters – and recall ‘ce n’était pas une lettre, c’était son sang’ (‘it was not a letter, it was his blood’) – can be said to accord with the structures of relationality, authority and desire, indeed the ties of ‘sang’ (‘blood’), that comprise the enclosed oedipal scenario: initially written from the father to the mother, the letters are so to speak ‘passed down’ to the son, and from the son to the daughter who then, crucially, writes *Or*.¹¹³

The sublimity of the father figure, and his association with myth, can also be related to the cultural myths that constitute the historical imaginary of his illness tuberculosis that Sontag has worked to elucidate.¹¹⁴ That tuberculosis was imagined as an ‘edifying, refined disease’, associated with the upper ‘spiritualised’ body (the lungs), and a beatific death,¹¹⁵ seems supported in Cixous’s descriptions of her father’s beauty in illness and death: ‘He seemed like a beautiful being. He was beautiful. With a beauty that is all the more striking no doubt in that it was a very interior beauty and threatened by death’.¹¹⁶ Death as synonym for illness understood to be fatal is taken to express and strike the interiority of being. Thus the assumed role of innate character in the contraction of disease: ‘However much TB was blamed on poverty and salubrious surroundings’, writes Sontag, ‘it was still thought a certain inner disposition was needed in order to contract the disease’.¹¹⁷ Accordingly in *Or*, which Derrida aligns with ‘the phthisical or consumptive space of literature’, the father’s experience

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.13; p.21.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p.25.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.26.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.16.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.22.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.35.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p.76.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p.35.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.58; Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (London: Penguin, 1991).

¹¹⁵ *Or*, p.16.

¹¹⁶ *Rootprints*, p.198-199.

¹¹⁷ Sontag, *Illness*, p.40.

of illness assumes the moral force of a battle or fight against death in which, despite dying, Georges is the victor: ‘Il sort vainqueur. Il ne tombe pas malade’ (‘He leaves victorious. He does not fall ill’).¹¹⁸ The triumphalism of this logic, and its implication of responsibility and blame in relation to illness, is repeated by Segarra in her analysis of *Or* when she reads illness with reference to divine moral retribution, comparing ‘the latent fight of the father against death’ to ‘a modern Prometheus before being punished by the Gods’.¹¹⁹ Yet equally Cixous offers a document (rather than moral prescription or reproduction) of how, in Sontag’s words, ‘disease widely considered a synonym for death [once TB, now cancer] is experienced as something to hide’.¹²⁰ The veiling of and social prohibition upon death has been considered a facet of modernity. Accordingly Cixous describes how when she was a child her father led ‘the life of a clandestine tuberculosis patient’ and that ‘There [was] a sort of veiled death in the house’.¹²¹ It has been argued that the social repression of death and its representation contributes to a generalised inability to mourn in modernity, which returns my argument to melancholia understood as the inability to mourn.¹²² The image of ‘veiled death’ also takes us back to the ‘veiled woman’ as embodiment of Cixous’s city of birth, and to her depiction of death and mourning in relation to gender.¹²³ I will now show how the relation Cixous sets out between death, mourning and femininity offsets the paternal emphasis of her ethics that I have brought to light.

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Against the sublime paternal body, idealised in death, Cixous presents the figure of feminine death. The gendered binary that this posits would at one level appear to undermine Cixous’s emphasis upon the overcoming, or setting into motion, of hierarchical oppositional forms. And yet this brings me to further comment on the gendered nature of mourning and melancholia, a focus on which reveals how, finally, Cixous undermines the melancholic paradigm and its male privilege by attending to the

¹¹⁸ Derrida, *H.C.*, p.124; *Or*, p.161.

¹¹⁹ Segarra, ‘Principle of Intermittence’, p.146.

¹²⁰ Sontag, *Illness*, p.8.

¹²¹ *Rootprints*, p.199.

¹²² On the social repression of death and modern inability to mourn, see Phillippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Alessia Ricciardi, *The Ends of Mourning: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Film* (California: Stanford University Press, 2003). Giorgio Agamben also notes ‘the degradation of death in our time’. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002), p.82

¹²³ ‘Scene of the Unconscious’, p.2.

pleasure and promise of text as response to loss. I will first focus on the figure of female death, as against the sublime paternal body, and the relation imagined by Cixous between mourning and the feminine body. In, for example, *Dedans (Inside)*, death is depicted as a sprawling female beast or hag with a dry, aged, non-reproductive body, 'like an enormous cow with withered tits', that men both fear and desire.¹²⁴ When the narrator's grandmother expresses an 'excessive' suffering in her mourning for her dead son, the abjected figures of feminine death and the bodily, non-melancholic response to loss combine:

She weeps because her son died on a single mattress, while she was away ... And she moans, taking pleasure in making her deep voice roll over our heads; to work up a really good howl, she's taken out her denture so she can open her pink gullet wide. She stops, feet apart, heavy body swaying, she raises her head, her old white neck stretched, eyes closed, big fists clenched, mouth open, she lets out the sound. RRRaRRRaRRa. At last her fury delivers a ferocious grief. I have never heard a sound so beautiful, so terrifying, I whisper her encouragement, go on, go on, louder, kill us, kill everything, more, more. Not another word; she bends to the ground AarrA aarrAarr, the sound rips through the feeble air, bellow it out old sunken flesh, bellow hard, that'll give death a scare, RrraRa, she kneels, taking her time, the palms of her big dry hands flat on the tiles. She knows what she's doing: she fills herself with her own cries, head hanging down between her front paws, she rocks a bellyful of cries. When the men were alive, her belly and arms were full ...¹²⁵

Unlike the suffering paternal body in *Or*, rendered sublime, mourning is here related to a failed and degenerate maternity via the representation of a barren and bestial female body whose belly, formerly so full, is now empty of all but cries. The maternal body is the site of grief: it takes on physical form in the old sunken female 'flesh', appearing to represent a lost prosperity that is indeed related to men ('When the men were alive, her belly and arms were full ...'). Yet the pleasure the grandmother takes in the physicality of her moaning, by associating suffering and pleasure, offsets the masculine, melancholic emphasis. The involvement of the female body in the act of mourning has already

¹²⁴ Hélène Cixous, *Inside*, trans. Carol Barco (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), p.49-50.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.43.

occurred by this stage in *Dedans*, as when the flesh of a weeping female friend (weeping for Georges) is described as ‘a garden of mourning’.¹²⁶ The ‘weeper’ represents a form of female mourning expressed through an overflowing feminine body linked to nature, the garden, and the elements, the flow of her tears dampening the air.¹²⁷ Unlike the grandmother’s withered non-reproductive body, her mourning is a generative or alluring state (a garden, a ‘soft’ female figure) but this would nonetheless work to confirm criticisms of Cixous as overly essentialist when it comes to the female body, to which the woman’s emotional state remains tied – unlike the father in *Or* who transcends his physical state such that ‘Il ne tombe pas malade’ (‘he does not fall ill’).¹²⁸

Cixous does indeed construe mourning as a physical ‘labour’ – in both senses of the word – of the feminine body in *Or* and *Dedans*. In *Dedans*, the narrator’s grandmother ‘delivers’ her ferocious grief; in *Or* the narrator imagines pulling her dead father, who has been described as a baby, out of her ‘waters’ with ‘grand deuil’ (‘great mourning’).¹²⁹ This is to take notions of mourning as ‘work’ – i.e. as a psychic or social effort – and construe it as labour of a quite different – and more specifically gendered and bodily – kind. That mourning might be related to a specifically feminine form of labour (qua work) is suggested by Schiesari in her response to Freud’s case study of the ‘hysteric’ Fräulein Elisabeth Von R., whose nervous ‘work of recollection’ of death and illness underpins Freud’s later theorisation of mourning and melancholia as well as, as Schiesari points out, the relegation of mourning to a gendered domestic labour or ‘women’s work’ lacking in the (masculine) moral and cultural superiority of melancholia.¹³⁰ Describing Elisabeth’s ‘work of reproduction’, a phrase that would itself imply the female body, Freud renders Elisabeth’s response to loss along the lines of a daily domestic chore or, in his words, another one of ‘her current household duties’: ‘This process of dealing with her impressions was dovetailed into her everyday tasks without the two activities interfering with each other’. The woman’s work of mourning takes its place among her other domestic duties. Schiesari reads this feminine ‘prosaics of mourning’ as ‘literally an

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.10.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.10.

¹²⁸ *Or*, p.162.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.31; p.37.

¹³⁰ Schiesari, *Gendering*, p.61-62. Indeed, Elisabeth Von R. does some work for Freud in that her articulation of her own mental state became foundational in Freud’s theory of mourning.

oikonomia, a woman's work that brings everything back into the home, a home economics regulated precisely by "current household duties".¹³¹

Accordingly in *Dedans* the old woman weeper, whose flesh is the 'garden of mourning' (a garden implying a household), performs mourning as a domestic and affective labour in the service of others: she enters the narrator's home and starts 'moaning for us' and 'every month she would total up for us the number of dead in our region. She'd list their names...'.¹³² Listing the names of the local dead, a public is posited only to be brought, exactly, back into the privacy of the home by way of mourning, or so as to be mourned. Similarly, in *Or* the 'work' of mourning is undertaken by women. Or rather it is refused by men: if we take the reading of the letters as an analogy for the work of mourning – and according to the logic of Cixous's *oublire* (*forgetreading*) that will be discussed shortly, reading indeed relates to loss (the loss of memory that constitutes forgetting) – then the decision of the narrator's brother, Pierre, to pass the letters on to his sister without having ever having read them displaces his work of mourning – or of forgetting – onto her, allowing him to melancholically 'keep' the memory of the dead for himself.¹³³ Thus Pierre's decision is described in terms of his own self-preservation and that of the lost object (Pierre 'resté intact pendant tout la garde, avec mon père sous enveloppe' ('remained intact during all the keeping, with my father in/under an envelope')).¹³⁴ Further, inasmuch as he is unwilling to 'let go' of his father – 'il veut garder son père' ('he wants to keep his father') – a comparison is made between the brother's decision not to read the letters and the refusal to mourn, or at least to deliver proper mourning rites: to not read the letters at all is like refusing to read the prayer of the dead that pronounces their death.¹³⁵ The lost object would thus be physically prolonged as according to conceptions of melancholia.

Schiesari's point about the possibility of a gendered division between mourning and melancholia is however complicated by the figure of the narrator's mother Eve in *Or*, and by the narrator herself. Although the letters were originally addressed to Eve, she is no longer the same as

¹³¹ Schiesari, *Gendering*, p.61-62.

¹³² *Inside*, p.7.

¹³³ *Or*, p.16.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.61.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.61.

she was when the letters were written, and so the letters can no longer be said to ‘address’ her as she is now: ‘Elle ne pourrait pas répondre, ma mère, pour celle qui n’était pas ma mère et qu’elle n’est plus depuis des dizaines d’années. Elle n’a jamais lu ces lettres. Elle ne les a jamais reçues’ (‘She could not answer, my mother, for the one who was not my mother and had not been for decades. She never read these letters. She never received them’).¹³⁶ Rather than an attempt such as the brother’s to melancholically ‘keep’ the dead for (or as) oneself, Eve’s characterisation makes a specific point about the (feminine?) capacity to move on: Eve is no longer receptive to the things that arrived or happened (*arriver*) to her in the past, what addressed her then does not address her now. Although the belated arrival of the letters signifies the intervention of the past in the present, in Eve’s case they do not override the changes that have occurred in the meantime and that constitute the substance of this present, which remains distinct. As such: ‘Elle est si loin de ma mère, cette correspondance ...’ (‘They are so far from my mother, this correspondence ...’).¹³⁷ Strikingly then, at the end of *Or* the narrator states that for Eve ‘La vie est détachement. J’admire comme elle n’a jamais été veuve’ (‘Life is detachment. I admire how she never was a widow’).¹³⁸ To never be a widow is to refuse to identify or be identified with one’s losses; to refuse to let loss decide in advance the character of one’s present and future; to refuse the gendered label of ‘widow’ and its relation to a veiled, inviolable presence.

The figure of Eve in this way limits the extent to which *Or* can be read under the terms of melancholy and trauma, her association with detachment rendering possible a present and future emancipated from traumatic repetition and melancholic retrospection. Although to state that ‘Life is detachment’ is not necessarily to be free from the traumatic paradigm, based as it is upon conditions of detachment and dislocation, the narrator’s own comment that ‘A moi par chance elles n’étaient pas encore arrivées’ (‘To me by chance [or luck] they had not yet arrived’) suggests an altogether different temporal structure, with an alternate affective charge – that of anticipation, in particular the anticipation or promise of text, and the attendant association of pleasure.¹³⁹

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¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.63.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.63.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.199.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.63.

Given Cixous's emphasis on the 'serious power' ('grave pouvoir') of writing as a moral 'obligation of fidelity' to the past, and her association of the origins of writing with loss and death, it is understandable why scholars such as Stephanie Bird state that Cixous typifies a moralising attitude of devaluation toward aesthetic modes that signal too clearly their association with pleasure, such as comedy.¹⁴⁰ But loss, such as the loss of memory that constitutes forgetting, is at instances in *Or* deprived of its privileged affective charge, the charge of melancholia as a duty to remember, and posited instead in a pleasurable and desiring interaction with the present and future possibilities of reading and writing.

Or's logic of anticipation and its relation to pleasure is most apparent in the narrator's responsiveness to texts and the enjoyment she takes in reading. A joyful relation to reading is clearly significant in a text that takes as its central conceit the possibility of reading the letters of the dead. Indeed if *Or* is, after all, a work of mourning for the dead then, crucially, it begins counterintuitively: not with the pain of loss nor the necessity of commemoration but rather with 'la joie' ('the joy') of reading, which is itself associated with the capacity to forget.¹⁴¹ Thus the narrator decides that she will re-read Dostoyevsky's *The Gambler* (1866) because, despite having read the work at least seven times, she has forgotten the details, the story and the characters. The desire to read this particular book remains – 'C'est *Le Joueur* que je veux' ('It's *The Gambler* that I want') – precisely because the (content of the) object is gone or forgotten: to forget what one has read is 'heureuse' ('happy') because it conserves intact 'le bonheur' ('the happiness') of reading as if for the first time.¹⁴²

The ordinary imperatives associated with loss are to a degree overridden, as are the traumatic implications of the encounter with the other, by pointing to the re-generative capacities of desire and textual play (from *jouer* [to play] as in *Le Joueur* [*The Gambler* or *The Player*]):

... nous lisons sans le souci de perdre en lisant la joie qui se lève de page en page, car nous avons appris depuis longtemps qu'on ne perd pas un livre tant aimé en le dévorant puisque

¹⁴⁰ 'Scene of the Unconscious', p.11; Bird, *Comedy and Trauma*, p.6.

¹⁴¹ *Or*, p.12.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p.11-12.

sitôt lu nous l'oublions, nous lisons et oublions nous lisons pour *oublire*, et deux fois oublier, oublier tout sauf le livre ...¹⁴³

(... we read without the worry of losing by reading the joy that rises from page to page, because we have learned for a long time that we do not lose a book so loved by devouring it as soon as we read it we forget, we read and forget we read *to forgetread*, and twice forgetread, forgetread everything except the book ...)

Loss insists but the narrator is 'sans le souci' ('carefree') because the loss that occurs if you forget everything is figured as a good, indeed as the very basis of love: 'c'est pour cela que j'aime les livres' ('that's why I love books').¹⁴⁴ The rhyme-like logic of the *oublire*, Cixous's portmanteau for the affirmative relation between reading and forgetting, itself directs us to the present in which re-reading becomes reading, and the future conceived of as desirable, a future in which the pleasure of reading is reanimated as if for the first time.¹⁴⁵ Thus: 'Relire, c'est-à-dire lire, c'est-à-dire ressusciter-effacer c'est-à-dire *oublire*' ('Re-reading, that is to say reading, that is to say resuscitating-effacing that is to say *forget-reading*').¹⁴⁶

If this passage is about 'désir' ('desire') – and the movement 'de page en page' ('from page to page') would suggest the running-onward of desire – then it is about the desire to read expressed as a desire to forget 'tout sauf le livre' ('everything except the book').¹⁴⁷ Reading, Cixous writes in *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (1994), is 'a rebellion: we open the book's door, pretending it is a simple paperback cover, and in broad daylight escape! We are no longer there: this is what real reading is'.¹⁴⁸ The escape enabled in the act of reading ('we are no longer there'), the reader's 'abandon' to text, is related to an abandonment of the social world, perceived as lacking, and one's responsibility in it, as occurs in melancholia. But, more so for Cixous, the imagined abandonment of

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.12.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.12.

¹⁴⁵ On Cixous's *oublire* as a poetics of forgetting see Mairéad Hanrahan, "'Oublire": Cixous's Poetics of Forgetting', *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures*, 54:2 (Summer 2000), pp.77-89.

¹⁴⁶ *Or*, p.16.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.12.

¹⁴⁸ Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, trans. Sarah Cornell and Susan Sellers (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p.21.

familial, sexual and reproductive duty as described in *Three Steps*¹⁴⁹ is in service of the non-reproductive ecstasy or elation ('la joie') of reading in and of itself.¹⁵⁰ In this respect, at least, reading intervenes in the present. The emotive, and, as we will see erotic, attention to the object – the love of books – and the enjoyment the object elicits speaks to the non-melancholic ability to invest and experience desire in the material of the present. Thus, to return to *Or*, 'c'est *Le Joueur* que je veux' ('it's *The Gambler* that I want') and that will give her 'satisfaction'; its books that make her 'tremble'.¹⁵¹

The pleasure derived by the narrator is not related to the resurrection of an idealised past through literary escape but rather the transformative capabilities of text anticipate the possibility of the future in a satisfying way. The very association of reading with escapism ('in broad daylight [we] escape') is noteworthy for the way it works against the modernist conceptualisation of reading as a challenging and serious intellectual task distinct from the 'low' cultural pleasures of mass leisure and consumption.¹⁵² Anticipation is itself pleasurable in the present, as embodied in the physical response of trembling ('je tremble' / 'I tremble'¹⁵³) although trembling can also relate to fear or fright. But over and above an attitude of fear at the unknown potentiality of the future in *Or*, the narrator delights in deferral:

Je fais durer le plaisir de l'angoisse. Je fais durer la promesse. Il arrive. Il va arriver. Attends, attends, laisse-moi jouir de ne pas encore. Papa, murmuré-je avec une tendresse terrifiée, papa, suppliais-je celui que je n'avais jamais quitté et je ne savais pas quoi lui demander.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁹ As Cixous writes in *Three Steps*, 'Between the writer [and reader] and his or her family the question is always one ... of escaping, of abandon ... A writer has no children, I have no children when I write. When I write I escape myself ... I forget all the people I love ...' (*Ibid.*, p.21).

¹⁵⁰ *Or*, p.12. Madame Bovary maybe the paradigmatic illicit woman reader, but see also Sara Ahmed on Laura Brown, the 'unhappy housewife' in the film *The Hours* (2003), the adaptation of the novel by Michael Cunningham (1998), inspired by Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925): 'Laura longs to read the book. She caresses the book; she wants to stay in bed with it; she wants to keep reading, to read more and more. Her desire for the book is also her desire not to be in her life, to be suspended from its time and rhythms: she wants to spend time with the book to avoid spending time with her husband and child'. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p.76.

¹⁵¹ *Or*, p.11-13.

¹⁵² See Laura Frost, *The Problem with Pleasure: Modernism and Its Discontents* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

¹⁵³ *Or*, p.13.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.84.

(I prolong the pleasure of anxiety. I make the promise last. He is coming. He is going to arrive. Wait, wait, let me come/enjoy not yet. Papa, I whispered with terrified tenderness, Papa, I begged the one I had never left and did not know what to ask him.)

As distinct from fear, 'angoisse' ('anxiety') is fear that operates in an anticipatory mode (fear that, as it were, has a future). Anxiety can indeed be read as a form of optimism.¹⁵⁵ The above passage places forms of fear together with responses of pleasure and vice versa: anxiety is a pleasure to be prolonged, tenderness has a quality of terror. The proximity between desire and anxiety is neither surprising nor new. Both are predicated upon the futurity of their object. The 'plaisir' ('pleasure') of anxiety would lie in the non-determined nature of its object; the tenderness of terror would refer less to the object's absence than to the finality of its presence that would short-circuit the enjoyment (*jouir*: to enjoy/come) of arrival (or coming) itself. Hence the repeated imperative 'Attends' ('wait'). The eroticism of the passage is most apparent at this point. The quality of pleasure is precisely that 'la promesse' ('the promise') posited is 'pas encore' ('not yet') fulfilled, which is again to posit – indeed look forward to – a future.

In respect of pleasure and fear, we might also consider Cixous's ambiguous expression of laughter as a response to death. Laughter, Cixous has stated, 'is merely the sigh of relief that bursts forth at the scythe's passing: it missed us by a hair!' In this respect, as Bird is clear to state, Cixous subjugates laughter as 'merely' the vicarious relief of comedy as opposed to the initiation into higher meditations enabled by tragedy. Thus, before excusing her laughter, Cixous states that she goes to the theatre so as to cry.¹⁵⁶ Different to the perception of the writing of trauma or melancholia, writing, that is, that makes one cry, aesthetic modes that elicit pleasure are by this logic held to be incompatible with any ethical representation of another's suffering or death. To consider Cixous's work as partaking in the devaluation or moral disquiet surrounding the association of loss and suffering with pleasure, a devaluation that attends the moral elevation of trauma and melancholy, would place it in subservience to 'an ethics of fear and pity', given its accord with the punitive injunctions of the

¹⁵⁵ 'Because optimism is ambitious, at any moment it might feel like anything, including nothing: dread, anxiety, hunger, curiosity ...' Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p.2.

¹⁵⁶ Hélène Cixous, *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, ed. Susan Sellers (London: Routledge, 1994), p.154. We might translate this also as 'a hair's breadth'.

superego and the moral order of the castration complex.¹⁵⁷ This being an order based, precisely, on the threat and fear of loss (expropriation, deprivation, separation, castration) and the regulation of desire and pleasure.¹⁵⁸ Yet the libidinal energies directed by Cixous's narrator toward the pleasurable qualities of text, tying the subject to a present that anticipates a future, work to counter this, as does Cixous's re-worked philosophical understanding of the encounter with death as an encounter without fear or fetishisation.

Certain of Cixous's comments on death, and her response of laughter to it, in fact suggest an undermining of the emphasis on traumatic encounter I have so far been charting. Against the veiling of death related to Georges's illness tuberculosis, and the related invocation of the (traumatic) sublime, Cixous conceives of writing as part of an effort not to 'blot out' death's image:

We must have death, but young, present, ferocious, fresh death, the death of the day, today's death. The one that comes right up to us so suddenly we don't have time to avoid it, I mean to avoid feeling its breath touching us. Ha!¹⁵⁹

Death in this respect is not a traumatic ultimate alterity as in Levinasian ethics. Nor is death perceived as a reified and radical absence experienced only through rupture. Rather for Cixous, unusually, death is 'present' and something one can possess (such as *a present*). The encounter with death that 'comes right up to us so suddenly we don't have time to avoid it' is not a source of traumatic shattering but of laughter, defiant, relieved, but also pleasurable, and crucially death relates to the gift of writing itself: 'I wouldn't have written ... I wouldn't have had death, if my father had lived... [H]e gave me death. To start with'.¹⁶⁰ The very notion of an encounter with or having of death works against the relation to death set out in much of western male-authored philosophy, including Levinas, in which death is the very paradigm of the non-appropriable.¹⁶¹ To state that death is *had* as one has a lover, or *given* as one

¹⁵⁷ Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (Cambridge: MIT, 2002), p.8-9; Bird, *Comedy and Trauma*, p.6; p.106.

¹⁵⁸ Or what Cixous names 'the realm of the proper, culture, [that] functions by the appropriation articulated, set into play, by man's classic fear of seeing himself expropriated, seeing himself deprived...by his refusal to be deprived, in a state of separation, by his fear of losing the prerogative, fear whose response is all of History. Everything must return to the masculine. "Return": the economy is founded on a system of returns. If man spends and is spent, it's on condition that his power returns' ('Castration', p.50).

¹⁵⁹ Cixous, *Three Steps*, p.7.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.12.

¹⁶¹ On death as non-renderable as an object see Garrett Stewart, *Death Sentence: Styles of Dying in British Fiction* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984).

gives a gift, means that for Cixous death does not signify the end of relation nor the cessation of reciprocity but rather commencement and an implication of continuity, challenging predominant configurations of human finitude and temporal linearity.¹⁶² For Cixous, death figures as a beginning, or more precisely as the beginning of a relation of giving ('He gave me death. To start with'), in the manner in which gift-giving creates relations of reciprocity.¹⁶³ The elision expressed between writing ('I wouldn't have written') and having death ('I wouldn't have had death') suggests that what is given is text (writing) and its ability to actively respond to or transform the presence of death. That the relation to or encounter with death is not subservient to a relation of generalised trauma as in Levinasian ethics nor the superego's prohibitive order of expropriation is signalled by the ending expression of laughter, which I've read as pleasurably defiant, that upends at least in part the ethical injunctions associated with representations of melancholy and trauma.

If here I have been discussing encounter (with death, with the past, with the lost object as it lives on in memory), then *Or* would appear to reverse the relation that links encounter to trauma. If, as Bird rightly notes, 'the ethical privileging of trauma has been profoundly influenced by an increasing philosophical emphasis on the encounter with the other as ethical', then the attendant conception of encounter (with alterity) as itself 'shattering, traumatic, and ethical' is not one to which Cixous subscribes.¹⁶⁴ The primary, privileged encounter in *Or* is that between the narrator and the text of her father's letters, although the narrator does not (yet) read the letters. Although the letters of the dead are a figure for an uncanny alterity, and their arrival an unexpected impingement that disrupts the narrator's interior space, the encounter with the text that is *to come* is, as I have suggested in relation to reading, a cause of pleasure for the narrator.¹⁶⁵ And here it seems for Cixous less that encounter is traumatic and more that trauma enables the rich possibilities of encounter: although by no means itself

¹⁶² Understanding Cixous's conception of death upon these lines can create repercussions for, for example, the Heideggerian philosophy of death as 'Being-towards-the-end' and thus upon 'being-towards-death' itself. Indeed, there are repercussions also upon the related notion that only one's own death is authentic, and that death is non-relational. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967).

¹⁶³ The notion that the death of another 'gives' a gift of time is expressed by Nicholas Royle in his novel *Quilt* (2010). Royle writes, following the death of the narrator's father: 'There is time given. It is a time that never existed before. It is as if your father's phrase "from time to time" ... opens up like a cuckoo clock, intimating a time between the one and the other, a mad gift'. Nicholas Royle, *Quilt* (Brighton: Myriad Editions, 2010), p.82.

¹⁶⁴ Bird, *Comedy and Trauma*, p.12.

¹⁶⁵ *Or*, p.34; p.29.

a pleasurable circumstance, the father's death when the narrator was a child is what has allowed for the present encounter with the textual entities that survive and are enabled by him. Thus the very terms of loss and the lost object themselves lose some purchase: the father in *Or* is not so much a lost object but returned ('Il revient' / 'He returns') and after death is subject not to degeneration but proliferation, becoming 'mes deux pères' ('my two fathers').¹⁶⁶ When the narrator differentiates between 'mon père, l'autre, le vrai' ('my father, the other, the real') and 'mon père personnel à moi réservé par moi recréé décomposé, relevé' ('my personal father to me reserved by me recreated broken down, risen') it is the 'real' father who died when she was a child that occupies the position of alterity, and the posthumous father with whom the narrator is intimate.¹⁶⁷ That this is not the intimacy afforded through the melancholic incorporation of the dead is understood by the non-inertia and alteration of the object and the narrator's response to loss: he is a (re)creation of her imagination, memory and writing, just as soon 'recréé' ('recreated') as 'décomposé, relevé' ('broken down, risen'). Any 'possession' the narrator has of her dead father is in motion, is itself already passing on, becoming something else. While the notion that the artist-writer might raise the dead does speak to an aesthetic of melancholic romanticism (the godlike artist who creates, breaks down and gives life to forms), the word *décomposer* (to break up, to distort, to decompose) suggests that any composition (of a body, a letter, a figure of one's imagination) is always and already a distortion, and thus that the other resists incorporation as an aspect of the self. This in turn points to the transformative capabilities of creation.¹⁶⁸

Or further incorporates crucial aspects of comic bathos that work to deflate the melancholic moral paradigm and any invocations of the paternal sublime. As when Hamlet, i.e. the melancholic conscience *par excellence*, 'the very *porte-parole* of the ego ideal' and the only figure Freud names in his analysis of melancholia,¹⁶⁹ appears embodied in the form of the narrator's neighbour's large

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.32; p.34.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.34; p.32.

¹⁶⁸ When Jean Genet describes his work *Pompes Funèbres (Funeral Rites)* (1948) as 'my story, if that is what I must call the prismatic decomposition of my love and grief' for his murdered lover Jean D. he too suggests that the literary composition of the lost object is a matter of decay, dissection or distortion in which what decomposes, or is transformed, is the grief-work itself. Jean Genet, *Funeral Rites*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (London: Penguin, 2009), p.22.

¹⁶⁹ Schiesari, *Gendering*, p. 58-9.

green-eyed dog, whose name is Hamlet – ‘quel beau nom pour un chien’ (‘such a beautiful name for a dog’) – and who comes running at the narrator’s door before she slams it shut in his face. If the dog Hamlet is a mock reference to the guilt-ridden attempt to do justice to paternal inheritance, and so to ‘the guilty rather than the tragic conscience’,¹⁷⁰ then his timing is good: he comes running at the narrator’s door just after she has received (or inherited) her father’s letters (‘C’est alors que je remarque ce nom, quel beau nom pour un chien’ / ‘It’s then that I noticed his name, such a beautiful name for a dog’).¹⁷¹ That the narrator is ‘gênée’ (‘embarrassed’) by being rude to a dog adds another element of humour, as does the apology the narrator then makes to Hamlet who disappears ‘avec bonté’ (‘kindly’).¹⁷² Further the moral gravity of guilt is met with the hyperbolic ‘petit crime’ (‘small crime’) of forgetting which for the narrator is nevertheless the most wounding.¹⁷³

If Hamlet the character acts as ‘a pivot for psychoanalysis and its project’, I would point further to Cixous’s bathetic treatment of the ‘father’ of psychoanalysis himself, Freud, who becomes in *Or* rather the narrator’s ‘nuncle’ – something like but finally not her own uncle (her non-uncle) – given the elements of historical and biographical contiguity between Freud and Georges Cixous.¹⁷⁴ This demotion of the ‘father’ of psychoanalysis to a place somewhat secondary within even his own project is explicit in Cixous’s notion of Freud as himself the first ‘lay-analyst’ (insofar as he practised psychoanalysis before the discipline was itself theorised), as well as in her initial side-stepping of Freudian psychoanalysis – ‘I dropped Freud ... I had put Freud aside’ – given Freud’s failure to adequately theorise female sexuality.¹⁷⁵ In *Or* the repressed or abjected femininity of/in psychoanalysis thus returns or rebounds upon – if not *as* – the very paternal body that would seek to deny it via the depiction of a dream (Freud’s very own, at least in the imaginings of *Or*) in which an elderly and unwell Freud, on the brink of death, breastfeeds a new-born baby whose fragile body then nourishes his own (‘Pour la nourriture je le mets au sein gauche ... C’est si chaud on ne sait pas qui

¹⁷⁰ Elizabeth Roudinesco and Jacques Derrida, *For What Tomorrow ... A Dialogue*, trans. Jeff Fort (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p.77-78.

¹⁷¹ *Or*, p.31.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p.30.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.21.

¹⁷⁴ Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 2005), p.133. Georges Cixous, father of Hélène Cixous, and Freud were contemporaries, both Jewish, both doctors, both writing daily to their German fiancés, both eventually dying of diseases to/complications of the throat.

¹⁷⁵ Hélène Cixous, ‘A Kind of Magic’, *Paragraph*, 36:2 (2013), pp.161-188, p.165-170.

nourrit qui. A demi-mort je me naissais de lui' / 'For nourishment I put [the baby] on the left breast ... It's so warm we don't know who feeds whom. Half-dead I was born of him').¹⁷⁶ The 'rêve du nouveau-né' ('dream of the new-born'), in which Freud is not so much rendered feminine as 'homme-femme' ('male-female'), not only makes a joke about the fantasy-content of Freud's own unconscious, as according to psychoanalytic logic would be fulfilled in his dreams, but also exposes how the emphasis for Cixous lies not with the death drive and the return to the inorganic (as per the Freudian and Lacanian trajectories) but rather with, as by way of conclusion I have been suggesting, principles implying pleasure: half-dead, the old man is warmed, nourished, even born (not death then but life, or the implication of each in the other, with an emphasis upon the latter).¹⁷⁷

Further comment can therefore be made on the relation between femininity and the abject 'labour' of mourning and death as imagined in *Or* and *Dedans*. The binaristic conception of gender is itself undermined and set in motion by Cixous's postulation of the 'homme-femme'. Returning then to my reading of the grandmother who 'delivers' her howling grief in *Dedans*, it is further important to note that the association between a tremendous grief and the contorted non-generative female body is held in check, indeed made somewhat funny, by the comic excess of the representation itself, both in terms of the young narrator's encouragement ('go on, go on, louder, kill us, kill everything, more, more') and the evident pleasure of the act ('she moans, taking pleasure in making her deep voice roll over our heads ... taking her time ...'), not to mention the grandmother's comic removal of her dentures 'to work up a really good howl'.¹⁷⁸ The pleasure of the act is evidently bodily, but lies also in language and its pleasing approximation of sound: 'RRRaRRRaRRa'. The comic element of excess, and the related postulation of feminine pleasure, in this way serves to limit the earnestness and melancholy of Cixous's association of femininity with suffering, death and melancholic abjection. Thus we can focus less on the placement of woman in the position of pain ('women do not mourn, and this is where their pain lies') and instead on what it might mean to 'take up the challenge of loss'

¹⁷⁶ *Or*, p.19-20.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.19; p.113. I would note also that in 'Mourning and Melancholia' Freud associated melancholia with 'the refusal of nourishment' (Freud, 'Mourning', p.259). Further, the collapse of the binary (life/death; pleasure/degeneration) is itself the overriding implication of 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' despite Freud's repeated attempts to keep the one from the other.

¹⁷⁸ *Inside*, p.43.

– to as it were *allow* loss, to ‘give loss life’ – understood as a statement set against the punitive injunctions of the superego and the moral order of the castration complex, an order based as noted on the attempt to eschew, avoid or abject loss (castration).

Indeed if, as suggested, the circulation of the letters in *Or* (from father to brother to sister) mimics the oedipal circulation of desire in support of the sublimity/authority of the father, then it is also the case that Cixous sets, against this oedipal dynamic, the excessive circulation or reciprocity enacted by the text (the letters) of *Or* itself. Here I refer to the dedication of the published text of *Or* from Cixous ‘à mon frère Pierre’ (‘to my brother Pierre’).¹⁷⁹ That is, to the brother who gave the letters of the dead to *Or*’s narrator in the confines of, indeed inaugurating, the text that follows. The final joke, play or gamble of *Or* would then be this: the excessive and reciprocal motion, giving, or giving back, of letters (as in reading, writing, text) in response to loss, as well as the way in which the ‘fictional’ space exceeds its interpretive borders. That Cixous ‘returns’ – or, like a letter, *writes* – *Or*, *les lettres de mon père* ‘to’ the brother who gave her narrator ‘les lettres’ of the dead, apparently unread, to begin with, speaks to the unbounded qualities of text, particularly as it operates as a form of passage or responsiveness between self and other, again like a letter.

At the end of *Or*, the narrator states ‘Je les lirai demain, dis-je, à haute voix. C’est promis’ (‘I’ll read [the letters] tomorrow, I say, aloud. I promise’).¹⁸⁰ The nature of *Or*’s promise ought to be understood less in terms of Derridean aporia or the Nietzschean drive to mastery of the future, these being paradigmatic philosophical modes in which promise has been thought. While *Or* undoubtedly emphasises relations, such as a promise, that bind self and other, I argue in conclusion that it is possible to think of *Or*’s promise once again in terms of a playful kind of joke. For, according to *Or*’s opening logic of *oubli* (forgetreading), any promise to read is always and already a promise to forget, and to forget is itself promising, for it renders possible and anticipates an encounter in the future. What might be promising about forgetting is precisely its ability to emancipate us from the objects of the past, the aim of mourning in the early Freudian schema. Thus Cixous in *Or*, paradoxically and playfully, evokes a promise made to one but kept to another (‘il est celui qui

¹⁷⁹ *Or*, n.p.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.199

promet, sachant que ce c'est pas à moi que la promesse sera tenue' / 'he is the one who promises, knowing that it is not to me that the promise will be kept'), indicating an unusually open-ended promise (a pure promise, a promise as such?) in which attachments and objects are open to promiscuous transfer, and the future is not objectified and remains free from mastery, as opposed to melancholic identification, repetition, and interiorisation of the object.¹⁸¹

Unlike the 'turning inward' of melancholic retreat, the making of promises 'rests on experiences which nobody could ever have with himself. On the contrary, experiences that are entirely based on the presence of others'.¹⁸² Sara Ahmed notes 'that the word *promise* derives from the Latin verb *promittere*, suggesting "to let go or send forth"', as a letter is sent forth, or set in motion.¹⁸³ Holding in check the terms of melancholic attachment and traumatic repetition through strategies of comic bathos and excess, and the crucial anticipation of a future that remains open to the other, *Or* finally suggests that the ongoing and renewable promise of text is its implication in the promise to let the past go, by sending loss forward.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.14. As Jennifer Rushworth explicates, for Derrida 'all promises are caught in the typically Derridean double bind of being a '[p]romesse nécessaire et impossible'; they are necessary for the establishing and maintaining of human relationships and for the tying together of past and future, yet impossible in that if they were possible they could never have been true promises in the first place'. Jennifer Rushworth, 'Derrida, Proust, and the Promise of Writing', *French Studies*, LXIX: 2 (April 2015), pp.205-219, p.206. In this respect, Derrida's formulation of promise is like his formulation of mourning as a double bind (how to do justice to the dead without betraying their singularity?). On Nietzschean promise, and without wanting to override the nuance and ambivalence of Nietzsche's thinking, we might say that for Nietzsche (unlike Cixous), the institution of promise militates against the capacity to forget: the bind of promise attempts to render predictable the other and the future as one in which the promise will be fulfilled. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*, trans. Michael A. Scarpitti (London: Penguin, 2013). In respect of my discussion of Cixous, Sara Ahmed is helpful in her understanding of promise as an expression of desire and an indication of something favourable to come (Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*, p.30). Cixous's version of promise is emancipated from the Nietzschean drive to mastery of the future given how Cixous relates it, paradoxically, to the promise to forget. Hannah Arendt's promise is similarly emancipated from mastery. Arendt relates promise to the capacity to act and begin something new, and indeed to the capacity to tell a story about oneself in relation to others. For Arendt promises are 'isolated islands of certainty in an ocean of uncertainty' and promises loses their binding power if they attempt to 'cover the whole ground of the future'. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p.244.

¹⁸² Butler, *Psychic Life*, p.171; Arendt, *Human Condition*, p.238.

¹⁸³ Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*, p.38.

2. Between ‘Nothing’ and A Name:

Jean Rhys, Displacement, and *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966)

This chapter conceptualises and interrogates Jean Rhys’s strategies of displacement in her late novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), considered her ‘masterwork’ and a rewriting of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847). The lively critical debate surrounding *Wide Sargasso Sea* presents a broad question regarding the role of European literature when it comes to the losses and injustice of the past: can literature be said to helpfully mourn the exclusions of the past? Critics have commented that Rhys ‘rewrote’ Brontë’s novel as a corrective to her source-text.¹ Attending to the history and interiority of Brontë’s creole character Bertha Mason, Rhys re-writes (or ‘writes back’ to) the narrative of colonialist individualism with which *Jane Eyre* has become associated in feminist and postcolonial literary studies, her intervention providing ‘a vivid reminder to Anglo-American critics that their exclusive focus on gender ... had assumed an essential female condition at the expense of the non-Western character’.² Yet Rhys’s own representation of racialised otherness has itself come under question, as have the limits of representation within the European novel as such: by countering the historical literary exclusion of Brontë’s white creole character, critics have argued that Rhys’s work *repeats* exclusionary practices in her spurious, if not structurally racist, representation of black creole voice and subjectivity. From this perspective, *Wide Sargasso Sea* ‘seems to be underwritten by the creole’s desire to reclaim hegemony over the literary representation of the West Indies and “black people.”’³

This chapter argues for an understanding of the structure and strategy of displacement in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which serve to ultimately disrupt identification with the dominant narratives and signifiers of Rhys’s historical telling. However, the scholarly work done in response to *Wide Sargasso Sea* displays a problematic of history, understood as a narrative of repetition. If, as has been argued,

¹ Carine M. Mardorossian, *Reclaiming Difference: Caribbean Women Rewrite Postcolonialism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), p.60.

² *Ibid.*, p.60.

³ Veronica Marie Gregg, *Jean Rhys’s Historical Imagination: Reading and Writing the Creole* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), p.114.

Rhys provides us with critical scrutiny of dynamics of ‘race’ and racialisation in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, I show that some of the racialist identifications at work in the novel have nevertheless been *displaced* onto the critical field, as emblematised in the recovery by critics of the ‘Rochester’ name for the nameless white narrator of Part Two. Rather than recover the paternal signifier, this chapter asks instead what his namelessness might make possible. In what follows, the terrain of ‘literature’ and that of ‘criticism’ are not identical to each other, and nor are they internally at ease. If the relationship between ‘literature’ and ‘criticism’ is itself one of displacement, this chapter nevertheless brings out a diversity at the level of the critical gesture. Meanwhile, the misalignments Rhys puts productively in place within her writing – for example, the textual and temporal displacements between *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*, and the displaced narrative ‘I’ across *Wide Sargasso Sea* – ultimately mitigate any spectatorial over-identification with loss, opening a space outside of repetition.⁴

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The binary nature of the critical field as outlined above has been complicated by more recent work on *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in which critics counter the argument that Rhys writes ‘in the interests of’ the white creole.⁵ Such critics argue that Rhys’s writing in fact scrutinises the discursive and intersectional construction of racial identity itself, in relation to contingencies of gender and class.⁶ In this chapter, I contribute to this line of argumentation by turning to Rhysian displacement in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Displacement refers most simply to the action of moving something from its place. In its association with place, displacement relates to an overriding question already under discussion in this thesis: how to ‘give place’ to the (lost) other through writing or remembrance, as has been at stake in chapter one. The term carries strong psychoanalytic association, as a characteristic mode of the operation of the unconscious. Psychoanalytically speaking, the phenomenon of displacement,

⁴ As Marianne Hirsch has made clear, strategies of displacement are key to mitigating spectatorial over-identification with loss. See Marianne Hirsch, ‘Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy’, *Act of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. M. Bal, J. Crewe and L. Spitzer (London: University Press of New England, 1999); see also Susannah Radstone, ‘Social Bonds and Psychical Order: Testimonies’, *Traumatizing Theory: The Cultural Politics of Affect In and Beyond Psychoanalysis*, ed. Karyn Ball (New York: Other Press, 2007), p.105-112.

⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism’, *Critical Inquiry*, 12:1 (Autumn 1985), pp.243-261, p.253.

⁶ See for example the recent edited collection *Jean Rhys: Twenty-First-Century Approaches*, ed. Erica L. Johnson and Patricia Moran (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

which is particularly applicable to the dream-work, means that a cathectic intensity or interest is liable to be detached from its emphasis and discharged onto other ideas, which are related via metonymic contiguity.⁷ Thus in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ (1917), Freud writes that in mourning there is a ‘withdrawal of the libido from [the] object and its displacement on to a new one ... The free libido [is] ... displaced on to another object’.⁸ Mourning in this respect follows a structure of displacement in the movement of libido – a movement related to desire which itself ‘may be limitless and open to an infinite series of displacements in quest of a surrogate for what has presumably been lost’.⁹ If this suggests that displacement presupposes loss, the equation is elsewhere reversed. Mourning, writes Freud, ‘is commonly the reaction to the loss of a beloved person or an abstraction taking the place of one’: a displacement has thus always and already occurred in Freud’s movement between the particular ‘beloved person’ and the ‘abstraction’ taking his or her place.¹⁰

The movement (of displacement) between particular and abstraction is indeed at stake in this chapter, broadly speaking, which situates Rhys’s writing in the geopolitical context of the colonial Caribbean, a region constituted by the transatlantic displacement of peoples. Further, the geopolitical dimension of displacement is itself displaced onto, or overlaps with, Rhys’s time of writing in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s when colonial structures were being countered and critiqued. As well as carrying psychoanalytic association then, displacement evidently also refers to colonial conditions of cross-cultural movement and its impact upon identity: the enforced departure of peoples, and the taking *over* of place throughout imperial histories. In relation to which, as already indicated, questions arise regarding the limits and possibilities (and limits of possibility) of the European novel when it attempts to encounter such displacement, without reproducing the problems and identifications of imperialism and the colonialist representation of the ‘other’. The ‘clearly defensive function’ of

⁷ Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Karnac Books, 1988), p.121-124. See also Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. A. A. Brill (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950). It was especially in dreams that Freud demonstrated the function of displacement via the difference between what is latent and what is manifest in the dream work: the psychoanalytic tracing of seemingly insignificant details related to the latent content is also an applicable method of reading literature, applied to some extent in this chapter. (And critiqued in recent work by Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015)).

⁸ Sigmund Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1987), p.257-258.

⁹ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014), p.59.

¹⁰ Freud, ‘Mourning’, p.252.

displacement according to Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis in *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (1967), who write that ‘in a phobia, for instance, displacement on to the phobic object permits the objectivation, localisation and containment of anxiety’, suggests displacement as a key operation at work in dynamics of ‘race’ and racialisation, whereby anxiety is displaced onto the raced subject in processes of (white) self-making.¹¹ The understanding from the previous chapter, of the association between melancholia and the abjected feminine, is thus in this chapter extended to an understanding of imperial melancholia and the inclusion-disavowal of the racialised ‘other’ in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Turning to Rhys’s strategies of displacement, this chapter also lends consideration to the developing interest in Rhys’s ‘affective dynamics’, namely pity and envy, understood as markers of white remorse that are projected or displaced onto racialised others.¹² ‘[T]he negative affects’ of oppressors, according to Kelly Oliver following Frantz Fanon, can be ‘deposited into the bones of the oppressed’.¹³ I point out how the signification of spurious loss, in association with the nameless white male narrator of Part Two in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, contrasts with the discursive association of blackness with pleasure and plenitude, thus elaborating an interpretation of racism as a powerful projection of spurious loss. In so doing, this chapter shifts the predominant focus of debates regarding the site of the subaltern in Rhys’s writing from Christophine to Daniel Cosway. Additionally, this chapter breaks new ground in bringing Rhys and Hélène Cixous into greater critical comparison. I now turn to this latter point.¹⁴

¹¹ LaPlanche and Pontalis, *Language*, p.123.

¹² Johnson and Moran, *Twenty-First-Century Approaches*, p.9.

¹³ Kelly Oliver quoted in Johnson and Moran, *Twenty-First-Century Approaches*, p.5. See also *Unconscious Dominions: Psychoanalysis, Colonial Trauma, and Global Sovereignities*, ed. Warwick Anderson, Deborah Jenson and Richard C. Keller (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹⁴ The term ‘affect’ is rather difficult to pin down as an object of study. Nonetheless, ‘affect’ understood as a form of contact, atmosphere, or feeling (emotional and bodily) helps elucidate the intricacies of encounter that go on *between* self, other, and object, and as such is relevant to responses to loss. Katherine Ibbett clarifies that affect pertains to ‘*in-betweenness*’ and ‘non-distinctions’, occurring somewhere between emotion, body, and experience. Unlike emotion, which can presuppose interiority, affect ‘doesn’t tally with a neatly bounded self but perhaps holds between such selves’ and thus does not ‘cling ... to a particular notion of the subject’. This definition is pertinent to this chapter for it underscores aspects of contingency and encounter. Katherine Ibbett, ‘When I do, I call it affect’, *Paragraph*, 40:2 (2017), pp.244-253, p. 245. Sara Ahmed’s interpretation of affect is also at play, for it underlines affect in relation to race as a turning away from or toward certain objects and bodies that become associated with an affective charge in an evaluative, intimate, or indeed exclusionary manner. Sara Ahmed, ‘Happy Objects’, *The Affect Theory Reader*, Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), pp.29-51, esp. p.29-31. This collection is useful overall for understandings of affect and the ‘affective turn’ in cultural studies. Further, affect (as implied in these definitions) relates to the overall interest in this thesis in encounter, and the promise of encounter or its thwarting through exclusion.

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Born Ella Gwendolen Rees Williams, Jean Rhys was the daughter of a Welsh doctor, her mother a third-generation Dominican creole of Scots ancestry, who lived in the Dominican city of Roseau before moving to England at sixteen. In other words, Rhys was a white woman of European ancestry ‘naturalised’ in a Caribbean colony, where her family had been slave holders prior to the Emancipation Act of 1833. Significantly, the Emancipation Act dates the opening of *Wide Sargasso Sea* to the post-emancipation period. But not in terms of black freedom: Mr Luttrell, former slave holder and friend and neighbour to the narrator’s family in Part One, is still ““waiting for this compensation the English promised when the Emancipation Act was passed. Some will wait for a long time””.¹⁵ The novel thus opens with the (delayed or impossible?) promise of reparation (‘compensation’), but from the perspective of lost white plenty. Luttrell eventually grows tired of waiting: ‘One calm evening he shot his dog, swam out to sea and was gone for always’.¹⁶ However, while the narrative position is seemingly informed by collective despair over colonial decline on the part of the white plantocracy, the notion of lost plenty is at the same time in question: ““Emancipation troubles killed old Cosway? Nonsense – the estate was going downhill for years before that””.¹⁷

The creole narrative complicates in an important way any easy opposition between black and white, understood as social markers of lack and plenty.¹⁸ Insofar as a ‘discursive and locational slippage ... attaches to the term’ a creole person ‘can be either black or white, coloniser or colonised’ since the term ‘figures a European *or* an African subject linked to displacements of place rather than

¹⁵ Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (London: Penguin, 2000), p.5. The ‘compensation’ Mr Luttrell awaits refers to the money promised to slave holders after Emancipation for the loss of ‘property’. See Catherine Hall, Nicholas Draper, Keith McClelland, Katie Donington and Rachel Lang, *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership; Colonial Slavery and the Formation of Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹⁶ *Sargasso*, p.5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.13.

¹⁸ As John J. Su notes, the opening passages of Part One of *Wide Sargasso Sea* demarcates ‘the white people’ and ‘the black people’ in such a way that the narrator is excluded entry into either grouping, disorienting the reader’s reliance upon racial markers of identification and interpretation. John J. Su, ‘The Empire of Affect: Reading Rhys after Postcolonial Theory’, *Jean Rhys: Twenty-First-Century Approaches*, ed. Erica L. Johnson and Patricia Moran (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p.178.

race'.¹⁹ Creole is then a non-binary and plural term, a 'shifting, elastic concept'²⁰ that is non-specific as to race and colour, and suggestive of an enduring relationality to otherness. As the Barbadian writer and historian Edward Kamau Brathwaite has argued, the socio-cultural plurality embodied by the creole is essential to the Caribbean region as one of cross-cultural transnationalism and transformation.²¹ Brathwaite describes the word 'creole' as a hybrid Spanish term itself at the intersection between the word *crear* (to create, to found) and *colono* (a colonist) which combine to become *criollo* – meaning a committed settler, or one native to a country's ways, even if not indigenous. Similarly, the Martiniquais writer and philosopher Édouard Glissant explores the cultural process of creolisation as an interplay of relations tied to colonial histories of transnational interconnection in the Caribbean. Glissant writes: 'We propose neither humanity's Being nor its models. We are not prompted solely by the defining of our identities but by their relation to everything possible ... – the mutual mutations generated by this interplay of relations'.²²

The state of interplay moves beyond a logic of appropriation insofar as 'identity' is not discrete but open to multiform relations. In this way, the creole position – as non-binary and potentially open to alterity – is resonant with the state or work of mourning when stressed as a non-appropriative relation to otherness. Both the creole and the mourner refute the fantasy of full presence in their aspects of relationality and plurality. Rhys's own position as a young woman of both privilege and disprivilege corresponds to this proliferation of relations: as H. Adlai Murdoch states, Rhys's subjectivity was overdetermined by racial strictures just as it was 'inculcated with an ineluctable

¹⁹ H. Adlai Murdoch, 'The Discourses of Jean Rhys: Resistance, Ambivalence and Creole Indeterminacy', *Jean Rhys: Twenty-First-Century Approaches*, ed. Erica L. Johnson and Patricia Moran (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p.150; p.147.

²⁰ Stuart Hall, *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands* (London: Allen Lane, 2018), p.18-19. As Hall writes, 'In the New World resident white settlers, born on the islands, were often described as creole; but the category also included enslaved African people, provided they were born in the country of captivity, as opposed to those recent arrivals directly transported into servitude from Africa' (*Ibid.*, p.18-19).

²¹ See Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean* (Kingston: Savacou Publications, 1974); on Rhys and the appropriation of racial difference see also, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, 'A Post-Cautionary Tale of the Helen of our Wars', *Wasafiri*, 22 (Autumn 1995), pp.69-78. 'A New World perspective', as Mardorossian writes, 'is traditionally perceived as one that highlights the interconnectedness of the dynamics of creolisation in the Americas, that is, of the transnational and cross-cultural processes of intermixing and transformation that produce a Creole society' (Mardorossian, *Reclaiming*, p.4).

²² Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p.89.

“Caribbeanness” ... whose contradictions continually undermined the sterile world of metropolitan whiteness’.²³ Equally, however, these contradictions prohibited unproblematic affiliation with the black creole population of African and slave ancestry. Thus while Mairéad Hanrahan writes, regarding Cixous, that ‘[w]hat matters most ... is how Cixous’s writing always transforms its originary “ground”’,²⁴ if the ‘originary “ground”’ of Rhys’s writing is the Caribbean then it is one already constituted by transformation as a region formed through the radical displacement and alteration of populations in the plantation economy and via the slave trade from Africa.

A sense of displacement – from the European elites as well as the Afro-Caribbean majority – is emphatically apparent in Rhys’s unfinished autobiography, *Smile Please* (1979), which I suggest marks Rhys’s displaced autobiographical positioning in a textual manner. The imperative of Rhys’s title refers to the opening scene of the autobiography in which Rhys recalls having her photograph taken as a child, which is to say the recollection of a moment in which the self is displaced from itself, captured as an image. Years later, the image does not aid autobiographical memory but marks internal difference or departure: ‘I wasn’t like it any longer ... the curls, the dimples, surely belonged to someone else. The eyes were a stranger’s eyes ... she wasn’t me any longer’.²⁵ While Marianne Hirsch has underscored the complicated mourning associated with photography insofar as it can emphasise the irretrievability of the past,²⁶ Rhys’s autobiographical description of estrangement from the documents of her own history demonstrate Sontag’s point that photography can just as well delimit memory insofar as one ‘remembers only the photographs’²⁷ – or, in this instance, the encounter with them that marks a sense of self-loss. An absence of internal continuity is likewise evident in the production by Rhys of an incomplete autobiography that, as Rhys’s editor Diana Athill

²³ Murdoch, ‘Discourses’, p.146.

²⁴ Mairéad Hanrahan, *Cixous’s Semi-Fictions: Thinking at the Borders of Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p.2.

²⁵ Jean Rhys, *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography* (London: Deutsch, 1979), p.19-20.

²⁶ Hirsch underscores the complicated mourning associated with photography when she writes that ‘Photography’s relation to loss and death is not to mediate the process of individual and collective memory but to bring back the past in the form of a ghostly revenant, emphasising, at the same time, its immutable and irreversible pastness and irretrievability’. Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), p.20. The ‘ghostly revenant’ of the photograph recalls to some extent the ‘return’ of Cixous’s father’s letters in *Or, les lettres de mon père* (1997) as discussed in chapter one.

²⁷ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2003), p.79.

explains, is not ‘a continuous narrative but would catch the past here and there, at points where it happened to crystallise into vignettes’.²⁸ ‘Autobiography’ is itself displaced from its author (i.e. moved from its proper place) to the extent that Rhys did not ‘write’ her own: at the age of eighty-six Rhys’s hands were so crippled she could no longer use a pen. Rhys dictated her memories of Dominica to her friend David Plante in the winters of 1976-78 in London; Plante took down Rhys’s words, typed them up, and read them back to her for revision. Even the aim of autobiography, understood as an account of one’s life, gets displaced by Rhys onto fiction insofar as, according to Athill, for Rhys the writing of autobiography was somewhat superfluous given that ‘much of her life has already been “used up” in the novels’.²⁹ (The ‘therapeutic function’ of writing fiction for Rhys, which was ‘the purging of unhappiness’ according to Athill, demonstrates the interaction of fiction with not only autobiography but therapy, contributing to my discussion in the Introduction regarding fiction and its others. Indeed, Athill associates Rhys’s autobiographical writing with a ‘tedious’ process of ‘raking over [of] remains’³⁰ which recalls the work of mourning – and/as analysis – as a piecemeal retrieval of one’s past.)

What Jane Hiddleston refers to as the ‘flight’³¹ of the dislocated autobiographical persona is likewise apparent in the Algerian writings of Hélène Cixous. Rhys’s displaced autobiographical position in the West Indies can be compared to Cixous’s plural position as a child in colonial Algeria, both positions suggesting a counter to colonialist hierarchy and categorisation. In her own autobiographical writings, Cixous refers to her ‘double childhood’ of inclusion/exclusion in colonial Algeria.³² A French-Algerian Jewish girl growing up in Oran and Algiers, with French, German, Arabic and Hebrew all spoken around her, Cixous occupied, not unlike the young Rhys, a position of complex displacement, describing herself as ‘a French person without France’³³ as much as she was a Jew in Algeria excluded from French citizenship following the anti-Semitic laws of the Vichy

²⁸ Introduction to *Smile*, p.6.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.6-7.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.6-7.

³¹ Jane Hiddleston, *Poststructuralism and Postcoloniality: The Anxiety of Theory* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), p.56.

³² Mireille Calle-Gruber and Hélène Cixous, *Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (London: Routledge, 2003), p.196.

³³ Hélène Cixous, ‘Mon Algérie’, in *Other Words: To Depart Not to Arrive From Algeria*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, *Stigmata: Escaping Texts* (London: Routledge, 1998), p.224-5.

government in 1940. The interaction of French colonialism in Algeria with the effects of anti-Semitism on Jewish life in the 1930s and 1940s engendered what Cixous describes as ‘that sort of Algerian disorder I used to get in Algeria or that Algeria got in me, that feeling of being possessed by a feeling of dispossession...’³⁴ As Jews, the Cixous family ‘were like the Arabs identical twins in deprivation’,³⁵ insofar as they were excluded from identification with the ruling French elites, and yet insofar as they were European with the privilege of relative wealth, the Cixous’s were identified with the coloniser class by the Arab and Berber communities, impeding solidarity and local alliance. As Birgit Mara Kaiser describes, the ““perverse historical complication” of French colonialism, which was at a specific moment coupled with Vichy-anti-Semitism, creat[ed] a position of simultaneous inclusion/exclusion, of arbitrary displacement, an in-between space that was privileged/disprivileged, depending on the perspective from which it was viewed.”³⁶ The result of which Cixous describes as an ‘unlivable relationship with oneself ... Me, I thought I am *inseparab*’: that is, constituted by both intimacy with and alienation from the (Arab Algerian) ‘other’.³⁷

Cixous’s description of a ‘disorder’ of dispossession affirms the psychical strife wrought by colonisation to which Frantz Fanon and Ranjana Khanna have attested, for example, in works in which psychoanalysis interacts with postcolonial or decolonial critique.³⁸ For Cixous, this strife manifests as a failure of mourning: an inability to have and to lose. Algeria as ‘the originary earth, the native country of [Cixous’s] writing’³⁹ is ‘unmournable’⁴⁰ because it was never clearly possessed at

³⁴ Hélène Cixous, *Reveries of the Wild Woman: Primal Scenes*, trans. Beverkey Bie Brahic (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2000), p.7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.225.

³⁶ Birgit Mara Kaiser, ‘Algerian Disorders: On Deconstructive Postcolonialism in Cixous and Derrida’, *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, 2:2 (September 2015), pp.191-211, p.196.

³⁷ *Reveries*, p.24.

³⁸ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin, 1963); Ranjana Khanna, *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). Khanna argues that melancholia emerges from colonialism in a manner allowing for critique. Unlike in the theories of Walter Benjamin and Wendy Brown, for example, in which melancholia is a political pathology that disables the present and future, Khanna argues that the critical agency with which Freud associated melancholia (as discussed in my Introduction and in chapter one) can counter the hegemonic super-ego in which ‘agency is assimilated into social mechanisms of control’. For Khanna, melancholic critical agency can therefore point the way toward ‘a political future free of the failures of postcolonial states and misguided biopolitics’ (*Ibid.*, p.16-26). On left-wing melancholia as attachment to a failed ideal over and above the revolutionary possibilities of the present, see Walter Benjamin, ‘Left-Melancholy’, *Weimar Republic Sourcebooks* (California: University of California Press, 1994); and Wendy Brown, ‘Resisting Left Melancholia’, *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2003), p.458-9.

³⁹ Calle-Gruber and Cixous, *Rootprints*, p.196.

⁴⁰ Cixous, *Reveries*, p.7.

all: ‘I did not lose Algeria, because I never had it, and I never was it. I suffered that it was lost for itself, separated from itself by colonisation’.⁴¹ As noted by Freud in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, mourning can refer to ‘the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country ...’⁴² According to which schema, colonialism would then produce the pathological reaction of melancholia insofar as the lost object – ‘one’s country’ – is as Cixous writes ‘lost for itself, separated from itself by colonisation’. Yet crucially, Cixous eschews any ease of identification and reiterates her challenge to the economy or ontology of loss: ‘I did not lose ... I never had it ... I never was it’. The sense of a destination at which it is impossible to arrive relates to this condition of non-possession: “‘*The whole time I was living in Algeria I would dream of one day arriving in Algeria, I would have done anything to get there, I had written, I never made it to Algeria*’”.⁴³ The displaced ‘destination’ of the colonial subject’s narrative or dream of departure and non-arrival is expressed by Cixous in her neologism ‘Algériance’ in which ‘the suffix *-ance* implicitly connects with Derridean *différance*, or postponement of interpretation’.⁴⁴ As with Rhys’s autobiographical flight in *Smile Please*, the scene of writing is thus not present to itself (“‘... *I had written ...*’”).⁴⁵ This is an insight I will carry forward into my reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea* in this chapter, and it makes sense of Cixous’s claim, despite writing seemingly so much from memory and experience, that ‘l’autobiographie, n’existe pas’ (‘autobiography does not exist’).⁴⁶ To write the ‘I’ is to separate from it, to be elsewhere, or is to tell one contingent story in place of another, as stated in Cixous’s epigraph to ‘Albums and Legends’ – which nonetheless remains a piece of ‘life-writing’: ‘All biographies like all autobiographies like all narratives tell one story in place of another story’.⁴⁷

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.224.

⁴² Freud, ‘Mourning’, p.252.

⁴³ Cixous, *Reveries*, p.3.

⁴⁴ Mireille Rosello, *Postcolonial Hospitality: The Immigrant as Guest* (California: Stanford University Press, 2001), p.114.

⁴⁵ As Mairéad Hanrahan points out, the ‘writing of the return to the divided or unreachable origin is in turn divided, split from itself’ (Hanrahan, *Semi-Fictions*, p.164). As much is evident in Cixous’s changing and undecidable use of tense: “‘*I was living ... I would have done anything ... I had written ... I never made it ...*’” (Cixous, *Reveries*, p.3).

⁴⁶ Hélène Cixous, *Le Livre de Promethea* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), p.27.

⁴⁷ Calle-Gruber and Cixous, *Rootprints*, p.203-204. For more on Cixous and autobiography, see Mairéad Hanrahan, ‘Of Autobiography’, *Paragraph*, 23.3 (2000), pp. 282-95.

Nor for Cixous is there an easy alignment between memory and experience. Thus, in an example of Cixous's 'memories of displacement', she recalls the irony of passing by the Catholic cemetery in Algiers when her father lay buried across town in the Jewish cemetery, 'the true cemetery', where her memory – at a distance from experience – is held or held back.⁴⁸ 'Although she did not go to the Jewish cemetery ... her memory somehow continues to linger in that place', resulting in 'the recollection of experiences from which the writing persona turns out all along to have been absent'.⁴⁹ Displacement is in this sense primary, with Cixous at once 'both inside and outside the sites of her early development'.⁵⁰ Unlike a colonialist logic of absence and presence, exclusion and inclusion, Cixous asserts the imaginative possibility of presence within absence: she is able to be 'with' her father even when she is not. The boundaries that enable enclosure and expulsion, inside and outside, are for Cixous in motion and overlap. Thus '[t]he circles intersected' and '[t]he border moves'.⁵¹ The 'inside' is not prior to or prioritised over the 'outside' but each gives way, or gives place, to the other.⁵² As Hanrahan writes, there can thus be 'no fantasy whatsoever of an original presence' to be lost or regained.⁵³ 'Algérie' therefore suggests not a loss to be mourned but 'a zone [to be inhabited] without belonging (against the colonial principle of the closed circle)', exemplified by the expulsion of the Cixous family from the 'Cercle Militaire' in Oran in 1940 after the revocation of their French citizenship under Vichy law ('we were thrown out as Jews').⁵⁴

Stuart Hall, in his own autobiographical writings recounting his childhood in Jamaica, points to the primacy of displacement in the Caribbean context, at which point the term 'displacement' carries geographic meaning but refers also to the displaced subject positioning of the creole as indicated already in this chapter. Like Cixous and Rhys, separated from the 'originary' scene of writing (which is itself dislocated), Hall writes that '[i]n recounting the story of someone born out of

⁴⁸ Hiddleston, *Postcoloniality*, p.57; Cixous, 'Algérie', p.206.

⁴⁹ Hiddleston, *Postcoloniality*, p.57; p.58.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.58.

⁵¹ Cixous, 'Algérie', p.213; p.183.

⁵² As noted in chapter one, Cixous's writing does not attempt to enclose what it names, remaining attentive to writing 'on' the other without 'crushing' the other. Peggy Kamuf, 'To Give Place: Semi-Approaches to Hélène Cixous', *Yale French Studies*, 87 (1995), pp.68-89, p.74.

⁵³ Hanrahan, *Semi-Fictions*, p.164.

⁵⁴ Kaiser, 'Disorders', p.204. Kaiser's refers to Glissant's work on creolisation in her essay on Cixous, emphasising the parallels I am drawing here between Rhys and Cixous (*Ibid.*, p.210); Cixous, 'Algérie', p.213.

place, displaced from the dominant currents of history, nothing can be taken for granted. Not least the telling of a life'.⁵⁵ This impacts upon the 'destination' of narrative: referring to his 'intermediary position' as part of an emergent brown creole middle class in colonial Jamaica, located between 'the European-oriented governing elites and the mass of Jamaica's black people', Hall comments that his narrative of himself 'will never reach its destination ... arrival never occurs ...'.⁵⁶ The decentred social imaginary of colonial society, involving structural white bias and identification with an absent-present 'mother country', provokes Hall's insight that identity 'is never singular but is multiply constructed across intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions'.⁵⁷ Given the distinctive shape of plantation society in Jamaica it is, as Hall states, necessary to grasp the multiplicity of social determinations in play such as race, gender, sexuality and class. That these social determinants 'work in combination, as an articulation of different forces' means that they are overdetermined. Scholars of Rhys such as Mardorossian and Murdoch have expressed the factor of overdetermination in relation to Rhys's fiction. Yet as Hall clarifies:

that [identities] are overdetermined suggests, too, the constant misalignment of these determinations: one can never be matched to the another, or read from another in a neat, stylised choreography. Displacement, in this scenario, is primary.⁵⁸

Before turning to the primacy of displacement in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, with the aiming of advancing readings of Rhys emphasising overdetermination, it is first important to clarify the relation of the critical field, and the writer 'Rhys' as a cultural/critical construct, to mourning and melancholia.

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The literary space and the critical space occupied by *Wide Sargasso Sea* display a problematic of displaced identification, related to a problematic of history and its repetition. There are several ways in which this is so. Firstly, in keeping with Rhys's displacement of autobiography from its 'proper' function,⁵⁹ attention to the critical reception of the author reveals the popular depiction of Rhys as

⁵⁵ Hall, *Stranger*, p.95.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.63; p.25.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.23.

⁵⁸ Hall, *Stranger*, p.91.

⁵⁹ As noted earlier in this chapter, Rhys did not 'write' her own autobiography and felt that the function of autobiography – the telling of a life, the purging of unhappiness – had been ““used up”” in her novels.

making ghostly incursions upon her own existence. In 1950, when Rhys's first five books were out of print, Francis Wyndham referred to 'the late Jean Rhys' after having been told that Rhys had died in a sanatorium (she was actually at work on her final novel).⁶⁰ The assumption that Rhys was dead during her life time, aided by the hiatus in the publication of her works between 1939 and 1966 (when *Wide Sargasso Sea* was published),⁶¹ attracted the curious impression that Rhys was herself 'a revenant, someone who returns to a familiar place, like Lazarus, from the dead',⁶² or that Rhys was impersonating her dead self, an imposter upon her own existence, as she wrote in a letter to Peggy Kirkaldy in November 1949: 'My bitter enemy next door is now telling everybody very loud and clear that I'm an imposter "impersonating a dead writer called Jean Rhys" ... It's a weird feeling being told you are impersonating yourself. Rather nightmarish. You think: perhaps I am!'⁶³ When Selma Vaz Dias wanted to adapt *Good Morning, Midnight* for radio, she had to work from 'missing persons' posts in local newspapers in order to locate Rhys.⁶⁴

The sense of spectrality has led critics to consider Rhys and her writings in terms of haunting, ghostliness and a melancholic remainder inassimilable to canonical parameters or periodisation: the wave of Rhys criticism since 2013⁶⁵ positions itself as haunted by its ghostly literary object, suggesting a work at once compelling and awkwardly plural and persistent. '[Rhys] haunts modernist studies for many of the same reasons that she does postcolonial literature – and most importantly because her emotional impact has seemed inassimilable'.⁶⁶ Rhys's ghostly figure has taken form in plural guises, as Mary Wilson and Kerry L. Johnson comment: 'Rhys matters? Which Rhys, exactly, are we talking about? ... Rhys the Caribbean novelist? Rhys the exile in England? Rhys the modernist? Rhys the postmodernist? Rhys the depressive alcoholic who somehow managed to create

⁶⁰ Likewise, the BBC reported that Rhys had died in tragic circumstances during World War Two (Introduction to *Sargasso*, p.vii).

⁶¹ Rhys published short stories and four novels between 1927-1939, at which point she did not publish again until *Wide Sargasso Sea* in 1966 when Rhys was seventy-six.

⁶² Introduction to *Sargasso*, p.vii.

⁶³ Jean Rhys, *Jean Rhys: Letters 1931-1966*, ed. Francis Wyndham and Diana Melly (London: Penguin, 1985), p.64.

⁶⁴ Johnson and Moran, *Twenty-First-Century Approaches*, p.16, n.28.

⁶⁵ By which I mean the onset of an intersectional approach to Rhys adopted in the edited collections by Johnson and Moran (in 2015) and, earlier, by the works collected in *Rhys Matters: New Critical Perspectives*, ed. Mary Wilson and Kerry L. Johnson (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013).

⁶⁶ Johnson and Moran, *Twenty-First-Century Approaches*, p.6.

great works through depression and despair ...?’⁶⁷ Insofar as ‘the literary dust is still settling’⁶⁸ around Rhys’s writing and its disruptive relation to canonical parameters, we are dealing with an oeuvre that embodies the interstitial and unmourned qualities of that which refuses to rest in peace, if not that other theoretical trope of the return of the repressed.

This may be ‘true’ of literature as such: if laid to rest, literature would cease as a creative, critical or cultural possibility, a notion that ties literary work conceptually to the ongoing work of mourning.⁶⁹ The possibility that the literary object can be forgotten ensures the possibility that it may return, like Cixous’s father’s letters – or like Rhys from the ‘death’ of literary obscurity. The ontology, or hauntology, of the *revenant* marks the cyclical nature of both literature and mourning, or of literature as a realm in which mourning takes place. On the other hand, *Le Revenant* was not a title that persisted for Rhys when it came to writing *Wide Sargasso Sea*: Rhys’s early draft under this name was lost and burned.⁷⁰ While *Le Revenant* did in a sense ‘return’ as *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the point about the repressed of literature and its cyclical return takes on a different meaning than the critical context above might suggest. Just as Wilson and Johnson’s (deliberately gauche) words point to the unavailability of the melancholic mode of cultural and aesthetic justification for the female writer who therefore falls short of genius – Rhys as the ‘depressive alcoholic who somehow managed to create great works’ as if by fluke, rather than Rhys’s depression as creatively legitimate – Rhys’s own relationship to writing as described by Athill suggests the desire to dispose of an unhappy past in order to ‘start again’ anew – not unlike Cixous’s emphasis on *commencement* – more than it does the melancholic or spectral.⁷¹

The second way in which Rhys, with *Wide Sargasso Sea*, performs a problematic of history and its repetition refers to the critical work already done on *Wide Sargasso Sea* and its relation to Rhys’s source-text. This requires greater elaboration. An important cornerstone of Rhys criticism

⁶⁷ Wilson and Johnson, *Rhys Matters*, p.1.

⁶⁸ Elaine Savory quoted in Wilson and Johnson, *Rhys Matters*, n.p.

⁶⁹ On this relation between literature and mourning see William Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

⁷⁰ Rhys’s first response to *Jane Eyre* was named *Le Revenant* but Rhys burnt the typescript after a row with her second husband, who had given her a copy of *Jane Eyre* in 1939 (Introduction to *Sargasso*, p.viii).

⁷¹ Athill notes how ‘Once something had been written out, [Rhys] said, it was done with and one could start again from the beginning’ (Introduction to *Smile*, p.6).

concerns the extent to which Rhys repeats or revises the imperialist construction of race implied in her source-text. In *Jane Eyre*, critics argue, ‘the woman from the colonies’ is ‘sacrificed as an insane animal for her sister’s consolidation’.⁷² Critics have to a large extent accepted the significance of Rhys’s comments that she wrote *Wide Sargasso Sea* in order to ‘correct’ Charlotte Brontë’s portrait of the ‘paper tiger’ creole Bertha Mason.⁷³ Rhys’s re-writing of a canonical text of modern European female subject constitution from a postcolonial perspective demands a reckoning with that subject and her imbrication in the colonial past. Likewise, the body of critical writing on *Wide Sargasso Sea* is, at its most worthwhile, a debate about the capacity of European literature to do justice to the victims of European history – the capacity of literature to mourn – while attempting to disentangle the consequences of the logic dramatised by *Jane Eyre*: that is, the constitution of some subjects via the disavowal of others.⁷⁴ If Rhys writes *Wide Sargasso Sea* so as to give life to Brontë’s Bertha Mason, to make her ‘at least plausible with a past’ as Rhys writes in a letter to Selma Vaz Dias in April 1958,⁷⁵ then Rhys’s novel proposes a work of feminist commemoration: it is precisely in the posthumous reckoning with the life of Bertha Mason that, so Rhys argues, her life can be conveyed with justice. ‘For me (and for you I hope) she must be right *on stage*. She must be at least plausible with a past’. To commemoratively convey a life that is otherwise ‘*off stage*’⁷⁶ and not fully human is to grant a posthumous humanity, rendering an ungrieveable life grieveable.⁷⁷

Justice, however, is one thing that the resulting text disputes: according to Antoinette and Christophine in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, there is neither justice nor God. Indeed, unlike certain scholars, *Wide Sargasso Sea* does not assume the possibility of repairing the past. In Part One, reparation is codified within the paradigm of white advantage (as already noted via Rhys’s historical reference to the ‘compensation the English promised when the Emancipation Act was passed’), and is further inscribed as ‘a thing of the past’: ‘... the road from Spanish Town to Coulibri Estate where we lived

⁷² Spivak, ‘Three Women’s Texts’, p.270.

⁷³ *Letters*, p.262. Rhys did indeed state: ‘I’ve never believed in Charlotte’s lunatic ... that’s why I wrote this book’ (as quoted in Mardorossian, *Reclaiming*, p.60).

⁷⁴ In this light, *Jane Eyre* is a highly melancholic portrait. Jane’s independence, thanks to the profits of slavery in the Caribbean and at the expense of Rochester’s West Indian creole wife, mark Jane’s subjectivity, and the cult feminist position with which it has been associated, with the unmourned losses of that history.

⁷⁵ *Letters*, p.156.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.156.

⁷⁷ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grieveable?* (London: Verso, 2016).

was very bad and ... road repairing was now a thing of the past. (My father, visitors, horses, feeling safe in bed – all belonged to the past)'.⁷⁸ If the eventual restoration of Coulibri Estate can be read as the site of an attempted reparation of the past then this is structurally superficial, an hygienic rendering of history ('it was clean and tidy, no grass between the flagstones, no leaks').⁷⁹ The assumption that the resolution of historical losses and limitation can be counted upon is certainly simplistic, as Mireille Rosello writes:

If historiography can make readers aware of history's canonical limitations and can successfully relay voices that were previously excluded from our textbooks, it is obviously capable of doing exactly the opposite. Counting on a natural historical progress of history would be a non-paranoid but definitely irresponsible form of trust and innocence ... What interpretive parameters do we use when we judge fictionalised historical narratives from a political and ethical point of view?⁸⁰

Indeed, the Western intellectual effort to let/hear the 'subaltern' speak via the resurrection of an 'authentic' voice or past instead reimposes the assumptions of imperialist self-image and embodiment, redoubling an exclusionary tendency in the process of subjectivation itself. As Spivak writes regarding *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a 'full literary reinscription cannot easily flourish in the imperialist fracture or discontinuity'.⁸¹ Hence the line of argument that Rhys's black creole characters such as Christophine cannot be 'selfed' within *Wide Sargasso Sea* because the logic of imperialism insists upon the domestication of the other: Christophine's story/presence remains a 'tangent' that 'cannot be contained by a novel which rewrites a canonical English text within the European novelistic tradition in the interest of the white Creole rather than the native'.⁸² Yet the creole positionality of displacement troubles the binary presumption implied in this latter claim. Thus, in keeping with a paradigm in which history, and literary history at that, is no progress narrative, critics argue that, in her attempt to do justice to Brontë's marginalised creole character, Rhys repeats the

⁷⁸ *Sargasso*, p.5.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.14.

⁸⁰ Mireille Rosello, *The Reparative in Narratives: Works of Mourning in Progress* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), p.101-102.

⁸¹ Spivak, 'Three Women's Texts', p.252-254.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p.253.

sacrificial logic of *Jane Eyre* insofar as *Wide Sargasso Sea* ‘seems to be underwritten by the Creole’s desire to reclaim hegemony over the literary representation of the West Indies and “black people.”’⁸³ Critics thus imply that *Wide Sargasso Sea* ‘needs a re-writing for the same reasons ... *Jane Eyre* did’.⁸⁴ That is, Rhys’s text does not ‘rectify’ an historical exclusion but repeats an act of exclusion itself. This tells us something about the construction of subjectivity through forms of disavowal: Antoinette/Bertha achieves her psychological and biographical substance at the expense of, and through spurious identification with, the representation of black creole characters and resistance.

The debate around *Wide Sargasso Sea* in this way complicates the relation between writing and reparation. If *Wide Sargasso Sea* repeats the exclusionary nature of the past it attempts to address, Rhys’s rewriting of a canonical English novel from a postcolonial perspective ends up demonstrating the persistence of colonialist assumption and identification. This speaks to the postcolonial condition as one of melancholic attachment, and to the limits of literature understood as a task of reparation or redemption. Regarding postcolonialism and melancholia, Ranjanna Khanna interprets postcolonialism as a field pervaded by melancholia because postcolonial thought at once rejects colonialism and testifies to its power. For Khanna, as Hiddleston notes, ‘Colonialism is the lost object that is at once incorporated and vilified’: the relation of postcolonialism to the lost object is not one of mourning ‘since this would bring about a false claim to resolving and forgetting the past. In the melancholic condition, the postcolonial subject perpetuates dissonance and antinomy, and this gives rise to critical agency’.⁸⁵ More broadly at stake in the reparative aspects of literature is the underlying cultural drive to interpret art as a corrective to life, one identifiable in the focus that has been afforded Rhys’s comments regarding the remedial purpose of *Wide Sargasso Sea* (and in those comments themselves) – that is, *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a corrective to her source-text, which is as such written predominately ‘in the interests of the white Creole’.⁸⁶ In *The Culture of Redemption* (1990), Leo Bersani describes

⁸³ Gregg, *Historical Imagination*, p.114.

⁸⁴ Mardorossian, *Reclaiming*, p.61.

⁸⁵ Hiddleston, *Postcoloniality*, p.182. See my note 37 above on Khanna and postcolonial melancholia; see also Ranjanna Khanna, ‘Post-Palliative: Coloniality’s Affective Disorder’, *Postcolonial Text*, 2:1 (2006) [https://www.postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/385/815#_edn5]. Accessed January 21st 2019; see also Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), in which Gilroy contends that British culture has failed to mourn the loss of empire.

⁸⁶ Spivak, ‘Three Women’s Texts’, p.253.

the mood of ‘eloquent melancholy’ produced by a ‘culture of redemption’ in which ‘sexuality and history are catastrophes that art has the task of repairing and redeeming’:

Reparative cultural symbolisations repeat those catastrophes in order to transcend them, which means that they scrupulously reenact the failures they are meant to make not happen. The mood produced by this intended spectralisation of pervasive personal and historical failures is one of noble and eloquent melancholy ... In this aesthetic, art discovers truth or essences, and this transcendence of the phenomenal, the transformation of things into signs, is ... a negation of the reality of pain ... as if in art [historical] turbulence can be absorbed, made to disappear, just as the signs or symbols of pain disappear.⁸⁷

I suggest that aspects of the critical work on *Wide Sargasso Sea*, namely those aspects attempting to salvage a feminist subject or redemption through identification with Antoinette’s narrative of personal white creole disaster, speak to the melancholic ‘corrective will’ that Bersani posits. Accordingly, such aspects ‘scrupulously reenact the failures they are meant to make not happen’ – i.e. exclusionary narratives of disavowal – insofar as any racist identifications ostensibly at work in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and their dependency on interpretations of white suffering and victimhood, are repeated – *acted out*⁸⁸ – in the critical literature.

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It is as Spivak notes ‘particularly unfortunate when the emergent perspective of feminist criticism reproduces the axioms of imperialism’.⁸⁹ One such axiom is the weaponisation of the female victim.

While Spivak’s reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is an attempt to ‘wrench oneself away’ from this ‘mesmerising focus on the “subject-constitution” of the female individualist’⁹⁰ – i.e. the trajectory

⁸⁷ Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), p.108.

⁸⁸ *Acting out* is a correlate to melancholic repetition and arrest in which the traumatised person or group is, according to Dominick LaCapra, ‘caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes ... in which the past returns and the future is blocked ... in a melancholic feedback loop’ (LaCapra, *Writing History*, p.20). *Acting out* is distinct (in a non-binary fashion) from ‘working through’ which maps onto mourning as a social process of articulation ‘whereby one is able to distinguish between past and present ... [W]orking through may counteract the force of acting out and the repetition compulsion’ (*Ibid.*, p.22). See also, from 1914, Sigmund Freud, ‘Remembering, Repeating, Working Through’, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, Vol. XII, 1911-1913 (London: Hogarth Press, 1958).

⁸⁹ Spivak, ‘Three Women’s Texts’, p.243.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.245.

from victimhood to agency – it is at the same time not at all clear that the women whom Rhys is known for writing, and the critical afterlives that they compel, constitute a contribution to feminist ‘individualism’ (insofar as that is even a desirable aim) given that Rhys’s protagonists are not typically interpretable in terms of female empowerment or individuation. Neither significant socioeconomic actor nor explicit bearer of modern rights, Rhys’s female protagonists are more likely to align interpretively with disempowerment, disillusionment, doll-like passivity, anhedonia and dysphoria.⁹¹ Angela Carter’s ‘profound distaste’ for the type of ‘feminine writing’ she felt Rhys typified, whereby womanhood is presented as a condition of victimhood and “‘Self-Inflicted Wounds’”,⁹² demonstrates the prevalence of such readings. Yet critics elsewhere have appraised Rhys for her representation of feminine melancholy and despair at the intersection of patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism,⁹³ while others counter readings of Rhys’s female protagonists as presupposing femininity as a narrative of victimhood and struggle, highlighting their capacity for autonomy and satisfaction.⁹⁴ Still, we can see the problem of a critical paradigm caught between the interacting poles of suffering and pleasure, victimhood and agency: the ‘axioms of imperialism’ can include both the representation of woman as victim *and* her capacity as ‘empowered’ individualist.

Aspects of the critical work on *Wide Sargasso Sea* speak to the desire to redeem a (western) feminist subject through identification with Antoinette’s narrative of personal white creole disaster, meaning that any racist identifications ostensibly at work in the text are reproduced in the critical

⁹¹ Laura Frost clarifies that there is a complicity with and tropism toward unpleasure and pain in Rhys’s characters, who do not achieve the ennobling state of the melancholic. For Frost and others, Rhys’s female characters instead inhabit states of unpleasure and obstructed agency exposing a wider dystopic social realm of ‘traumatised ... marginality’ in the interwar period, with characters ‘drawn to obliteration, repetition, debasement, and self-destruction’. Laura Frost, *The Problem with Pleasure: Modernism and Its Discontents* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p.164-165.

⁹² Edmund Gordon, *The Invention of Angela Carter: The Authorised Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2016), p.217; p.277.

⁹³ On Rhysian female melancholia, and contra to work on Rhys by Frost (for whom Rhys’s characters do not achieve the ennobling state of the melancholic), see Cathleen Maslen, *Ferocious Things: Jean Rhys and the Politics of Women’s Melancholia* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009).

⁹⁴ Jennifer Mitchell notes that ‘Characterising [Rhys’s female characters] as a victim negates all possibilities of agency and empowerment’, and reads against this paradigm. Jennifer Mitchell, ‘The Trouble with “Victim”’: Triangulated Masochism in Jean Rhys’s *Quartet*’, in *Rhys Matters: New Critical Perspectives*, ed. Mary Wilson and Kerry L. Johnson (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), p.198. With regards masochism, it is important to note the co-constitution of pleasure and pain for Rhys’s characters: ‘They do not ... perform a simple inversion [of pleasure and pain] ... but rather alter the value of each’ (Frost, *Problem*, p.165). For example, for Rhys’s protagonist Marya in *Quartet* (1929) ‘longing for joy, for any joy, for any pleasure was a mad thing in her heart. It was sharp like pain and she clenched her teeth’. Jean Rhys, *Quartet* (London: Penguin, 2000), p.34.

field. Thus in Anne B. Simpson's *Territories of the Psyche: The Fiction of Jean Rhys* (2005), Rhys's textual inscription of socio-historical circumstance become mere referents for Antoinette's inadequate and traumatising others such as her black childhood 'friend' Tia in Part One, just as her former slave holding family are construed as ahistorical victims of an 'atmosphere' of black anger in which 'they are perilously living'.⁹⁵ As Veronica Marie-Gregg has pointed out, the reading of friendship between Antoinette and Tia depends upon a structural impossibility – i.e. ignores the socioeconomic factors that would have inhibited alliance between the black character and the white character – amounting to 'an erasure of history'.⁹⁶ This point is most pertinent in relation to the scene in Part One, traumatic and violent, in which the young girl Tia throws a stone at the young Antoinette's face after the Coulibri Estate has been set fire to by recently emancipated slaves. Despite the portrayal of dialogue and difference amongst the black creoles who gather around the estate in protest and for other reasons,⁹⁷ Simpson subjugates Tia's act to the undifferentiated 'attitude of the mob' and then subjugates the mob to the performative and typically delegitimised, feminised realm of 'hysteria'.⁹⁸ If hysteria refers us to a set of symptoms without organic and material aetiology, then the scene that *Wide Sargasso Sea* depicts is read by Simpson in limited terms as unreasonable and without cause as opposed to an effort of resistance or collective agency against continued racial injustice and economic oppression – which is more than colonial 'indifference'⁹⁹ – in post-slavery West Indies. Secondly, the 'enraged responses' of the racially oppressed function for Simpson as facilitator and anticipator of white creole family fury (Antoinette's) – for Simpson the psychic and Oedipal dimensions of Antoinette's rage, which she relates to 'the unloving maternal object', will in her argument supplant the social rage of the riot as 'all the more dramatic'.¹⁰⁰ Thirdly, in order for Antoinette and Tia to be

⁹⁵ Anne B. Simpson, *Territories of the Psyche: The Fiction of Jean Rhys* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), p.117.

⁹⁶ Gregg, *Historical Imagination*, p. 96.

⁹⁷ *Sargasso*, p.23-24.

⁹⁸ Simpson, *Territories*, p.117.

⁹⁹ To give the full quote, Simpson writes: 'Synecdochally figuring the attitude of the mob, Antoinette's young friend Tia hurls a rock at her as the crowd's hysteria mounts. Tia and the others' enraged responses to the indifference with which they are treated by the remaining colonial families anticipates the fury that Antoinette, in turn, will level at those who turn away from her as if she is not there: first her mother ... and later her husband. In Tia and Antoinette's mirrored responses to the fire, Rhys creates a portrait of what her heroine will be' (*Ibid.*, p.117). Simpson thus reads Tia as Antoinette's portrait and mirror.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.118.

‘mirrored’ in friendship we must see Antoinette as victim of Tia’s ‘betrayal’ and ‘abandonment’, and Tia as Antoinette’s mirror and portrait.¹⁰¹

Similarly, when Simpson reads the black servant, obeah woman and former slave Christophine as ‘enter[ing] the room pleasantly, happy at the sight of [young Antoinette]’ for whom she has a ‘warm expression of concern’, she repeats the textual association/euphemism of blackness with simplicity, happiness and pleasure to be harvested for the replenishment of white sustenance and self-making. ‘As reincarnation of the feeding-other, [Christophine] gives Antoinette replenishing milk; as sympathising source of comfort, she urges Antoinette to cry when her heart is being broken’.¹⁰² Simpson reads Christophine in Kleinian terms as representative of the giving mother of the ‘good breast’: although Simpson points to the ‘reductive patterns’ that ‘turn others into objects that are all-denying or all-giving’ (i.e. the good or bad breast/mother) she proposes her own form of reduction by stating that Antoinette’s idealisation of Christophine as the good and giving mother denies Christophine’s ‘dark side’, which Simpson asserts in association with ‘the grim apparatus’ of obeah.¹⁰³ Simpson’s point about the efforts of simplification inherent in any good/bad idealisation/denigration dichotomy functions through an appeal to a racially inflected and itself simplified instantiation of dark/light. Equally, the point gets lost that Christophine actually is a mother of three with a son named Jo-jo who appears in the novel.¹⁰⁴ It is as if Christophine is read as black surrogate or ‘natally dead’: the discursive historical assumption lingers that, in Toni Morrison’s words, ‘slave women are not mothers [to their own children]; they are “natally dead,” with no obligations to their offspring or their own parents [...]. These [assumptions of the slave’s natal isolation] are bizarre and disturbing deformations of reality that normally lie mute in novels containing Africanist characters ...’¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p.119.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p.115.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.115.

¹⁰⁴ *Sargasso*, p.69; p.74.

¹⁰⁵ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), p.13; p.21-23.

As with Simpson's reading of friendship between Antoinette and Tia, Sandra Drake similarly reads *Wide Sargasso Sea* in terms of its mirror-imaging of black and white identity.¹⁰⁶ Both critics subscribe to a redemptive illusion of reciprocity whereby power relations are naturalised by the bonds of 'friendship' as a form of white self-resolution: the suffering of the racialised other is apprehended by way of a return to the white self. Thus, Tia serves as a conduit for white yearning, the site of mediation for the white creole fantasy of happiness and union:

As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her ... When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. I did not feel it either, only something wet, running down my face. I looked at her and I saw her face crumple up as she began to cry. We started at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking glass.¹⁰⁷

Such concentration on this scene as one of symmetry between racial difference (as per Simpson and Drake) belies the processes of misrecognition and displacement that Rhys's text in fact renders. Thus the 'looking glass' is less the site of self-resolution than the sphere of false female hope: despite her social isolation and eventual decline, Antoinette's mother Annette 'still planned and hoped – perhaps she had to hope every time she passed a looking glass' ('... You can pretend for a long time...').¹⁰⁸ In Part Two, which is the narrative of the unnamed man that most critics nevertheless refer to – curiously and precariously, as I will come to discuss – using the proper name/subject position 'Rochester' in reference to Brontë's male protagonist, the looking glass betrays the social spectacle of power. If femininity is internalised before the looking glass as a form of false hope, the internalisation of masculinity is met with a grimace: the male narrator of Part Two crowns himself with a wreath of frangipani but pulls a face before the mirror in front of Antoinette (who is now older and married to the narrator of Part Two), to whom he looks "like a king, an emperor", before the wreath falls to the floor. The narrator stands on it as he leaves the room: "I hardly think it suits my handsome face, do

¹⁰⁶ Sandra Drake, 'All That Foolishness/That All Foolishness: Race and Caribbean Culture as Thematics of Liberation in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*', *Critica*, 2:2 (Autumn 1990), pp.97-112. Drake's reading interprets Tia and Antoinette as variants of each other in her analysis on the novel's final scene as one of (white) resolution.

¹⁰⁷ *Sargasso*, p.24.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.5; p.83.

you?”¹⁰⁹ (‘How old was I when I learned to hide what I felt? A very small boy. Six, five even earlier. It was necessary, I was told, and that was the view I have always accepted’; ‘I played the part I was expected to play.’¹¹⁰) Again, the ‘looking glass’ does not resolve the (white or white creole) self but displaces and refracts, as Antoinette comes to understand when she is confined in the attic of Thornfield Hall in Part Three: ‘The girl I saw was myself yet not quite myself. Long ago when I was a child and very lonely I tried to kiss her. But the glass was between us ...’¹¹¹

The ‘looking glass’ that resides ‘between’ oneself marks an internal fracture, or the unavoidable interface of history and socialisation. Cixous describes this state as that ‘unlivable relationship with oneself ... Me, I thought I am *inseparab*’.¹¹² Rhys’s attention to the ‘looking glass’ as the site of a primary subjective displacement implies the installation of a racialised social ideal. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Frantz Fanon interprets the mirror stage as a racial allegory in which the image of idealised whiteness emanates in a narcissistic relation to ‘blackness’, figured as obscene. Seeing himself through the white gaze, Fanon writes ‘[m]y body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recoloured, clad in mourning in that white winter day.’¹¹³ The black body mourns for the ideal it was never possible to own, for (according to the white hegemonic perspective) ‘the black body *is* formed by deformation’.¹¹⁴ The social composition of the creole encounter somewhat shifts this parable: when Antoinette seems to see ‘herself’ reflected in Tia’s face/tears – that is, when she attempts to appropriate the black body/image – she meets the fracture of her own subjecthood. Thus, the mirror scene of ostensible reciprocal self-making is one in which the optics of white self-resolution are splintered by the difference (historical, economic, and racial) between Antoinette and Tia that *Wide Sargasso Sea* delineates. Rather than act as Antoinette’s ‘mirror’, Tia’s attack ‘repudiates the Creole’s needs and gesture as acts of simultaneous coercion and erasure’, anatomising ‘the intimate violence that inheres within the creole’s cathexis to the black Other and Tia’s refusal of

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.44-45.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.64; p.46.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.117.

¹¹² Cixous, *Reveries*, p.24.

¹¹³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), p.113.

¹¹⁴ Ann Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.55.

this role'.¹¹⁵ Tia's act resists 'the parasitical nature of white freedom' as it constructs itself via extractions of the racialised other, disturbing the racially and ideologically charged realm of the visual.¹¹⁶ Therefore, Rhys follows this scene in which the optics of white identity are violently fractured (Tia throwing a rock at Antoinette's face as Antoinette appeals for likeness) with another image that acknowledges Antoinette's dismemberment from herself – and reengages the suggestion of a corrupting, fallen femininity: "I saw my plait, tied with red ribbon, when I got up," I said. "In the chest of drawers. I thought it was a snake".¹¹⁷ To be clear, it is not that Antoinette and Tia are historically discrete entities: as Gregg implies, and as Cixous's neologism '*inseparab*' expresses of a different colonial context, an intimacy exists within or between the apparent binaries of the dualistic colonial encounter. Indeed the proper names Antoinette and Tia are related.

Turning to Rhys's earlier text *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) is illuminating at this point, as we stay with the mirror motif. In *Voyage in the Dark*, the protagonist Anna Morgan claims that 'a reflection in the looking glass is different from the real thing'.¹¹⁸ Rhys's work maintains however that representation is tied to social reality and the agency of 'the real thing' (hence the 'looking glass' attends to the socio-symbolic construction of the self, troubling the binary that Anna posits). If in *Wide Sargasso Sea* the internalisation of masculinity is met with a grimace, in *Voyage in the Dark* the internalisation of femininity demands a more obsequious acceptance: sitting before a mirror, Anna sees Walter put money in her handbag after sex and, having witnessed herself reflected in Walter's eyes, she accepts his construction of her as a sexually and ideologically commodified woman ('... instead of saying, "Don't do that," I said, "All right, if you like – anything you like, any way you like." And I kissed his hand').¹¹⁹ As critics have noted, Anna's (ambivalent) adoption of the subject

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.96.

¹¹⁶ Morrison, *Playing*, p.57.

¹¹⁷ *Sargasso*, p.24. Animal or improperly human aspects of femininity, as suggested by the 'snake' of Antoinette's chopped off hair, are emphasised in the famous and racialised description of the madness of the 'savage' Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*. Bertha is discoloured, bloated, animal, and with a 'quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane'. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Michael Mason (London: Penguin, 2003), p.328. '[W]hether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell' (*Ibid.*, p.327-8). Spivak makes the essential point that Bertha's construction as non-human legitimates the law against her, just as the law is mobilised against Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea* – her inheritance going to her husband after marriage, with 'no provision made for her' (Spivak, 'Three Women's Texts', p.247; *Sargasso*, p.43.).

¹¹⁸ Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark* (London: Penguin, 1982), p. 25.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.33-34; Gregg, *Historical*, p.120-1.

position of the ‘prostitute’ is anticipated and facilitated by her reading of Émile Zola’s *Nana* (1880) which as Maudie describes is a “‘dirty book’” “‘about a tart’”.¹²⁰ Maudie’s notion that books are ‘like that – just somebody stuffing you up’” is applicable to the picture (the text) of the Miller’s daughter in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, with her lovely brown curls, which marks the failure of a certain form of femininity for Antoinette.¹²¹ The picture is Antoinette’s favourite, but Antoinette’s own hair has to be cut and her mother’s hair is burnt after Colibri Estate is set fire to by the recently emancipated slaves; neither of the white creole women can fit inside the frame of imported English female innocence, which itself goes up in flames.¹²² In her analysis of *Voyage in the Dark*, Gregg concurs with Maudie’s statement: books – and, we can add, other forms of text (such as paintings and pictures) – are part of the mechanism that initiates individuals into the social system.¹²³ In *Voyage in the Dark*, Anna will indeed be ‘stuffed up’ – as in, set up, stitched up, filled up – by discursive constructions of meaning and association. Hence ‘[t]he girls call her the Hottentot’: while Anna might distinguish between her reflection and her reality, it is her reflection in the eyes of others that becomes the reality of her subject constitution.¹²⁴ To apply Gregg’s point to *Wide Sargasso Sea*: as Anna/‘Nana’ becomes sexually commodified, so in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Antoinette ‘becomes’ ‘Bertha’ – the name (from a book) that inculcates *her* into the (patriarchal English) social system.

The work of Patricia Moran however is in keeping with an emphasis upon white victimhood, insofar as Moran argues that Rhys employs narrative form in a staging of trauma and its aftermath.¹²⁵ This results in the delimitation of Antoinette’s sexuality in *Wide Sargasso Sea* to a reading of female masochism qua ‘complex response to psychic trauma’ and early environmental failure, thereby tying the capacity for female pleasure to an emphasis on sex as the acting out of rejection and death.¹²⁶ The

¹²⁰ *Voyage*, p.9.

¹²¹ *Voyage*, p.9; *Sargasso*, p.18.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p.18-26.

¹²³ Gregg, *Historical*, p.117. Zola’s *Nana* is a response to Edouard Manet’s painting *Nana* (1877), which is itself a response to Zola’s initial portrayal of Nana in *L’Assommoir* (1877). In *Voyage in the Dark* an identification process takes place from Anna to Nana (the names are anagrams) regarding lingering nineteenth century imperial discourses of sexually commodified females and pathological racialisation, circulating through Rhys’s intricate intertextuality.

¹²⁴ *Voyage*, p.12.

¹²⁵ Patricia Moran, *Virginia Woolf, Jean Rhys, and the Aesthetics of Trauma* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), p.118.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.115-117; p.139. Moran reads masochism as the acting out of the need for parental authority, intimacy and protection and therefore as ‘regressive and infantilising’. Rhys’s ‘masochistic aesthetic’ – constituted by, for

capacity for the critical concentration on trauma to evade integral distinctions is further evident in Moran's reading of identification between Anna Morgan, the white West Indian protagonist of *Voyage in the Dark*, and Maillotte Boyd, the young 'mulatto house servant' whose name Anna had seen on a slave list belonging to her family back in Dominica.¹²⁷ The emphasis upon trauma as an interpretive framework for the constitution and rationale of the (white) subject as victim occludes historical relations of power in service of a spurious identification.

Differently, Spivak and Gregg also posit that *Wide Sargasso Sea* elicits identification with Antoinette and the white creole position occupied by Rhys. But neither accounts fully for the role of Rhys's text when it comes to displacing the assumptions about identification upon which readers rely. Categorical processes of identification can themselves be a function of colonialist systems of order and control, which must police categories of difference and similarity. Questions of whom readers are encouraged to identify with, and what systems of power and exclusion are upheld or redirected by this identification, are therefore key to an understanding of the post- or de-colonial capacity of literature and criticism. The critical positions that assume identification with the white creole narrative, and therefore either praise Rhys for a feminist revision of Bertha Mason (the redemptive elements of Simpson and Drake) or, in nuanced ways, criticise Rhys's repetition of exclusionary identifications in her treatment of black subjectivities (such as Spivak and Gregg), have accordingly been countered by critics who agree that Rhys's writing of black creoles in *Wide Sargasso Sea* can inscribe counterdiscursive possibilities. For Benita Parry, for example, Spivak's deconstruction of the colonialist signifying system ignores an important stage in the process of resistance and constrains the development of anti-imperialist critique by assigning absolute power to hegemonic discourse and so disarticulating the 'native' as historical subject, speaker and combatant.¹²⁸ Parry however retains the assumption that *Wide Sargasso Sea* elicits a non-ambivalent identification, this time with the

example, the suspension and disavowal of narrative climax; the blurring of reality and fantasy; the enactment of repetition and reversal – speaks to 'deep dependency needs and the fear of loss and abandonment' in Rhys's female protagonists according to Moran. A further consequence of this reading being that Walter, in *Voyage in the Dark*, functions as a remedy for Anna as opposed to a man complicit in her suffering (*Ibid.*, p.137; p.128; p.138).

¹²⁷ Moran, *Aesthetics*, p.138.

¹²⁸ Benita Parry, 'Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse', *Oxford Literary Review*, 9:1 (July 1987), pp.27-58, p. 34. According to Parry, Spivak's theory denies 'the native the ground from which to utter a reply to imperialism's ideological aggression or to enunciate a different self' (*Ibid.*, p.36).

marginalised and racialised characters. She retains the identification of speech with authoritative authentic singularity and voice, the belief in the power of enunciation for subjectivation, which is an assumption criticised for its role in underpinning Western hegemonic structures. Mardorossian therefore departs from Parry by arguing that a character such as Christophine is *not* the location of a non-ambivalent and self-determining defiance but rather resistance to colonial authority lies in the black creole capacity for silence, opacity and inscrutability.¹²⁹

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At this point, it is relevant to note that, while the insights of mourning as an experience of intersubjectivity and vulnerability to alterity are pertinent to reformulations of responsibility, as Butler has argued, scholars of *Wide Sargasso Sea* have thus far had recourse to a general register of trauma and melancholy.¹³⁰ According to which, the ethical, sociopolitical and ecological core of *Wide Sargasso Sea* resides in its emphasis upon discursive limitation and aporia, or the capacity for the inscription of an internal absence or impossibility.¹³¹ The debate has not yet been considered in light of its reliance upon this critical attachment to the terms of trauma, of which the following by John J. Su offers a helpful summary:

For Spivak, imperialism functions as the dominant world system, incorporating expressions of resistance within its own terms; as such, postcolonial literary texts are celebrated for their *capacity to identify the limits of representation* ... [The textual inscription of] Christophine cannot represent a subject genuinely capable of challenging colonial discourses because she is defined vis-à-vis an established colonial type, 'the good servant'. As such, Rhys may employ her to suggest that colonial forms of knowledge are not all-encompassing, but *cannot directly articulate* those alternatives ... *Resistance is measured in terms of her ability either to speak or to remain silent*: to disrupt the discourses of English colonialism or to *identify the limits* of such discourses

¹²⁹ Mardorossian, *Reclaiming*, p.61-64.

¹³⁰ Judith Butler, *Prearious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).

¹³¹ For example, Gregg writes that 'The aporias of the husband's text [in Part Two] are the ground of possibility for the "carnival" of voices, the multivocality, which helps to create the text of *Wide Sargasso Sea*' (Gregg, *Historical*, p.108); while Spivak states that 'It is one of the strengths of *Wide Sargasso Sea* that it can mark, with uncanny clarity, the limits of its own discourse' (Spivak, 'Three Women's Texts', p.129).

... *Wide Sargasso Sea* invites readers to explore what the text itself *cannot or will not directly represent. The non-represented becomes, in other words, the primary subject.*¹³²

When Gregg values *Wide Sargasso Sea* in terms of its 'precise delineation of what never was' – i.e. the impossibility of friendship between Tia and Antoinette – she describes the textual inscription of lack and/or absence, the demarcation of what is missing or absent from history.¹³³ For Spivak, it is the inscription of Christophine as a 'tangent' that the text cannot contain that allows it to mark 'with uncanny clarity the limits of its own discourse' and thus the non-total nature of the imperialist project.¹³⁴ Mardorossian reads resistance in *Wide Sargasso Sea* in terms of opacity, and Jennifer Gildersleeve considers what the novel does not represent in or as full presence: by insisting upon maintaining the 'secrecy' of the 'unknowable' and 'unmappable' Caribbean landscape Rhys, the white Creole writer, respects 'the impossibility of its representation' within European paradigms.¹³⁵ Gildersleeve thus reads the resistance of the Caribbean landscape to the colonial gaze as a refusal of representation, or rather the refusal of (literary) representation as a form of resistance.¹³⁶

What does this logic of indirection and missing things (fracture, discontinuity, aporia, absence, tangents) mean for the textual politics of race and representation? To take up the terms of mourning and – more so – melancholia, the text incorporates *as an absence or internal limit* (or 'crypt' or 'wound') the object it cannot externally 'know' or represent. Yet the relation between resistance and the rubric of impossibility remains unclear. Indeed, despite Gildersleeve's argument it is true that in *Wide Sargasso Sea* the landscape remains appropriable as the site of colonial projections. Thus, according to the nameless man who narrates Part Two, the Caribbean forest is 'hostile' with 'enemy trees'.¹³⁷ Does not the very 'hostility' of the landscape to European representation and navigation at the same time perpetuate European paradigms of the enmity of the

¹³² Su, 'Empire', p.174-175. Italics my own.

¹³³ Gregg, *Historical*, p.96.

¹³⁴ Spivak, 'Three Women's Texts', p.252.

¹³⁵ Mardorossian, *Reclaiming*, p.61-64. Jennifer Gildersleeve, 'Jean Rhys's Tropographies: Unmappable Identity and Tropical Landscape in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Selected Short Fiction', *etropic*, 10 (2011), pp.32-38, p.37; p.34.

¹³⁶ As quoted above: '[Rhys] refuses to presume to possess or capture the space of the tropics in art ... Rhys does not presume to speak for the tropics, but rather learns from and incorporates its strategies of resistance into her narrativisation of gendered struggle.'

¹³⁷ *Sargasso*, p.65-66.

other? Do the terms of this literary debate naturalise pain and absence as the condition of representations of black subjectivity? What does it mean to conceptualise resistance in the metric of absence, inscrutability or silence? As Anne Anlin Cheng notes, the structure of trauma that is ‘so often associated with discussions of racial denigration’ misses ‘dynamic process[es] at stake in such denigration’ including those of the perpetrator.¹³⁸

The possibility of such dynamic processes suggests that racial meanings shift and attach through a terminology that is affective as well as discursive. While Mardorossian has successfully analysed how Rhys compels us to read against the grain of Antoinette’s narrative, exposing the colonialist assumptions of which racial denigration consists, she does not account fully for the agency of the text when it comes to displacing the reading of narrative itself. Moreover, Mardorossian refers her reader to ‘the norm of the text’: the curious critical tendency toward reinstalling the proper name ‘Rochester’ in reference to Rhys’s nameless narrator of Part Two performs the difficulty of disavowing the paternal signifier, a difficulty to which I attend.¹³⁹

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The primacy of displacement under conditions of colonality troubles narrative and the fantasy of the origin. As Hall puts it, in the Caribbean the “past” was already “missing”, “the origin” permanently deferred, the future unfixed. This abetted an acute social forgetfulness’. Which is not the same as saying the Caribbean has no history, a claim that ‘carries us right back to the heartlands of colonial thinking’.¹⁴⁰ This impacts upon the ‘destination’ of narrative. When in Part One of *Wide Sargasso Sea* Antoinette inscribes her name in history, she therefore does so in terms of deferral in a manner resonant with Cixous’s perpetual process of non-arrival (as underscored by her neologism ‘Algériance’), whereby the scene of writing – and, in Antoinette’s case, remembering – is not present to itself:

¹³⁸ Cheng, *Melancholy of Race*, p.12.

¹³⁹ Mardorossian, *Reclaiming*, p.62-70.

¹⁴⁰ Hall, *Stranger*, p.93-94.

Quickly, while I can, *I must remember* the hot classroom. The hot classroom, the pitchpine desks, the heat of the bench striking up through my body ... *I will write my name* in fire red, Antoinette Mason, née Cosway, Mount Calvary Convent, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 1839.¹⁴¹

I will return to the significance of names and naming. For now, the urgency of the need to remember ('Quickly, while I can, I must remember'), and the specificity of the child's inscription ('Antoinette Mason, née Cosway, Mount Calvary Convent, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 1839'), is complicated by the change of tense ('while I can, I must ... I will write') which renders the narrative 'I' hard to place, as does the perpetuation of the imperative into the future simple: 'I will write'. The deferred time of writing is equally the point at which the reader is most explicitly displaced from the source text, the literary 'origin', *Jane Eyre*: Antoinette's dating (1839) locates the action of *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the period after the Emancipation Act was passed in 1833, whereas the action and finale of *Jane Eyre* occurs prior to this.¹⁴² The 'prequel' thus arrives in the aftermath, via an anachronistic and displaced chronology. Readings of *Wide Sargasso Sea* ought then not be restricted to Rhys's desire to rectify Brontë's 'all wrong creole scenes': *Wide Sargasso Sea* is not reducible to *Jane Eyre* but rather demonstrates the displacement of/at its 'origin', the relationship between *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* dramatising a transformation and plurality of originality. Rhys's gesture of re-arranging the historical dates of *Jane Eyre* to the post-Emancipation period in this way performs an intervention into chronological orderliness, and the deliberate anachronism of *Wide Sargasso Sea* that results writes against the fantasy of history as orderly and singular that colonialism generates.

Similarly, Rhys's intervention into the relationship between history and fiction allows her text to draw attention to the tensions and continuities of colonisation at her own time of writing the novel when colonial structures are being dismantled internationally in the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁴³ This means that *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be read – plurally, as it were – in light of decolonisation and cultural revolution in the 1960s, such as the Pan-Caribbean Black Power movement, the mobilisation of anti-

¹⁴¹ *Sargasso*, p.29. Italics my own.

¹⁴² The date of the Emancipation Act is 1833. The end of *Jane Eyre* is set around 1808. As Gregg notes, 'Bertha Mason was already confined to the attic of Thornfield Hall by the first decade of the nineteenth century, whereas Antionette Cosway in *Wide Sargasso Sea* was still a child in the 1840s'. Thus Rhys deliberately sets *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the 1830s and 1840s, i.e. the post-Emancipation period (Gregg, *Historical*, p.83).

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.83.

racist Civil Rights action in the USA, and the impact of black migration from Jamaica to the UK after 1948. In this way the text draws attention to the relation of Europe to its ‘others’ and so to itself, in a manner strikingly relevant to contemporary political contexts in Britain: events around the Windrush scandal show that the work of reckoning in a socially just and transformative way with the presence of the colonial Caribbean ‘other’ in the former ‘heart’ of empire is ongoing. The *idée fixe* of Europe is itself at stake in Rhys’s representation: Antoinette inquires after England but ‘Her mind was already made up. Some romantic novel, a stray remark never forgotten, a sketch, a picture, a song, a waltz, some note of music, and her ideas were fixed. About England and about Europe’.¹⁴⁴ The *idée fixe* of Europe – which, the latter quotation suggests, circulates in and is entrenched by representation and fantasy – is, so *Wide Sargasso Sea* suggests, an attachment – both sentimental and violent – to a fallacy or fiction (‘their world’, Antoinette states in Part Three, is ‘as I always knew, made of cardboard’ like a book that can be lost or burned) or it is ‘unreal’ in the manner of a ‘dream’.¹⁴⁵ Subject, therefore, to myth and belief: “‘England,’ said Christophine ... ‘You think there is such a place?’”¹⁴⁶

The displacement of demarcations such as the nation state, rendered flimsy like ‘cardboard’, occurs at other instances in *Wide Sargasso Sea* with impact upon subject-formation. After the first instance of her bad dream, Antoinette appeals to ‘the barrier of the sea’; ‘I lay thinking, “I am safe” ... I am safe from strangers”’.¹⁴⁷ Antoinette’s attempt to construct herself as an individual safely contained within private property and geopolitical borders (“‘the friendly furniture ... the garden ... the wall green with moss. The barrier of the cliffs and the mountains ...’”) fails to produce a securely enclosed subjectivity, instead revealing Antoinette’s lack of insight into the historical co-ordinates of her own construction (indeed she will eventually have to marry a ‘stranger’ with whom she will cross ‘the sea’ only to be enclosed in the attic of Thornfield Hall; and the home in which she dreams will soon be set alight by recently emancipated slaves). Unlike the reader of *Jane Eyre*, which famously begins with Jane’s self-enclosure in the act of reading Bewick’s *History of British Birds* (1797) –

¹⁴⁴ *Sargasso*, p.58.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.117; p.49; p.64.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.70.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.12.

assisting in the cultural process of self-making, nation-building, and history-making – the reader of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is not invited into the interiority of the protagonist with anything like the same assurance. Where Jane encloses herself in the ‘double retirement’ of reading,¹⁴⁸ Antoinette can’t read from the signifier ‘England’ a conception of the nation: ‘England, rosy pink in the geography book map, but on the page opposite the words are closely crowded, heavy-looking. Exports, coal, iron, wool. Then Imports and Character of Inhabitants. Names, Essex, Chelmsford on the Chelmer’. Here ‘England’ functions less like a nation than a textual and discursive construct made or ‘made up’ by books, words and names; English snow is not snow but ‘Torn pieces of paper falling’.¹⁴⁹ Where might this leave the act of reading when it comes to *Wide Sargasso Sea*? The readers’ relation to *Wide Sargasso Sea* is itself one of displacement.

Ethics, according to Rosello, arrives when the story can become a plot: when the story that the king died and then the queen died becomes the plot that the king died and then the queen died of grief, an example appropriate for this thesis in that it points to mourning in its gendered aspect. Ethics here implies a form of narrative: the creation of causal narrative links that contribute meaning to truth and therefore enable individual and historical accountability.¹⁵⁰ It is not clear that Antoinette has a ‘plot’ of her own: the moments that constitute much shock and pathos in the reader of *Wide Sargasso Sea* are repeated in the text in a minimal form that troubles their claim to meaning. For example, an early moment of loss in Part One – the young Antoinette discovering the corpse of her mother’s horse who has been poisoned – is in Part Two displaced from its socio-political significance as an act of anger, protest, or sabotage by the black creole characters when it is repeated by the older Antoinette in reductive terms: “... they poisoned her horse and she could not ride anymore”.¹⁵¹ Similarly, the scene of much pathos in Part One in which Tia throws the stone at Antoinette, marking the impossibility of their friendship as we have seen, is rendered thus by Antoinette in Part Two: “I was

¹⁴⁸ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p.14.

¹⁴⁹ *Sargasso.*, p.70.

¹⁵⁰ Rosello, *Reparative in Narratives*, p.132.

¹⁵¹ *Sargasso*, p.83.

ill for a long time. My head was bandaged because someone had thrown a stone at me”¹⁵² In Antoinette’s condensed version of her own history, Tia loses her name and her act its meaning.

Antoinette’s failure to provide causal narrative links could be read, following the critical focus on trauma, as the symptoms of lacunae and discontinuous recall following traumatic experience. But, bearing in mind Hall’s reference to an ‘acute social forgetfulness’ in the Caribbean and the selectiveness of Antoinette’s memory overall, I suggest that Rhys’s subtle textual politics direct the reader elsewhere in these instances. Rhys’s inscription of the post-Emancipation environment and the politically spurious notion of the ‘long ago’ attest not to traumatic discontinuity but to collective conditions of colonial amnesia and disavowal on the part of the white/white creole plantocracy: thus Antoinette bypasses ‘the old sugar works and the water wheel that had not turned for years’; the nameless man notes without further comment that there are ‘ruins’ of former plantations ‘all over the place’; the local white creoles refer to ‘old customs’ euphemistically (meaning ‘miscegenation’ between Old Cosway and his slaves).¹⁵³ ““And who was massacred here? Slaves?” ask the nameless man when he and Antoinette arrive in a village named Massacre after their marriage early on in Part Two: ““Oh no.” [Antoinette] sounded shocked. “Not slaves. Something must have happened a long time ago. Nobody remembers now”¹⁵⁴ Antoinette, as a bad or blind reader of history, is displaced from claims to narrative truth or an ideological grip; if we are to mark a moment of historical remembrance in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, it does not take place at the level of the white creole protagonist.

But the explicit subjects of fiction are not the only subjects of fiction.¹⁵⁵ Indeed the black creole character Gregory belies the hegemonic colonial narrative of forgetting events from ‘long time ago’ when, after the poisoning of Annette’s horse, he states ironically: ““When the old time go, let it go. No use to grab at it. The Lord make no distinction between black and white ...”¹⁵⁶ Likewise, Christophine speaks to punitive conditions of continuity with slavery: ‘No more slavery! She had to

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p.85.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.8; p.10; p.19; p.12; p.84; p.13.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.39.

¹⁵⁵ See also, Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

¹⁵⁶ *Sargasso*, p.6.

laugh! “These new ones have Letter of the Law. Same thing ... – more cunning, that’s all”.¹⁵⁷ Even Antoinette imagines at one point that in England there will be ‘fields of corn like sugar-cane fields’: the English landscape is overwritten or inscribed with the image of Caribbean fields of sugar-cane that provided England with sugar through chattel slavery in the historical period preceding *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in this way troubling the difference and distance between colony and metropole.¹⁵⁸ Indeed the nameless man’s perception in Part Two of the Caribbean island as ‘untouched’ is challenged by his presence upon it:

It was a beautiful place – wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness. And it kept its secret. I’d find myself thinking, ‘What I see is nothing – I want what it *hides* – that is not nothing.’¹⁵⁹

The memory of extinction and extreme loss is evaded if not erased by depictions of the Caribbean landscape as bountifully ‘untouched’. Mardorossian accordingly describes a contradiction at the heart of the representation of the environment in Caribbean fiction since the end of the eighteenth century: the cultural representation of an uncultivated ‘nature’ is contradicted by the region’s reflection of colonial history as one ‘radically altered in terms of human and botanic migration, transplantation, and settlement’ not to mention the extinction of Caribs and plant and animal species.¹⁶⁰ What the landscape ‘*hides*’ would in this sense be its precise lack of ‘nature’ or the eradication of the natural; what the landscape ‘*hides*’ from the nameless man (what he hides from himself) is the history of his own implication in it. The irony of the passage points to the concealment of the historical memory of colonialism on the part of the colonising powers. Equally, it is true that the landscape *refuses* to provide a reflection of patriarchal European identity and agency, remaining (willfully?) ‘alien’ such that it is the European man who perceives and figures as ‘nothing’ (more on which to follow).¹⁶¹ The

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.11. When, later in the novel, Christophine states “No police here ... No chain gang, no tread machine, no dark jail either. This is free country and I am free woman”, the freedom of the former slave is destabilised by the continued threat of the law against her: “*I have written very discreetly to Hill, the white inspector of police in your town ... she won’t get off lightly this time ...*” (*Ibid.*, p.103).

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.70.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.54.

¹⁶⁰ Carine M. Mardorossian, ‘Caribbean Formations in the Rhysian Corpus’, *Jean Rhys: Twenty-First-Century Approaches*, ed. Erica L. Johnson and Patrician Moran (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p.113.

¹⁶¹ While the nameless husband’s narrative takes up much of the text it is as Gregg notes ‘his nothingness which the novel insists upon’, as I develop in what follows (Gregg, *Historical*, p.100).

‘mask’ the landscape wears forms part of the textual depiction of Caribbean resistance to colonial rule through concealment in which, according to the narrator of Part Two, Christophine wears ‘a mask on her face’ and Baptiste puts ‘his service mask on’.¹⁶² Later, ‘Baptiste looked very different. Not a trace of the polite domestic’.¹⁶³ Here Rhys undermines the colonial encounter from both directions: not only can Baptiste wear and remove the ‘mask’ of racist discursive stereotyping (‘the polite domestic’) but his ‘master’ seems aware that the ‘polite domestic’ trope does not constitute what Baptiste ‘is’.¹⁶⁴ The racist discourse of the ‘polite domestic’ is not integral to the text nor the subjectivities on which it is imposed. Rather, Rhys flags up its discursive function within relations of servitude and domination, a function that maybe internalised but can also be undermined and opposed. The depiction of Christophine as lazy by the nameless man draws on dominant historical discourses of the languid and lascivious ‘black’ (“‘she looks so lazy. She dawdles about’”), but is undermined by the ironic textual operations whereby Christophine is seen to bring the nameless white man his tea as he lies late in bed – having already been sent away twice.¹⁶⁵

Identity, and racialised identification in particular (‘race’), are shown up as products of asymmetric social relations in an intersectional and shifting symbolic economy rather than as discrete and pre-existing facts. The contingency of difference and social determination upon qualities that exist relationally points out that ‘race’ is not an essential identity in the novel but a discursive and contextual event of socio-economic contiguity.¹⁶⁶ Thus in Part Two the ‘mulatto’ Amélie’s skin blackens and her body bloats before the nameless man’s eyes after they have had sex.¹⁶⁷ Her ‘blackness’ is not a stable identity but a product of the nameless man’s perception of and desire for her, which is itself conditioned by imperialist discourses of pathological femininity and ‘the black’.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶² *Sargasso*, p.104; p.66.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.108.

¹⁶⁴ Gordon Lewis notes that ‘The slave recognised the psychological need of the stereotype in the master mentality and ... exploited it for his own ends [to delude the master; to adopt an exaggerated deference, really a disguised form of insolence; to disguise’s one’s true feelings] ... all became part of the game, of putting on ole massa’. Gordon K. Lewis, *Main Currents in Caribbean Thought: The Historical Evolution of Caribbean Society in its Ideological Aspects, 1492-1900* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1983), p.181.

¹⁶⁵ *Sargasso*, p.52-53. Antoinette concurs that Christophine “‘seems slow ...’” (*Ibid*, p.53).

¹⁶⁶ Mardorossian, *Reclaiming*, p.3; p.84.

¹⁶⁷ *Sargasso*, p.89.

¹⁶⁸ On pathology, sexuality, and race, see Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1985). As Philippa Levine has addressed, desire has difficult connotations for colonial rule under which there was ‘a constant concern, official or otherwise, about

In this sense, Rhys deals less with ‘race’ than processes of racialisation, which she treats as discursive and libidinal operations, as is expressed in Antoinette’s perception of the racialised ‘other’ in terms of liking and disliking (“‘Don’t you like Christophine?’”; “‘I thought you liked the black people so much ... You like the light brown girls better ...’”); personal enmity (Daniel Cosway simply “‘hates all white people, but he hates me the most’”); and physical feeling (according to which Antoinette’s fatigue excuses her racism).¹⁶⁹ Antoinette is herself subject to racialisation when she shifts from being ‘Creole of pure English descent’ to looking ‘very much like Amélie’, while ‘Rochester’ is likened to a ‘black devil’ and Antoinette is named a “‘white cockroach’”.¹⁷⁰ Mannie presents the spectre of the “‘black Englishman’” insofar as he works for white people; the ‘mulatto’ Daniel Cosway can live ‘like white people’ because ‘he had a house like white people, with one room only for sitting’; and Sandi is “‘a coloured man even though he don’t look like a coloured man’”.¹⁷¹ Race, understood as an difference upon which social orders can be based (racism being the perpetuation of that order), is in this way undermined as racial signifiers move and shift across Rhys’s text.

The ‘mask’ of discourse affirms readings of *Wide Sargasso Sea* whereby one reads against the grain of the novel’s self-presentation: according to which, Rhys does not appropriate black creole practices of resistance but accepts the inability of her novel to clearly penetrate or ‘contain’ them, in Spivak’s phrase, and – going further – undermines the co-ordinates of the ‘European’ text from within by displacing the readers’ sense of narrative structure.¹⁷² We can say that the ‘mask’ motif functions as a form for thinking through the displacement in or ‘over’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* itself as a narrative and textual whole, the double narrative structure that some critics (including Mardorossian) have retained in their readings being itself a sort of ‘mask’ for the multiplicity of relational narratives that the text in fact disjunctively enables. Crucial to the narrative expression of relationality, which displaces the assumption of singular or binary narrative selves, are the critically overlooked

how far the habits and morals associated with the allegedly libidinous tropics would rub off on the [white colonial settlers]’; ‘[t]hroughout the colonial period, in Britain as well as in the colonies, sexuality ... was the literal subject of an endlessly mapped metaphor for the necessity of colonial rule’. Philippa Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire* (London: Routledge, 2003), p.125-129.

¹⁶⁹ *Sargasso*, p.53; p.94; p.81-81; p.10.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.40; p.81; p.63.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.23; p.76-77.

¹⁷² Spivak, ‘Three Women’s Texts’, p.253.

parenthetical insertions that Rhys places in Part One and more so in Part Two.¹⁷³ The first of which arises in Antoinette's narrative in Part One: '(they [‘the black people’] notice clothes, they know about money)'.¹⁷⁴ Where does this assertion come from? In this instance, the parenthesis inserts racist generalisations into the child's narrative, showing again how such discourses do not belong to the realm of essences – they are parenthetical to the narrative ‘proper’ – but are internalised, perhaps awkwardly and disjunctively, into a narrative patchwork. The ‘patchwork’ metaphor for the act of reading so disjunctive a text is fitting, as Mardorossian points out, but the implications of this textual patchwork have not been elaborated.¹⁷⁵ In Part Two, the patchwork of parentheses escalate, seeming to represent the male narrator's memories; his growing paranoia; his internal asides; to then becoming the increasingly intense presence of the words of ‘others’ impressing upon him – Christophine, Antoinette, and Daniel Cosway.¹⁷⁶ These words are given in italics and challenge the seeming dominance of the male narrative perspective.

For example, the following moves from the italicised repetition of Christophine's words – spoken in ‘her judge's voice’ – to the insertion of, apparently, Antoinette's own stream of consciousness, to the iteration/internalisation of Daniel Cosway's words:

Now every word she said was echoed, echoed loudly in my head.

‘So that you can leave her alone.’

(Leave her alone)

‘Not telling her why.’

(Why?)

‘No more love, eh?’

(No more love)

[...]

¹⁷³ I note none in Part Three, but the voice of Grace Poole presented in italics serves a similar function.

¹⁷⁴ *Sargasso*, p.5.

¹⁷⁵ Mardorossian refers to the ‘dispersed textual pieces of the patchwork’ that constitute the multivalent voices of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, noting that Aunt Cora and Christophine, the most cogent characters in the novel, both have or make a ‘patchwork’. The patchwork offers a fitting motif for Antoinette's divided subjectivity and for the act of reading the novel itself, as the reader tries to ‘patch’ together polyphonic narrative meaning and voice (Mardorossian, *Reclaiming*, p.64; p.157, n.9).

¹⁷⁶ *Sargasso*, p.56; p.57; p.73; p.98-102.

(I lay awake all night long after they were asleep, and as soon as it was light I got up and dressed and saddled Preston. And I came to you. Oh Christophine. O Pheena, Pheena, help me.)

[...]

*(Give my sister your wife a kiss from me. Love her as I did – oh yes I did. How can I promise that?) I said nothing.*¹⁷⁷

The narrative expresses the intersections and interpenetrations of relational identity. There are at least three different ‘I’s in the short passage above, four counting the voice of Christophine, each displacing the other. To describe Christophine’s as a ‘judge’s voice’ may be the patronising perception of the European patriarch, but it also refers the reader to the internalised voice of judgment of the super-ego, and the disjunctive construction of the self somewhere between the psychic and the social that the super-ego signifies. The positioning of Daniel Cosway’s narrative in Part Two is further noteworthy in respect of narrative displacement in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and with regards the disturbance of the apparent dominance of the male nameless narrator. Although the male narrator of Part Two takes up most of the text, as Gregg notes, his centrality as representative of European will is in fact debunked by the insurgent presence of Cosway’s narrative, which is intimate and undermining, the ‘return of the repressed with a vengeance’.¹⁷⁸ The textual function of Daniel Cosway as narrator of an alternate, but intimate and internal, history/text serves to unseat the general possibility of a singular historical and textual ‘truth’ in *Wide Sargasso Sea*: as Gregg notes, ‘Daniel’s narrative intratextually operates upon and critiques that of the husband. Furthermore, his story contradicts Antoinette’s and remains a probability’.¹⁷⁹ The presence of Cosway’s narrative is further significant insofar as it speaks to the intimacies of the colonial encounter by way of narrative intimacy: taking up a notable portion of Part Two, the narrative presence of the ‘I’ of Daniel Cosway’s letter nestles closely within the nameless narrator’s ‘I’, in a narrative reproduction of how closely and intimately Cosway’s letter gets folded away inside the nameless narrator’s pocket, so close that he forgets it.¹⁸⁰ Antoinette’s ‘I’

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.98-102.

¹⁷⁸ Gregg, *Historical*, p.100; p.112.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.114.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.59-62.

similarly intersects the ‘I’ of Part Two.¹⁸¹ This point shifts the focus of critical debates regarding the site of the ‘subaltern’ in *Wide Sargasso Sea* from Christophine to Cosway. What is more, the narrative intimacy to which the displacing ‘I’s of *Wide Sargasso Sea* attest speaks to Rhys’s conceptualisation of racism as a dynamic of disavowed relationality, such as Anne Anlin Cheng describes as melancholic.

*

Anne Anlin Cheng writes that racism is ‘like’ melancholia in that it both refuses and retains the racialised other. Racism is ‘hardly ever a clear rejection of the other. While racism is mostly thought of as a kind of violent rejection, racist institutions in fact often do not want to fully expel the racial other; instead, they wish to maintain that other within existing structures ... Segregation and colonialism are internally fraught institutions not because they have eliminated the other but because they need the very thing they hate or fear’.¹⁸² Rather than full relinquishment, racism involves need/desire for the feared and hated raced subject. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the disjunctive narrative internalisation of the nameless man’s others in Part Two (Christophine, Antoinette, Cosway) speaks to the melancholic formation of racism that Cheng has theorised, whereby the racialised other is excluded yet retained, consumed yet denied, within dominant narratives of the white ideal. Accordingly, Rhys underlines the intimacy and affect constitutive of relations of servitude and domination:

Amélie, who had been sitting with her back to us, turned round. Her expression was so full of delighted malice, so intelligent, above all so intimate that I felt ashamed and looked away.

“Well,” I thought. “I have had fever. I am not myself yet.”¹⁸³

If this is the intimacy of dialectical self-making, then we see that the master cannot achieve recognition via the ‘slave’ – ashamed, he looks away – without undermining the co-ordinates of the

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.67-75.

¹⁸² Cheng, *Melancholy of Race*, p.12. Cheng explores the melancholic formation of race and racism as effects of a white national ideal sustained by the exclusion-yet-retention of racialised others. ‘The national topography of centrality and marginality legitimises itself by retroactively positing the racial other as always Other and lost to the heart of the nation. Legal exclusion naturalised the more complicated “loss” of the unassimilable racial other’ (*Ibid.*, p.10-11).

¹⁸³ *Sargasso*, p.41.

colonial project from which he is made; the revelation of intimacy (and shame) between the two terms of the colonial dualism being thus one strategy of postcolonialism and decolonisation.¹⁸⁴ Further, Fanon points to the limitations of Hegelian dialectics when qualified with racial difference in the colonial encounter. In Hegelian master-slave dialectics the slave ‘loses himself in the object’, achieving a degree of liberation: ‘In Hegel the slave turns away from the master and turns toward the object.’ But in the colonial encounter reciprocity falters – the slave cannot ‘lose himself’ in the object (i.e. the object of work); ‘the slave turns toward the master and abandons the object’.¹⁸⁵ Indeed, if for Hegel ‘the master laughs at the consciousness of the slave’, for Rhys it is Amélie who laughs at the master.¹⁸⁶

The inability of the nameless ‘I’ of Part Two to arrive at a secure narrative self – his inability, in Hall’s words, to reach his destination – returns us to the notion of the ‘non-arrival’ of the (post)colonial subject as discussed at the start of this chapter.¹⁸⁷ The presumption of originary subjecthood and possession is displaced by the dispossessions of identity and place wrought by colonisation. To repeat the relevant quotation from Cixous: ‘I did not lose Algeria, because I never had it, and I never was it. I suffered that it was lost for itself, separated from itself by colonisation’.¹⁸⁸ Yet, in order to grasp the affective enactments of imperial power in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, it is necessary to understand how the association of the nameless man with non-arrival and ‘nothing’ is acted out like a loss he wishes to override. The imperative to mourn in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (to ‘let it go’) is thus followed by the violent denial of loss in the nameless man’s narration (‘Not lost. I had found it in a hidden place and I’d keep it, hold it fast. As I’d hold her’).¹⁸⁹ Without a name, the man is characterised as a ‘blank’, a shrug, a wordless place upon the page: “... You are –” [Christophine]

¹⁸⁴ Parry, ‘Problems’, p.29.

¹⁸⁵ As Fanon writes, ‘For Hegel there is reciprocity; here the master laughs at the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work. In the same way, the slave here is in no way identifiable with the slave who loses himself in the object and finds his work the source of his liberation [as per Hegelian dialectics]. The Negro wants to be like the master. Therefore he is less independent than the Hegelian slave. In Hegel the slave turns away from the master and turns toward the object. Here the slave turns toward the master and abandons the object’ (Fanon, *Black Skin*, p.220, n.8.).

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.220, n.8. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* the nameless man is repeatedly laughed at by the Caribbean creoles. For example, ‘Like Hilda she put her hand over her mouth as though she could not stop herself from laughing and walked away’ (*Sargasso*, p.77).

¹⁸⁷ Hall, *Stranger*, p.25.

¹⁸⁸ Cixous, *Reveries*, p.224.

¹⁸⁹ *Sargasso*, p.108.

shrugged “ – ...”.¹⁹⁰ The little boy who sobs ‘Loud heartbreaking sobs’ at the man’s eventual departure cries ‘For nothing. Nothing ...’.¹⁹¹ Tears themselves are ‘ – nothing! ...’.¹⁹² No name or paternal signifier, feverish, apparently poisoned, ultimately deserted by his servants: the master is unmastered, ‘not [him]self yet’.¹⁹³ Gregg therefore notes that while the nameless man’s narrative takes up a large part of the text it is ‘his nothingness which the novel insists upon’.¹⁹⁴ His ‘plot journey’ fails: despite journeying from England to the West Indies, the man gets lost (literally), and perceives his destination to be forever ‘hidden’ from him.¹⁹⁵

But it is precisely the association of the nameless man with melancholic ego-loss that pertains to his position of power over others in the racialised circulation and projection of affect:

I was tired of these people. I disliked their laughter and their tears, their flattery and envy, conceit and deceit. And I hated the place.

I hated the mountains and the hills, the rivers and the rain. I hated the sunsets of whatever colour, I hated its beauty and its magic and the secret I would never know. I hated its indifference and the cruelty which was part of its loveliness. Above all I hated [Antoinette].

For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness. She had left me thirsty and all my life would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it.

So we rode away and left it – the hidden place. Not for me and not for her.¹⁹⁶

Cheng notes that in the face of racial discrimination there is a loss of affective discrimination.¹⁹⁷ In the above, envy slides into or is proximate with hate; hate emerges out of dislike for the affect (laughter, tears, envy) of racialised others perceived to be an undifferentiated compound. The envy the nameless husband attributes to ‘these people’ is best read as a projection: to assert the envy of the other is to claim abundance in oneself (you have what others want), and to project implies an exercise of power insofar as the other is approached as readily occupiable and reducible to the self. In this instance,

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.101.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.110-112.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p.58.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, p.41.

¹⁹⁴ Gregg, *Historical*, p.100.

¹⁹⁵ *Sargasso*, p.111.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.111.

¹⁹⁷ Cheng, *Melancholy of Race*, p.17.

black feeling and the black body as, in Saidiya Hartman's words, 'an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values.'¹⁹⁸

Envy implies lack. Melanie Klein understands envy as the will to possess or enjoy, and so to destroy. Envy is 'the angry feeling that another person possesses and enjoys something desirable – the envious impulse being to take it away or to spoil it.'¹⁹⁹ Envy is an 'angry' response to the enjoyment of the other. The narrator above dislikes the 'laughter' of the islanders; perceives himself to be lacking ('I had lost'; 'left me thirsty'; 'Not for me') and attributes a 'secret' abundance to the other (person/place) which accumulates ('... the mountains and the hills, the rivers and the rain ... the sunsets ... its beauty and its magic and the secret I would never know ...'). But it is he who occupies the position of 'thirst and longing' and not having ('not for me'), which is to say the position of lack with which envy is associated. In the context of the affective logic of colonialism as depicted by Rhys, Klein's definition of envy can facilitate an understanding of racism or race hatred (that 'angry feeling') as less like melancholia and more like covetousness for what is perceived to be lacking in the (white or white creole) self and overabundant in the racialised other – like a 'secret' the other enjoys but hides, that one might 'spoil' in the act of (white) self-making. That is, racism as covetousness or desire to override an absent, lost or missing thing that might be violently (and then only fantasmatically) 'recovered'.

The 'recovery' by critics of the proper name 'Rochester' in their work on *Wide Sargasso Sea* is intriguing in this respect. Gregg is unusual amongst the majority of scholars of *Wide Sargasso Sea* in that she does not invest the nameless male narrator with the proper name, referring to him as 'nameless' throughout. I find curious the majority trend in Rhys criticism that insists upon naming the man whom Rhys keeps nameless, and whose relation to 'nothingness' her novel elaborates. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the man whom critics have called 'Rochester', due to his alignment with Brontë's male protagonist, works his own act of (re)naming when his Caribbean creole wife Antoinette 'becomes' Bertha, in accordance with European scripts of pathological racialised female alterity:

¹⁹⁸ Saidiya A. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.21.

¹⁹⁹ Melanie Klein, *Envy and Gratitude; and Other Works, 1946-1963* (London: Virago, 1988).

“My name is not Bertha; why do you call me Bertha?”

[...]

“... on this of all nights, you must be Bertha.”²⁰⁰

It is possible to read the resisted imposition of the name/subject position ‘Bertha’ as the process of the imperfect – and, like mourning, piecemeal – internalisation of the ‘text’ of femininity. But, more specific to the context of post-Emancipation West Indies, the contingencies of proper naming in *Wide Sargasso Sea* refer us back to the factor of displacement in the colonial encounter. While Antoinette resists the imposition of the text of ‘Bertha’ (“‘Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know that’s obeh too’”), the name ‘Antoinette’ is already composed of ‘others’: Tia derives from Antoinette, and from Annette (Antoinette’s mother’s name) we get to ‘Antoinette’ by the addition of *toi* (you); a ‘you’ constituted within the scope of alterity.²⁰¹ Christophine is also called Pheena, ‘Josephine or Christophine Dubois’.²⁰² Daniel Cosway’s real name, “‘if he has one’”, is Daniel Boyd, but he adopts the name Esau in reference to the biblical allegory of birth right, brotherhood and betrayal. “‘They call me Daniel ... but my name is Esau’”.²⁰³ Antoinette forgets and then remembers that Sass’s real name is Disastrous Thomas, of whom the parson said “‘I cannot christen this child Disastrous, he must have another name’”.²⁰⁴ The nameless man wonders if Baptiste ‘had another name’.²⁰⁵ Clearly, the Caribbean creole can exist outside of Western categorisation, although the changing of names also relates to the name-changing of people after they have been sold into slavery. I would suggest however that the enforcement of names by the nameless man upon his ‘others’ – Antoinette is also ‘*Marionette, Antoinette, Marionetta, Antoinetta*’ – speaks to the libidinal logic of racism as I have interpreted it, according to

²⁰⁰ *Sargasso*, p.86-87.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p.94.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p.91-94.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.81; see also Gregg, *Historical*, p.108-109. In Genesis, Esau sold his birth right to his twin brother Jacob for a bowl of food. Daniel is also a biblical name. In the Old Testament, Daniel goes into the lion’s den but survives because of the power of his faith. (The biblical realm of faith, I would point out, is undermined by Rhys in her association between piety and colonial forgetting, as remains to be discussed in the above).

²⁰⁴ *Sargasso*, p.81.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.112.

which the subject felt to be lacking projects plenty upon the other (*Antoinette, Marionette, Antoinette, Marionetta, Antoinetta*).²⁰⁶

Furthermore, doesn't the critical act of 'naming' the nameless man 'Rochester' repeat and act out *his* imperial act of naming Antoinette as Bertha (and *Marionette, Antoinette, Marionetta, Antoinetta*)? By 'castrating' 'Rochester' of his paternal signifier, Rhys points to a problem of ideology, one that we dramatise and repeat if we critically rename as 'Rochester' that which would otherwise allow an absence or opening to reside within Rhys's text. If this namelessness is a wound that Rhys asks her readers to work with, for the most part critics have sutured that space without reflecting upon what the 'loss' (of the proper name, of the paternal signifier) would otherwise enable. The tendency that Cixous asserts, as seen at the outset of chapter one, whereby mourning means 'not losing' when the loss 'is a dangerous one' – instead 'you "mourn", you make haste to recover the investment made in the lost object' – is again applicable here.²⁰⁷ The hasty critical resurrection of the 'Rochester' name plays out the difficulty of removing the paternal signifier, the problem being something to do with the difference between 'nothing' and a name. To paraphrase Cixous, *Wide Sargasso Sea* thus presents a 'challenge of loss' that critics haven't quite taken up.²⁰⁸ I would ask, then, what does the man's namelessness make possible? If the man without a name is representative of structures of white power – 'the man' – then it may be that his very namelessness represents, precisely, his power. Yet, although ideology can assert itself most fully when we feel it to be absent or invisible, Freud's 1929 letter to Ludwig Binswager nevertheless comes to mind, suggesting a quite different possibility. In this letter Freud counters his early trajectory of mourning by writing that 'we shall remain inconsolable [after loss] and will never find a substitute. No matter what may fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else'.²⁰⁹ Rhys, refusing or removing the name, does not 'fill the gap' or find a substitute, acknowledging instead the central space for

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.99.

²⁰⁷ Hélène Cixous, 'Castration or Decapitation?', *Signs*, 7:1 (Autumn 1981), pp.41-55, p.54.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.54.

²⁰⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Letters of Sigmund Freud 1873-1939*, ed. Ernst L. Freud, trans. Tania and James Stern (London: Hogarth Press, 1970), p.386.

‘something else’ in her novel, and so the insight of contingency that shows we need not identify with the received and dominant scripts and signifiers of the past.

However, the exposition of the affective register of ‘race’ in *Wide Sargasso Sea* involves the attribution of fullness and plentitude to the raced other. Hartman argues that in social relations of slavery an economy of enjoyment undergirded the meaning of racial subjection in which violence is conflated with pleasure.²¹⁰ ‘Blackness’ emerges more than once in Rhys’s writing as the locus of ‘secret’ enjoyments withheld from the white creole woman and the white European man.²¹¹ Thus in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the secret ‘loveliness’ of the island connects to the ‘lovely meaningless’ face of Amélie, who is perceived by the nameless man as the hoarder of laughter and the island’s secrets: ‘Ask the girl Amélie ... She knows ... She belongs to this island’.²¹² The ‘untouched’ ‘secret’ of the island might be ‘touched’, so this logic would go, via the ‘illicit’ pleasures afforded through the racialised and economically dependent female body, which are imagined to be given happily: ‘She was so gay, so natural and something of this gaiety she must have given to me, for I had not one moment of remorse’.²¹³ Given the relations of servitude and domination that constitute the sexual encounter, we must consider carefully the imputation by the master of ‘gaiety’ in the ‘little half caste’ servant girl. Following Klein’s interpretation of envy, black ‘gaiety’ becomes a resource for the removal of white remorse, and exists only to be ‘given’ (that is, taken). More so than racial melancholia, which retains its associations with the withdrawal of the ego from the social world, and the critical agency of the ego turning in upon the self, *Wide Sargasso Sea* conceptualises the affective register of racism as a dynamic of longing (covetousness) directed at the racialised other, who serves

²¹⁰ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, p.1-20.

²¹¹ For example, in *Voyage in the Dark* the white West Indian Anna Morgan remembers her longing to ‘be’ black: ‘I wanted to be black. I always wanted to be black. I was happy because Francine was there ... Being black is warm and gay, being white is cold and sad’ (*Voyage*, p.27). As Anna Snaith comments, ‘the language here [belies] the naiveté of the equation’, a naiveté compounded in that the ‘simplistic and racist identification of black people [such as Francine] with warmth, vibrancy and energy is linked specifically to childhood.’ Anna Snaith, *Modernist Voyages: Colonial Women Writers in London, 1890-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p.147.

²¹² *Sargasso*, p.89; p.62. Amélie repeatedly laughs at the nameless man who cannot understand why. It is Amélie who delivers Daniel Cosway’s letters which claim to offer truth over lies, and end by suggesting an appeal to Amélie to reveal the (putative) Cosway family insanity and racial illegitimacy. The notion that the ‘mulatto’ girl is the threshold to a disturbing family secret seems predicated upon her interracial inheritance – ‘miscegenation’ being an aspect of the supposed ‘secret’ – and provides in part the logic for the nameless husband’s coercive ‘encounter’ with her (*Ibid.*, p.39; p.81; p.89).

²¹³ *Ibid.*, p.89.

as the site for the redemption of white remorse. As well as envy, *Wide Sargasso Sea* relates the nameless male narrator to pity, presenting the reader with a further marker of white lack to be acted out upon the other. As remains to be seen, the inscription of the nameless man as lacking (as pitiable) pertains to the novel's inscription of racialised power as an effect of longing and loss.

*

Pity relates to *pietà* which is the paradigmatic icon of mourning in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The object of mourning is dead or lost; the object of pity is alive and suffers visibly. Pity is for those upon 'whose faces, inscribed upon whose bodies, one can already see the fatal sign' of death or degeneration.²¹⁴ In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the nameless man pities himself – 'Pity. Is there none for me?' – and senses himself to be an object of pity amongst the creole community: 'I saw the same expression on all their faces. Curiosity? Pity? Ridicule? But why should they pity me. I who have done so well for myself?', in particular regarding Amélie ("I am sorry for you", Amélie repeats in relation to the nameless man, who repeats back to her: "Well, Amélie, are you still sorry for me?" "Yes," she said, "I am sorry for you ...").²¹⁵ Elsewhere in Rhys's corpus, pity is associated with colonial discourses of racial purity when, in *Voyage in the Dark*, Hester's implies a 'black taint' in Anna's blood due to her father's 'Unfortunate propensities' in the West Indies (having children with Afro-Caribbean women): 'I always pitied you ... considering everything you were much to be pitied'.²¹⁶ Rhys in general satirises such sentiment as forms of bourgeois false consciousness and a displacement of the political (thus Hester is a parody of British moral superiority who chastises Anna for not liking dogs and for looking sleepy, whilst Walter earnestly projects anxiety about Anna's tights).²¹⁷

²¹⁴ David Punter, *The Literature of Pity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p.25. Punter writes that the terms *pity* and *piety* 'have long become intertwined, probably through their Latin and Italian roots; but it is in fact pity that is conjured in the famous images of the *pietà* which we have inherited from medieval and Renaissance art, perhaps especially emblematised in what is regarded as one of Europe's aesthetic masterpieces, Michelangelo's extraordinary sculpture. We are speaking here of the Christian tradition, and of the notion of pity has become focused on the image of the Virgin Mary cradling the dead body of Jesus in her arms after he has been cut down from the Cross' (*Ibid.*, p.24.). See also Punter's chapter 11, which is on Rhysian structures of pity in *Voyage in the Dark*.

²¹⁵ *Sargasso*, p.106; p.47; p.77; p.89; p.90.

²¹⁶ *Voyage*, p.56.

²¹⁷ "My dear Anna, I wish I could tell you how sweet you are. I'm worried about you. Will you buy yourself some stockings with this? And don't look so anxious when you are buying them, please. Always yours, Walter

Hannah Arendt has demonstrated the ethical and political murkiness of pity, referring to pity as a perversion of compassion related to the ‘vested interest[s]’ involved in the ‘thirst for power’.²¹⁸ If the melancholic, according to Freud, glorifies in his ‘keener eye for the truth’, the subject of pity casts no ‘equal eye’ over the suffering of others:

pity, in contrast to solidarity, does not look upon both fortune and misfortune, the strong and the weak, with an equal eye; without the presence of misfortune, pity could not exist, and it therefore has just as much vested interest in the existence of the unhappy as thirst for power has a vested interest in the existence of the weak. Moreover, by virtue of being a sentiment, pity can be enjoyed for its own sake, and this will almost automatically lead to a glorification of its cause, which is the suffering of others.²¹⁹

The ‘interest’ of pity is pity, and so the perpetuation of sorrow as the perpetuation of pity. Pity is a pleasure to be enjoyed ‘for its own sake’. Jennifer Mitchell notes that ‘[c]haracterising [Rhys’s female characters] as a victim negates all possibilities of agency and empowerment’.²²⁰ But, like Arendt, Rhys writes ‘the victim’ as a dialectic between strength and weakness, suffering and pleasure. Thus, the nameless narrator quotes Macbeth anticipating a response of pity to his murder of Duncan with a paradox about the power of the powerless (‘And pity, like a naked new-born babe / Striding the blast ... / Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye / That tears shall drown the wind’).²²¹ *Macbeth* is a play in which Macbeth and Lady Macbeth plan false feelings of sorrow (‘we shall make our griefs and clamour roar / Upon his death’) because ‘False face must hide what the false heart doth know’. Pity is presented as simultaneously a position of power and strength (the babe strides the blast), corruption and ambition (Macbeth), while tears of pity ‘drown’ out the clarity of distinction required for justice and ethics (‘blow the horrid deed in every eye / That tears shall drown the wind’).²²² In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the ‘tears and lamentations’ that Daniel Cosway evokes partake of his attempt at persuasion by

Jeffries” (Ibid., p.23). On anxiety as ‘a modern variant of the male melancholic’ see Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.214.

²¹⁸ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Faber, 2016), p.84.

²¹⁹ Ibid., p.84.

²²⁰ Mitchell, ‘The Trouble with “Victim”’, p.198.

²²¹ William Shakespeare, *The Arden Shakespeare: Macbeth*, ed. Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), I., vii., 21-25.

²²² Ibid., I., vii., 78-83.

appealing to the white man's paranoia.²²³ (Laura Frost's comment that for Rhys there is 'no pleasure without negation' achieves a certain clarity here: we see that the negation of pleasure – in suffering, in pity – is itself pleasurable, if not powerful.)²²⁴

The intertwining of pity with piety recalls us to Daniel Cosway's insurgent and intimate narrative placement, which is to say the strategies of displacement, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and the opening question of this chapter regarding the limits and possibilities of literature, when it comes to the (re)writing of histories of injustice and exclusion. Cosway's narrative attempts to assert the claims (true or false) of the subaltern subject over the text of institutionalised history. For Cosway (as for Antoinette) lies 'grow' into collective history.²²⁵ Whether or not Daniel Cosway's claims of lost paternity are true (and the association I have shown between the paternal position of the nameless narrator and loss could well suggest that they are), Cosway's narrative points the reader to the fact that history is itself a narrative that can be 'written up' as lies, as a kind of fiction, to the detriment of mourning as a process of reparation:

'My father old Cosway, with his white marble tablet in the English church at Spanish Town for all to see. It have crest on it and a motto in Latin and words in big black letters. I never know such lies ... "Pious," they write up. "Beloved by all". Not a word about the people he buy and sell like cattle. "Merciful to the weak", they write up ... I know by heart all the lies they tell – no one stand up and say, Why you write lies in the church? ... All that long time ago ... my letter was no lie ...'²²⁶

Rhys here gives the 'lie' to collective memorialisation in relation to justice, reminding the reader of the nameless husband's earlier recollection in which individual memory is outdone by institutionalised remembrance: 'I remember little of the actual [wedding] ceremony. Marble memorial tablets on the walls commemorating the virtues of the last generation of planters. All benevolent. All slave-owners. All resting in peace'.²²⁷ Unlike Cixous's affirmative individual relation to forgetting

²²³ *Sargasso*, p.77.

²²⁴ Frost, *Problem*, p.197; p.199.

²²⁵ "'Lies are never forgotten, they go on and they grow'" as Antoinette states (*Sargasso*, p.84).

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.77-80.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.47.

and the memory of the dead, Rhys's text appears pessimistic about the capacity (including its own?) to 'rewrite' history toward justice. When, in a subsequent conversation, the nameless man speaks of justice and slavery – “Slavery was not a matter of liking or disliking,” I said, trying to speak calmly. “It was a question of justice” –, Antoinette replies in a manner that makes justice a matter of *false* (re)writing: “‘Justice,’ she said. “I’ve heard that word. It’s a cold word. I tried it out ... I wrote it down. I wrote it down several times and it always looked like a damn cold lie to me. There is no justice””.²²⁸

To conclude, then, while Hartman writes that the historical events of enslavement engender ‘the necessity of redress, the inevitability of its failure, and the constancy of repetition yielded by this failure’, justice remains a “‘question”” that *Wide Sargasso Sea* will not easily answer, or necessarily fails to answer.²²⁹ Yet Rhys's reiteration in *Wide Sargasso Sea* of relational and plural narratives, that are at once antagonistic and intimate, displaces the categories upon which colonialist thinking depends. Nevertheless, some of the racialist identifications at work in *Wide Sargasso Sea* have been shown to be themselves *displaced* onto, and acted out within, the critical field, as emblematised in the recovery by critics of the ‘Rochester’ name. Attention in this chapter to Rhys's strategies and structure of displacement, however, has shown that we need not assume identification with the dominant scripts of history. Rhys scrutinises operations of ‘race’ and racism as powerful projections of plenitude and lack, while the displacement of dominance in *Wide Sargasso Sea* enables an opening for the creative and critical rearticulation of the losses of the past.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.94.

²²⁹ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, p.70.

3. Queer Temporal Touch: Virginia Woolf's 'A Sketch of the Past' (1939-1940)

*'The loss of a mother must be something very strange'*¹

Virginia Woolf's autobiographical text 'A Sketch of the Past' (1939-1940) is most commonly evoked with attention to Woolf's claim that in writing the novel *To The Lighthouse* (1927) she 'laid ... to rest' her longstanding obsession with her mother, Julia Stephen, who died when Woolf was thirteen. Woolf appeals to the work of analysis, indeed adopts the position *of* the analyst, in order to make this claim, circumventing the doctor-patient dyad: 'I suppose I did for myself what psychoanalysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest'.² Critical focus on 'A Sketch of the Past', already relatively scant given Woolf's canonical literary status, has attended to this claim to the point that 'Sketch' is largely read as a tool or 'key' with which to better access Woolf's fictions.³ Catharsis is assumed, as is a unidirectional temporal logic in relation to loss. However, this chapter argues for more unruly and restless relations to both loss and time in 'A Sketch of the Past', attending not only to what Woolf claims to do (or have done) with her losses, but to the work of 'Sketch' itself. Given Woolf's characteristic use of apophasis, which is assertion through negation, this distinction is one we would do well to decipher. This chapter thus takes seriously the complex *restlessness* of Woolf's unfinished 'Sketch', which I will not view in terms of lack. Instead, I present new readings of critically overlooked passages, maintaining that the oft-quoted passage above has been misinterpreted, and arguing for a sense of Woolf's work of temporal unsettling. The framework of my argument calls

¹ Sigmund Freud, *Letters of Sigmund Freud 1873-1939*, ed. Ernst L. Freud, trans. Tania and James Stern (London: Hogarth Press, 1970), p.391.

² Virginia Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', *Moments of Being: Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Jeanna Schulkind (London: Pimlico, 2002), p.93.

³ Notable exceptions amongst the articles specifically on 'A Sketch of the Past' (of which I found few) are the following works, with which this chapter is in dialogue: Elizabeth Abel, 'Spaces of Time: Virginia Woolf's Life-Writing', *Modernism and Autobiography*, ed. Maria DiBattista and Emily O. Wittman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Barbara Claire Freeman, 'Moments of Beating: Addiction and Inscription in Virginia Woolf's "A Sketch of the Past"', *diacritics*, 27:3 (Fall 1997), pp.65-76; Georgia Johnston, *The Formation of 20th-Century Queer Autobiography: Reading Vita Sackville-West, Virginia Woolf, Hilda Doolittle, and Gertrude Stein* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007).

attention to the question of genre (autobiography, fiction) and the relations that exist between genres. This chapter thus takes the opportunity to further explicate the heterogenous genres of mourning.

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In the novel *The Friend* (2018) by Sigrid Nunez, 'A Sketch of the Past' is quoted by the grieving narrator who inherits the dog of her oldest friend after his suicide (the dog is also grieving). Like most critics who make reference to 'A Sketch of the Past', the narrator – herself a writer and teacher who contemplates the relation between literature, writing and mourning – assumes 'the effectiveness of catharsis' for Woolf and goes so far as to wonder 'how many psychoanalysts actually do for their patients what Woolf did for herself. I bet not many'.⁴ The acceptance that Woolf laid to rest her lost objects *without the help of psychoanalysis* goes hand-in-hand with a sense of derision for the orthodox understanding of analysis (and analysts) that will be discussed later in this chapter. It is easy to understand for now the attention, critically and in popular culture, to Woolf's ability to lay her lost objects to rest through writing, given her explicit commitment in 'A Sketch of the Past' to the healing power of words and writing. In 'Sketch', Woolf explicitly highlights her capacity to 'heal' by 'putting [shock] into words' so that 'it has lost its power to hurt me' and 'I take away the pain', describing this as 'Perhaps ... the strongest pleasure known to me'.⁵ 'Sketch' has as such been taken as evidence of Woolf's 'successful ... cure' through writing for the losses and violence that plagued her life, obscuring the non-whole, non-total nature of 'Sketch' itself, to which this chapter attends.⁶ Further, the putting of pain into words in a manner that elicits pleasure communicates a dialectical relationship between pleasure and pain, rather than an easy erasure or loss of pain, which instead is given referential meaning through writing.

This is not to cast doubt on Woolf's claim regarding her relationship to loss, and thereby underestimate her agency as a writer in relation to her past. Much work has been done critically to

⁴ Sigrid Nunez, *The Friend* (London: Virago, 2019), p.57-58.

⁵ 'Sketch', p.85.

⁶ Susan Bennett Smith, 'Reinventing Grief Work: Virginia Woolf's Feminist Representation of Mourning in *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 4:4 (1995), pp.310-327, p.310; Likewise Maud Ellmann notes how writing *To the Lighthouse* (1927) had the 'power to exorcise the dead' for Woolf, and Reina Van Der Wiel is confident that there is 'no reason to doubt Woolf's claim that writing *To the Lighthouse* purged her obsession with her parents'. Maud Ellmann, *The Nets of Modernism: Henry James, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Sigmund Freud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.63; Reina Van Der Wiel, *Literary Aesthetics of Trauma: Virginia Woolf and Jeanette Winterson* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014), p.80.

counteract early evaluations of Woolf's pathological relationship to loss; her inability to love and to grieve; her overdetermined association with trauma and abuse. The publication of the memoirs was a crux for and enabling of these readings, as if the autobiographical details of Woolf's experiences of loss and trauma offered the 'privileged hermeneutical key' to reading her fictions.⁷ Yet to analyse 'A Sketch of the Past' attentively means taking seriously its complex destabilisation of precisely these terms (loss and trauma). The desire for cogency evident in the search for a 'privileged hermeneutical key' produces an excess in the assumption that a master narrative exists if only we can uncover it.⁸ Not only is trauma reified at the level of identity and interpretation, but the past is entrenched in an ontological status that overwhelms the capacity to produce new readings in the present. A nostalgic temporality is assumed that gives rise to its own losses, namely the loss of attentively reading 'Sketch' with an eye for how past, present and future are figured as forms that will not settle securely in one place.

Scholarly work on feminist and queer temporalities is as such relevant to my reading. 'A refusal to "properly mourn"', states Sam McBean in her work on feminism's queer temporalities, 'might be conceptualised as a feminist tactic to question the desire for coherent narratives.'⁹ McBean quotes Robyn Wiegman's essay 'Un-Remembering Monique Wittig' from a 2007 special memorial

⁷ Madelyn Detloff, *The Persistence of Modernism: Loss and Mourning in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2009), p.26. Alex Zwerdling likewise refers to the representativeness of *Moments of Being* which, upon publication, was taken as 'the master key to Woolf's life and the bedrock truth at the base of all her fictions'. Alex Zwerdling, *The Rise of the Memoir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p.60. Tammy Clewell notes how the 'elegiac dimension' of Woolf's writing was identified as early as the first book length study of her work by Winifred Holtby, who called *To The Lighthouse* a ghost story aimed at burying the phantom of the dead mother. The challenge of reading Woolf's work as a narrative work of mourning was more fully taken up after the publication of Woolf's diaries, letters and memoirs, published posthumously in the 1970s. However, these critical evaluations were limited to reading in Woolf a display of pathological grief and the attribution of Woolf's breakdowns and suicide to the premature deaths of her mother, half-sister, and brother. Tammy Clewell, 'Consolation Refused: Virginia Woolf, The Great War, and Modernist Mourning', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 50:1 (Spring 2004), pp.197-223. For examples of readings of Woolf's work that presume her pathological relationship to loss and overdetermine the impact of abuse upon her life and writing, see Mark Spilka, *Virginia Woolf's Quarrel With Grieving* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980); and Louise DeSalvo, *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on her Life and Work* (New York: Ballantine, 1989). Readings of Woolf's fiction as a case study in pathology and grief are questioned, however, in the work of not only Clewell and Bennett Smith but Thomas Caramagno, *The Flight of the Mind: Virginia Woolf's Art and Manic-Depressive Illness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); and John Mephram, 'Mourning and Modernism', *Virginia Woolf: New Critical Essays*, ed. Patricia Clements and Isobel Grundy (Totowa: Barnes and Noble, 1983). I advance such studies on Woolfian mourning in this chapter through attention to Woolf's comparatively overlooked 'Sketch'.

⁸ This tendency of literary criticism has been explored and critiqued by Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

⁹ Sam McBean, *Feminism's Queer Temporalities* (London: Routledge, 2017), p.44-45.

issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* that was dedicated to Wittig, in which Wiegman draws attention to the paradox of memorialising a figure who has already been critically assessed and positioned. ‘The “Monique Wittig” I am tracing has already been lost, before the fact so to speak, by the force and gesture of contemporary critical practice’. The memorial issue therefore proposes a predetermined encounter with ‘what we have already done to and with [Wittig]’, causing Wiegman to ask ‘Might there be something instead important about refusing to ignore the losses that our investments in producing coherence entails?’¹⁰

Heeding this point, this chapter demonstrates the excess of Woolf’s ‘Sketch’ over attempts to interpret and instrumentalise, pointing instead to the incalculability of the ‘I’ across time. Indeed, despite her ability to ‘take away the pain’ of the past in writing, the narrative of the past is clearly subject to the constraints, crises, and chances of the present. The possibility of healing through creative work is highly compromised at times of war and thus ‘A Sketch of the Past’ – written during the second world war under German air invasion – is, precisely, a sketch: a product of war time anxiety, restriction and threat that Woolf never would complete or make ‘whole’ before her suicide in March 1941. As Woolf writes in ‘Sketch’ on June 8th 1940, ‘The battle [for Britain] is at its crisis’ and book writing is therefore ‘doubtful’:

June 8th 1940 ... Shall I ever finish these notes – let alone make a book from them? The battle is at its crisis; every night the Germans fly over England; it comes closer to this house daily. If we are beaten – however we solve that problem, and one solution is apparently suicide (so it was discussed three nights ago in London among us) – book writing becomes doubtful. But I wish to go on, not to settle down in that dismal puddle.¹¹

As the above demonstrates, Woolf frequently begins her entries in ‘A Sketch of the Past’ with comment upon present or recent events, or upon the scene and conditions of her writing, before ‘descend[ing]’ into the ‘deep river’ of the past.¹² It is as if the moment of beginning writing on any given day is the moment of a decision – or ‘crisis’ – between different registers: memoir-writing and

¹⁰ Robyn Wiegman, ‘Un-Remembering Monique Wittig’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 13:4 (2007), pp.505-518, p.507; p.509.

¹¹ ‘Sketch’, p.109.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.108.

war, private recollection and public engagement, past and present.¹³ Thus we read of Woolf's *turning* to and from the public traumas of war and the private remembering of her past, a sense of turning underscored by the shifts between the end of one entry and the start of another after an elapse of time, and by Woolf's sense that to write about the past is to advance into a different element (a river or a stream).

The evidence of crisis has led some to read into Woolf's late works the nervous, atomistic and disjunctive prose in keeping with mental collapse, claiming that Woolf's late writing lacks the 'complex' style of earlier works.¹⁴ Woolf's suicide in March 1941, not long after her last entry in 'Sketch' in November 1940, has been interpreted as non-accidental with the experience of war, as when Alex Zwerdling notes that the last time Woolf 'began to hear voices' had been in 1915 during the first world war.¹⁵ The implication that 'Sketch' is lacking, namely in complexity, is contested throughout this chapter. Indeed, 'Sketch' is read here in terms of not lack but something more like excess or plurality. As has been noted by others, 'Sketch' demands a complex double reading, as it writes both the socialisation of the female subject in the patriarchal family, as well as providing points of resistance to the reproduction of patriarchy; the 'I' of 'Sketch' is both participant and spectator, object and critical subject, with regards the Victorian family, manoeuvring among positions of submission to those of activity, analytic observation, subversion and empowerment.¹⁶ Zwerdling bases his reading of Woolf's last works on an interpretation of Woolf's aim as an artist to affirm continuity in all things over arbitrary division, implying an art that would be radically called into question by war and which Woolf herself would come to 'distrust'.¹⁷ Although I do not offer readings of Woolf's earlier writings here, others have done so in a manner contesting the notion that her writing can be helpfully restricted to a single consolidating aim or periodised in terms of 'reassuring cadences' which reach a point past which they will 'no longer flow' – as if that which is 'earlier' is

¹³ The Greek origin of the word 'crisis' is *krisis*, meaning 'decision', from *krinein*, meaning 'decide'.

¹⁴ Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p.289.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.289.

¹⁶ Both Abel and Johnston read 'Sketch' as a double narrative. Johnston makes the valuable point that 'Sketch' is, in this sense, hysteric in that it 'speaks' when repressed, or 'speaks' in and through its symptoms (Johnston, *Queer Autobiography*, p.83-88; see also Abel, 'Spaces of Time', p.57).

¹⁷ Zwerdling, *Real World*, p.290.

evidently more complete and comforting.¹⁸ Woolf's description of her own childhood in 'A Sketch of the Past' as a 'vast space' interrupted by 'violent moments of being' in which 'Nothing remained stable long' would itself contest this innocent understanding of temporality, as would the claim made by Madelyn Detloff that Woolf's late writing contains an address to the future.¹⁹ The number of queer readings Woolf's work has given rise to demonstrates how Woolf's *oeuvre* troubles generic and temporal drives to contain, conserve, or unidirectionally progress, as queerness itself contests 'flow' by registering that which is in excess of discourse.²⁰ Thus, in her work on Woolf as a cultural image and icon, Brenda Silver must needs read the iconicity of 'Virginia Woolf' in terms of plurality and proliferation, and the 'mobility ... to cross the boundaries between categories that so many people, particularly those who defend high culture, would dearly like to keep in place'.²¹

As per Wiegman's "'Un-Remembering'" of Monique Wittig, this chapter, while it may well be haunted by Woolf's canonical status, proposes an encounter with 'Sketch' that remains open to its alterity, without presuming 'a present tense ... capable of capturing the complexity of the world'.²²

The beat and break of the St Ives waves that so resonate with the popular image of Woolf's life, work and death are themselves associated in 'A Sketch of the Past' with originary difference, not reassuring 'flow'.²³ If we must search for a 'cadence' or 'flow' in or across Woolf's work, we can think of such a

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.290.

¹⁹ 'Sketch', p.91; Detloff, *Persistence*, p.32.

²⁰ For a useful summary of 'Queer Woolf' see chapter 25 of *A Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Jessica Berman (Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2016). Queer readings of particular note to this chapter are work by Erica Delsandro and Georgia Johnston. I agree with Johnston that 'Sketch' represents "an 'I' that could not only remember, but, through memory, could reenact the past'. Where I note play in 'Sketch', Johnston similarly senses 'parody' at work, notably when it comes to Freud, although our readings of Woolf's relation to the Freudian text are somewhat different. This chapter essentially takes up where Johnston's highly valuable chapter on Woolf concludes: 'Lesbian modernist autobiography, Woolf begins to imply, may need to challenge whole systems of thought, even something as seemingly basic and unchangeable as chronological systems that divide past-present-future. Lesbian modernist autobiography begins to step outside a symbolic system of heterosexual patriarchy' (Johnston, *Queer Autobiography*, p.74; p.78; p.93). Elsewhere, Delsandro offers a reading of queer history in *Between the Acts* in Erica Delsandro, "'Myself' – it was impossible": Queering History in *Between the Acts*', *Woolf Studies Annual*, 13 (2007), pp.87-109.

²¹ Silver's study of the extensive verbal and visual circulation of 'Woolf' across cultural terrains reads 'Woolf in the plural, as a site of conflict about cultural boundaries and legitimacy: 'the proliferation of Virginia Woolfs has transformed the writer into a powerful and powerfully contested cultural icon'. Brenda Silver, *Virginia Woolf Icon* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), p.3-4.

²² Wiegman, 'Un-Remembering', p.514.

²³ As evident in, for example, the film *The Hours* (2002), directed by Stephen Daldry, which opens and closes upon the scene of Woolf's drowning and shots of flowing water. See also the swirling wave-like patterns of Vanessa Bell's Hogarth Press covers of Woolf's novels. In general, covers of Woolf's novels, especially *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1931), often depict images of water and the sea. See also Philip Hoare, 'Fatal attraction – writers' and artists' obsession with the sea', *Guardian* (24th June 2017).

rhythm rather as the interweaving of Other and Same, or with reference to the generational ‘waves’ of the feminist movement.²⁴ As Wiegman describes, the dominant generational model of feminist history as a succession of waves is linked to developmental understandings of time and ‘indebted to reproduction as its implicit epistemology’, the limiting effects of which are described and countered by critical thinkers including Lee Edelman, Elizabeth Freeman, McBean and Wiegman.²⁵ These thinkers argue in different ways to unsettle ‘hetero temporalities’ of unified, linear and progressive time in favour of more ‘unruly temporalities’ that do not depend upon an imagined full past that is lost to the present, nor accede a fantasy of the future that works to conserve the social order without real transformation or challenge.²⁶

‘A Sketch of the Past’ demonstrates precisely such ‘unruly’ temporalities. Woolf herself calls attention to the figure of Antigone, which means anti-generational, more than once.²⁷ As Woolf underlines in *Three Guineas* (1938), the essay in which she responds to the question ‘How in your opinion are we to prevent war?’, and an essay that provides an intertext with ‘Sketch’ since it is ‘a collective autobiography of “the educated man’s daughter”’, Antigone can be considered representative of female struggle against fascism and the state *across time* and as mediated through her rebellious work of mourning.²⁸ In Woolf’s novel *The Years* (1937), *Antigone*, the text by Sophocles, is translated by Edward and, at a later point, read by Sara. Sara’s reading of *Antigone* is playful and non-linear and thus, as McBean describes, sits ‘outside of the system of valorisation and

[<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jun/24/fatal-attraction-writers-artists-obsession-sea-shakespeare-woolf-turner-gormley-philip-hoare-ocean>]. [Accessed 16th July 2019].

²⁴ What is rhythm? According to Giles Deleuze, it is the interweaving of Same and Other, continuously – the repetition of the same with alteration. Giles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. by Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

²⁵ Robyn Wiegman, ‘On Being in Time with Feminism’, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 65:1 (2004), pp.161-176, p.165. See also Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

²⁶ Carolyn Dinshaw et al, ‘Theorising Queer Temporalities Roundtable’, *GLQ: Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 13:2-3 (2007), p.182; McBean, *Temporalities*, p.3.

²⁷ Judith Butler highlights this interpretation of the name Antigone. See Judith Butler, *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

²⁸ Johnston, *Queer Autobiography*, p.84. In *Three Guineas*, Woolf writes that Antigone could be ‘transformed’ into ‘Mrs. Pankhurst’, referring to leading suffragette Emily Pankhurst, or ‘Frau Pommer’, a Nazi dissenter. As McBean writes, ‘Antigone is unburied from her context and is made to speak through Woolf’s contemporary political agitators. Indeed, these contemporary women become actors for whom Antigone’s politics might be performed in the present’ (McBean, *Temporalities*, p.37).

competition' in which Edward's translation partakes, his translation being an attempt at accuracy that will socially and academically elevate him.²⁹ In terms of counterdiscursive or queer rhythms (or queer reading), I would suggest we look also to Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941), in which Lucy reads H.G. Wells's *Outline of History* (1920) but, by the end of the novel and after watching Miss La Trobe's pageant, she 'had lost her place' in that romantic search for origins.³⁰ It is as if the impact of La Trobe's pageant, a fragmented and somewhat farcical restaging of the British past to which I will refer in more detail, communicates the point that history has no pre-established 'outline' to be pursued free from disorganising effects.

The very notion of an 'outline' indicates a temporal relation not dissimilar to Woolf's action of sketching in 'A Sketch of the Past', analysed in this chapter. To outline gestures to what is to come as well as the restriction of that future: an outline encloses an empty place to be filled, a contour to follow, in a manner that is predetermined and possibly essentialising, but is as yet unformed in detail. The indication via outline of the outer limits of a shape/structure *to come* is also helpfully understood as a gesture *to the side* of enclosed demarcations, to what is left out of the historical record, and so to the inclusion-exclusion dynamic of melancholic communal belonging and disavowal related to the treatment of Miss La Trobe and William Dodge as queer subjects in *Between the Acts*.³¹ Queerness enters in the novel via the linguistic blank of Giles's homophobia as 'the word that Giles had not spoken' about William and that Isabella 'guessed' at but does not herself speak. 'Isabella guessed the word that Giles had not spoken. Well, was that wrong if [William] was that word? ... this dust – She waited for a rhyme, it failed her ...'³² Pointing to that which cannot conform to 'polite' society and speech – that which, to play on William's proper name, dodges –, Woolf communicates the failure of regulatory rhythms, encouraging her reader to do more than 'wait' for the continuity of pre-established patterns.

The force of the anti-generational leads into a consideration of memoir and so to 'A Sketch of the Past', Woolf's tentative wartime attempt at writing memoir. With 'A Sketch of the Past', Woolf

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.37-38.

³⁰ Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.196.

³¹ Sanja Bahun, *Modernism and Melancholia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.178.

³² *Between the Acts*, p.56.

departs from the generational legacy of memoir-writing inherited from her father, Leslie Stephen. Memoir might seem to presuppose a backward gaze upon the past, entrenching the weight of the generational as the deciding factor of self-construction. ‘Memoir’ is indeed related to the French *mémoire* meaning memory. But even Woolf’s title disorganises this point, a ‘sketch’ of the past implying a future work not yet written but that will nonetheless be ‘of’ (derived from, belonging to) the past. If the work of the present pulls us into the future in which it will be finished, and yet remains attached to the past to which it ‘belongs’, then we might think of this belonging in the manner Elizabeth Freeman does when she writes that ‘Longing produces modes of both belonging and “being-long”, or persisting over time’.³³ If the past is that for which we *long* and to which we feel we *belong*, this *belonging* can nevertheless displace the past *as past* – reorganising it rather as persistence.³⁴ Before demonstrating Woolf’s departure from her own default or normative ‘belonging’ – that is, the inherited past of her paternal legacy of memorialisation – it is relevant to think about the autobiographical genre as such and the relation to past and present at work therein, as well as the relations between genres as expressed in this thesis.

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The discussion of temporality in the above suggests we can carry forward from chapter one Cixous’s understanding, from her own most explicitly autobiographical text *Photos de racines (Rootprints)*, that ‘Toutes les biographies comme toutes les autobiographies comme tous les récits racontent une histoire à la place d’une autre histoire’ (‘All biographies like all autobiographies like all narratives tell one story in place of another story’).³⁵ Cixous’s sense of the (auto)biographical does not apply a logic of linearity, hierarchy or progression between genres but one of substitution or even hospitality towards the ‘other’ of the text, whereby any ‘one story’ (‘une histoire’) may be shadowed by or open to ‘another’ (‘une autre’). Cixous’s unpunctuated sentence provides a sense of parity, contiguity or fluidity of movement between genres and what they narrate – as if one genre flows into another, in

³³ Freeman, *Time Binds*, p.13.

³⁴ Johnston makes a similar point. ‘Woolf’s supposition that events can reoccur through a process of memory questions the very notion of autobiography as a retrospective genre’ (Johnston, *Queer Autobiography*, p.74).

³⁵ Mireille Calle-Gruber and Hélène Cixous, *Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (London: Routledge, 2003), p.203-204.

which sense autobiography would not be predetermined by any singular and privileged narrative of the past. For Woolf likewise, there is an exposure to alternate options involved in her sketching of the past, and therefore an element of chance.

Woolf knows ‘many different ways’ in which a memoir can be written, ‘But if I begin to go through them ... the mornings ... will be gone. So without stopping to choose my way, in the sure and certain knowledge that it will find itself – or if not it will not matter – I begin: the first memory’.³⁶ Woolf doesn’t make a predetermined selection from the many possible ‘ways’ of writing open to her, and the apparently dismissive parenthesis – ‘or if not it will not matter’ – communicates that in writing this version of her past Woolf does not deny the possibility of others: it ‘will not matter’ because a foreclosure of alternatives will not be taking place. Nor does Woolf disavow the contingency of her ‘Sketch’, commenting that among the ‘innumerable things’ she has ‘left out’ of ‘Sketch’ ‘I have left out the most important – those instincts, affections, passions, attachments – ... which bound me, I suppose, from the first moment of consciousness to other people’.³⁷ The reader of ‘Sketch’ is well aware of what they have *not* read, as when Woolf writes that ‘What I write today I should not write in a year’s time’.³⁸ That which we *do* read is thus tied to that which we *do not* as a form of potentiality rather than a missed opportunity.

Leaving alternative narratives of her past open, Woolf recalls another of Cixous’s claims from *Photos de racines*: ‘Ce que je raconte ici (oublis et omissions compris), c’est ce qui pour moi n’est pas dissociable de l’écriture’ (‘What I am recounting here (including what is forgotten and omitted) is what for me is indissociable from writing’).³⁹ For Woolf, as for Cixous, to have something omitted or ‘left out’ might paradoxically be still to include it, as writing (*l’écriture*) remains open to its others and does not demarcate an enclosed environment. Woolf therefore acknowledges an element of chance given the multiplicity of ‘ways’ of writing memoir open to her: ‘... I cannot work this out; it had better be left to chance’.⁴⁰ In respect of which, we might think also of Cixous’s reference to

³⁶ ‘Sketch’, p.78.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.91-92.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.87.

³⁹ Cixous, *Rootprints*, p.203-204.

⁴⁰ ‘Sketch’, p.

Dostoyevsky's *The Gambler* or *The Player* (*Le Joueur*) (1866), an important intertext with *Or, les lettres de mon père* (1997). Like a player or gambler, Woolf gives place to the chance involved in writing of the past, which risks and is restrained by the gamble of the wartime present. That Woolf with 'Sketch' may be some kind of player (an actor, trickster or joker, rather than a 'real novelist') will be considered further at the end of this chapter, in relation to Freud.⁴¹ My suggestion for now is that, rather than a backward gaze upon the past, Woolf's attempt at memoir is complexly attached to the conditions and contingency, risk and possibility, of the present conceived as, in Woolf's words, a 'platform to stand upon'.⁴² Where other scholars of 'Sketch' have emphasised Woolf's conception of the 'platform' of the present as something like a viewing or take-off platform from which Woolf can enter into or witness her past, I take a different approach, reading Woolf's 'platform' with *Between the Acts* in mind, as a stage on which the past is creatively *restaged* by Woolf, along with the sense of performance, possibility and play this entails.⁴³

Before extrapolating on Woolf's departure from a paternal inheritance of memorialisation, I would like then to consider further Woolf's novel *Between the Acts* which was written contemporaneously with 'A Sketch of the Past'. For the writing of a novel that, as Madelyn Detloff argues, performatively rearticulates 'the pedagogical scripts [of history] that present exclusionary nationalistic identification as inevitable', at the same time as Woolf is endeavouring to sketch out her *own* history in writing, challenges us to read 'A Sketch of the Past' with a similar sense of how the past may be rearticulated powerfully in the present.⁴⁴ The postulation of the past in terms of fullness and plenitude can lead to the desire to replenish that fullness in violent and totalising ways. Woolf was evidently aware of the violence of seemingly 'natural' historical trajectories in her posthumously published final novel *Between the Acts*. Cixous's aforementioned comment from the epigraph of *Photos de racines* – that 'tous les récits racontent une histoire à la place d'une autre histoire' ('all narratives tell one story in place of another story') – indeed recalls Miss La Trobe's comment in

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.84.

⁴² '2nd May ... I write the date, because I think I have discovered a possible form for these notes. That is, to make them include the present – at least enough of the present to serve as platform to stand upon' (*Ibid.*, p.87).

⁴³ For example, see Elizabeth Abel's comments on the 'platform' of the present in 'Spaces of Time: Virginia Woolf's Life-Writing' in *Modernism and Autobiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁴⁴ Detloff, *Persistence*, p.52.

Between the Acts that ‘another play lay behind the play she had just written’: La Trobe has no trouble acknowledging the contingent and constructed nature of her own telling of the past, itself a *mise-en-abîme* of stories and plays-within-the-play.⁴⁵

Between the Acts is set across one day in June 1939 when the outbreak of war in the immediate future was a strong possibility for Britain but, crucially, had not yet occurred: the Nazis had occupied Austria and Czechoslovakia and were threatening to occupy Poland. But rather than suggesting political despair, ‘the likely death of civilized life’, or the end of Woolf’s pacifist idealism and a precursor to her suicide due to the ‘barrenness of the faith she could not bring herself to give up’, the setting of the novel immediately prior to the declaration of war encodes alternate, unrealised possibilities against a triumphant unidirectional historical logic.⁴⁶ The preparations in the novel for the traditional annual village pageant, directed by the creative visionary/mock dictator/maligned lesbian outcast Miss La Trobe, ironically parodies group attachment and identification contemporaneous with the actual rise of fascism on the continent, while the relation of La Trobe’s play – which restages scenes and stories from British history – to failure and farce implies a non-essentialist conception of the past. According to Detloff, Woolf is ‘able to construct a demystifying counterdiscourse through her rhetorical and stylistic choices’, unmasking ‘the reifying effects of “memory and tradition” that performatively construct subjects willing to fight and die for national ideals’.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, the ultimate ‘dispersal’ of the performance points to Woolf’s antifascist critique of consolidating visions of identity that presuppose the repudiation of abjected social others (such as the queer characters William Dodge and Miss La Trobe).⁴⁸

Following Michael André Bernstein, whose term ‘backshadowing’ refers to the practice of retrospectively interpreting events as omens, Detloff therefore reads Woolf’s effort to imagine history

⁴⁵ *Between the Acts*, p.58.

⁴⁶ Nancy Topping Bazin and Jane Hamovit Lauter, ‘Virginia Woolf’s Keen Sensitivity to War’, *Virginia Woolf and War*, ed. Mark Hussey (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1991), pp.14-39; Zwerdling, *Real World*, p.289-290.

⁴⁷ In *Three Guineas*, Woolf refers to the ideological effects of ‘memory and tradition’ when it comes to the justification of war (Detloff, *Persistence*, p.35).

⁴⁸ Thus, Bahun reads a ‘melancholic dynamic in the psychic structuring of community’ in *Between the Acts*, an interpretation related to the treatment of La Trobe and William Dodge as queer abjects. Bahun, *Modernism and Melancholia*, p.178.

otherwise as a form of ‘sideshadowing’ whereby attention is drawn ‘to the side’ of seemingly irresistible historical narratives ‘to a present dense with multiple, and mutually exclusive, possibilities for what is to come’.⁴⁹ Although I have pointed out ways in which Woolf (and Cixous) eschew exclusivity, the plaintive refrain of dispersal in *Between the Acts* – ‘To the valediction of the gramophone hid in the bushes the audience departed. *Dispersed*, it wailed, *Dispersed* are we ... Then the music petered out on the last word *we*’ – reflects a lateral spreading out of community structure and historical direction, and the elegiac sense of paradox attending this: ‘valediction’ implies an address or call – from the Latin *vale* (‘farewell’) and *dicere* (‘to say’) – that interpellates a communal ‘we’ only in the last stages of its departure.⁵⁰

Known as a politically, albeit ambivalently, engaged pacifist and feminist,⁵¹ Woolf is less commonly considered a social theorist or philosopher of ethics. Yet as suggested in the above, Woolf’s second world war writings anticipate and can help to develop contemporary theories of mutual vulnerability, exposure and loss, such as Woolf’s considerations in ‘A Sketch of the Past’ on the ‘invisible presences’ that make up the “‘subject of memoir’”, by which Woolf means ‘the consciousness of other groups impinging upon ourselves’.⁵² According to Judith Butler, it is possible to ‘address’ a ‘we’ since ‘all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody. Loss has made a tenuous “we” of us all’.⁵³ In Butler’s terms, to be constituted by relations that also dispossess us is to address a ‘we’ composed of ‘those of us who are living in certain ways *beside ourselves*, whether in sexual passion, or emotional grief, or political rage’.⁵⁴ The mirror-staging scene of La

⁴⁹ Michael André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p.1-3.

⁵⁰ *Between the Acts*, p.88; Bahun affirms that ‘Woolf conceives of the relationship between the modern individual and community as galvanised by its own impossibility’ (Bahun, *Modernism and Melancholia*, p.175-176).

⁵¹ In a recent work based upon archival research, Clara Jones details Woolf’s ‘grassroots’ activity in a number of campaigning bodies, namely the Women’s Co-operative Guild with whom Woolf had her most life-long affiliation (from 1913-1931), and the People’s Suffrage Federation. Jones also documents Woolf’s social participation via her voluntary teaching at Morley College between 1905 and 1907 and her engagements with the Rodmell Women’s Institute. Jones characterises Woolf’s activism as ‘ambivalent’ due to the reticence of her approach, her sensitivity to the internal conflict of political movements, and her questioning of the value of her own political and social activity. Clara Jones, *Virginia Woolf: Ambivalent Activist* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

⁵² ‘Sketch’, p.92.

⁵³ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006), p.20.

⁵⁴ Butler, *Precarious*, p.24. Italics original.

Trobe's pageant in *Between the Acts*, in which a series of mirrors are bought onstage to confront the audience with its own reflection, reflecting back a splintered image of 'Ourselves', renders the audience at once accountable and vulnerable, 'caught unprotected' in the 'play' of history, in a manner that anticipates Butler's call to rethink vulnerability as the basis for community and ethical responsibility.⁵⁵ Forcing the realisation of a disavowed 'part of ourselves' that is 'not a part we like to recognise' – 'something hidden, the unconscious as they call it?' – (a 'part' related to the abjected figure of the village 'idiot' who comes around to collect donations), La Trobe's play implicates the other in the self, bringing to the fore 'relational ties that have implications for theorising fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility'.⁵⁶ The constitutive exposure of the self means that, at the most intimate levels, 'we are social; we are comported toward a "you"; we are outside ourselves, constituted in cultural norms that precede and exceed us, given over to a set of cultural norms and a field of power that condition us fundamentally'.⁵⁷ La Trobe's mirror-staging scene casts the audience as actors in history, while at the same time it fragments the illusion of the complete community, returning the audience to itself 'only ... in parts' and rendering the spectacle 'Cracked' in a manner resonant with 'the looking-glass incident' that Woolf recalls in 'A Sketch of the Past'.⁵⁸

My movement between genres here – the fictional and the autobiographical – is supported by Cixous's sense of hospitality between genres. For Cixous, as argued by Mairéad Hanrahan and Peggy Kamuf, fiction 'gives place' to its others, and indeed 'fiction' is already an uncertain and heterogeneous category that traverses other areas (as Hanrahan clarifies, fiction shades into 'narrative', 'novel', 'work of literature', 'imagination', 'story', and also poetry).⁵⁹ Memoir too is heterogeneous, related to analytic work for Woolf insofar as it continues the explication of her past in spite of the critical emphasis. However, 'Sketch' itself is also not clearly memoir at all, but a different or

⁵⁵ *Between the Acts*, p.164-165; p.179; p.165.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.174; p.179; Butler, *Prearious*, p.22-24.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.45.

⁵⁸ *Between the Acts*, p.164-165.

⁵⁹ Mairéad Hanrahan, *Cixous's Semi-Fictions: Thinking at the Borders of Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p.3-6. Hanrahan, in reference to the work of Gérard Genette, argues that 'Literary space is defined not by an overarching categorisation but by a series of traversals or intersecting lines. In consequence, there is no single point at which they all meet, no single unifying principle according to which literary forms can be classified' (*Ibid.*, p.6). See also Peggy Kamuf, 'To Give Place: Semi-Approaches to Hélène Cixous', *Yale French Studies*, 87 (1995), pp.68-89.

interstitial literary category altogether: a text – or an ‘analysis’ – that is fittingly ‘outside’ or ‘*beside*’ (to use Butler’s vocabulary) the generic categories with which we might want to name it.

As my references to analysis suggests, ‘Sketch’ engages disciplines other than that of literature. Writing it, Woolf has ‘no energy’ for ‘the horrid labour that it needs to make an orderly and expressed work of art; where one thing follows another and all are swept into a whole’, and yet wishes to ‘explain a little of my own psychology’ which means to ‘analyse [the] invisible presences’ without which ‘we know very little of the subject of the memoir’.⁶⁰ Life-writing is indeed ‘futile’ for Woolf if it cannot ‘analyse’ the ‘immense forces society brings to play upon each of us’.⁶¹ Yet ‘Sketch’ isn’t exactly a memoir but a provisional attempt *toward* memoir as the designation ‘sketch’ suggests. The word ‘sketch’ – which can refer to a visual work more than a written text, although it can also mean ‘to give a brief account of’, and a short comic skit – is related to the Greek *skhedios* meaning ‘on the spur of the moment’ or extemporaneous, the Latin *ex tempore* meaning literally ‘out of time’. ‘Sketch’ is indeed situated outside of and away from the commodified time of ‘labour’ and ‘drudgery’ involved in Woolf’s professional writing practice, written as it was in her time off from writing for publication, such as Woolf’s biography of Roger Fry and the draft *Pointz Hall* which became *Between the Acts*.⁶² ‘Perhaps one day, relieved from making works of art, I will try to compose this’ writes Woolf, situating her work (which is not a ‘work’) in the interstices of art and memoir, which are deferred or occur elsewhere.⁶³ The postponement of the ‘literary’ memoir-to-come is emphasised by the ‘casual’ diaristic form of ‘Sketch’ as a composite of dated entries, while the implication of a future beyond in which the work of memoir and the life it writes will be finally ‘whole’, but which crucially in this case does not arrive, is inherent in the notion of ‘sketch’ as a preliminary and unfinished form.⁶⁴

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⁶⁰ ‘Sketch’, p.87; p.83; p.92.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.92.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p.96

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.87.

⁶⁴ Commenting on her idea of what makes a ‘real novelist’ in reference to Austen, Trollope, Thackeray, Dickens and Tolstoy, Woolf states that she will ‘leave the literary side alone for the moment’ (*Ibid.*, p.84); p.92.

That Woolf is ‘sketching’ *the past* supports the sense of the concomitance of past and present – the past is taking shape *in the present*; the past is the unfinished work *of the present* – and further expresses the past as bound to the potential of a future (for further interpretation, analysis, mourning). In passages whose complexity have been critically overlooked, Woolf imagines the past as a river or stream that the memoirist attempts to ‘see ... through the surface to the depths’ or that ‘like a child advancing with bare feet into a cold river, descend[s] again into that stream’.⁶⁵ A moving element, then, that just might carry one away or beyond. Likened to a reflective surface into which the memoirist searches for their self-image, the past can shatter – like the cracked looking-glass in *Between the Acts* – or peter out into a ‘dismal puddle’.⁶⁶ Woolf’s war time conditions of writing are crucial to her figuration of the past: if the subject of memoir is to ‘see through’ the present to the ‘deep river’ of the past ‘peace is necessary’, but when Woolf was writing ‘Sketch’ – April 1939–November 1940 – the Battle of Britain reached a point of ‘crisis’.⁶⁷ This clearly impacted Woolf’s relationship to writing and her ability to narrate the past as a ‘whole’. In a remarkable and critically overlooked passage, Woolf writes ‘I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream’.⁶⁸ Woolf identifies herself as momentarily positioned within a moving element that she cannot describe, a fish ‘held in place’ in a stream. The ‘stream’ is not only the ‘invisible presences’ and ‘immense forces’ of society (such as war and patriarchy), but memory and the past – which not only themselves *move* but run the risk of predetermining one’s own movements and self, holding one in place. Indeed, insofar as self-reflection is the task of memoir, ‘a symbolic equivalent to looking in the mirror’, for Woolf to ‘see’ herself is for her to recall the ‘incident of the looking-glass’ that relates to Woolf’s memory of male sexual violence by her half-brother Gerald Duckworth in the hallway of the Stephen family home by the looking-glass.⁶⁹ In this sense, writing memoir becomes the counterpart to the lifelong traumatic symptom of being ‘ashamed of looking at my own face’, and therefore memoir ‘takes the place and bears the traces of the sexual trauma’ and

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.108.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.109.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.109.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.92.

⁶⁹ Freeman, ‘Beating’, p.74; ‘Sketch’, p.81-82.

patriarchal domination.⁷⁰ Yet if we take seriously Woolf's image of her younger self as something slippery like a fish – a difficult-to-grasp creature that has been fixed within one narrative or social context – then I would already suggest that we might want to avoid keeping her critically 'held in place' by any such pathologising reading.

The image of the fish is itself familiar as the recurring scene of writing for Woolf and her 'catching' of a creative idea. While in this instance the narrator has no direct line between herself and the fish, and thus as Abel interprets 'Rather than fishing, [she] gazes, futilely', there is more to say about Woolf's critically overlooked fish image in 'Sketch' beyond Abel's reading of futility, whereby the writer cannot connect to her creative resources.⁷¹ I repeat the sentence once more to highlight its strangeness: 'I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream'.⁷² The sentence is one of self-reflection, which is also the objectification or othering of the self, but in this instance the self that Woolf 'sees' is not one she can capture (or catch) nor is she able or trying to situate this other image conclusively. Woolf places her older self over and above the fish that is identified with her younger self – the 'I now' looks down upon the 'I then' to make use of the vocabulary of 'Sketch' – and yet the viewpoint of the 'I now' that seems safely grounded, on land in the present, 'cannot describe' the 'stream' of social existence and the past.⁷³

However, this gaze need not be futile. Rather, although 'above' Woolf's gaze does not try to totalise about the position of the self in time and place, which I take as suggestive of the impossibility of telling any definitive story about that of which one is a part. (This condition can itself be described in terms of mourning and melancholia: the melancholic cannot apprehend his/her loss because it is an aspect of him/herself; the melancholic trope of internality means the subject is both intimately within and yet at a remove from loss.) Is Woolf internal to or external to, within or without, the element she describes and upon which she gazes? Although the 'I now' is understood to look down upon the 'I then' within the moving element of the past – according to which interpretation of memoir Woolf is

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.81-82; Freeman, 'Beating', p.74.

⁷¹ Abel, 'Spaces of Time', p.58.

⁷² 'Sketch', p.92.

⁷³ 'It would be interesting to make the two people, I now, I then, come out in contrast', Woolf writes (*Ibid.*, p.87).

separate from herself, *seeing* herself as an idea or other – it remains the case that the ‘I now’ is itself exposed if not drenched in this same element, implicated in the process the ‘I’ describes, as when Woolf refers to the ‘dismal puddle’ of the present.⁷⁴ Time then saturates the subject as opposed to being something from which the subject is separate: as Riley writes, ‘You *are* time. You are saturated with it, rather than standing apart from it as a previously completed being who was free to move in it’.⁷⁵ The capacity to not totalise about past, present and future is the most pronounced strength of what Woolf achieves in ‘A Sketch of the Past’, which is a text overlooked in terms of its own achievements.

Woolf’s non-totalising gaze upon herself ‘as a fish in a stream’ recalls the famous passage from volume one of Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*), *Du Côté de chez Swann* (*Swann’s Way*) (1913). It is well known that Woolf read Proust and was affected, apparently deeply, by *À la recherche*. If Woolf is *both* within and without that which she describes – evidencing again the multiplicity of meaning and positionality enabled by Woolf’s writing – then we might consider Woolf’s non-totalising gaze in ‘Sketch’ alongside the scene from volume one of *À la recherche* in which Proust’s narrator looks down at the boys casting bottles into the river Vivonne to catch fish, such that the bottles became ‘à la fois <contenant> aux flancs transparents comme une eau durcie et <contenu> plongé dans un plus grand contenant de cristal liquide’ (‘at once a “container” with transparent sides like hardened water and a “content” immersed in a larger container of flowing liquid crystal’⁷⁶). Like Woolf’s non-totalising perspective upon the past, the gaze of Proust’s narrator resists the impulse to crystallise that which he observes, emphasising instead the point at which all is ‘près d’être en voie de cristallisation’ (‘beginning to crystallise’).⁷⁷ Proust’s emphasis upon beginning – indeed the beginning of the beginning – does not relate to arrest so much as mutability and possibility. Further, ‘A Sketch of the Past’ performs a reiterated and differentiated relation to beginning.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.109.

⁷⁵ Denise Riley, *Timed Lived, Without its Flow* (London: Picador, 2019), p.59.

⁷⁶ Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), p.168; Marcel Proust, *Swann’s Way*, translated by Lydia Davies (London: Penguin, 2002), p.169.

⁷⁷ Proust, *A la recherche*, p.168; *Swann’s*, p.169.

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In terms of autobiography, the critical emphasis as outlined at the outset of this chapter, upon ‘Sketch’ as key to Woolf’s fictions as works of mourning, is at this point already undermined by the relation between memoir and mourning. According to Kenneth Reinhard and Julia Lupton, autobiography can be read as less one genre amongst others and more ‘a mode in which texts participate when performing the literary work of mourning’ – in which sense Woolf’s writing of ‘A Sketch of the Past’ would itself evidence not that the object has been laid to rest through a prior work in the past but that the very process of mourning persists in the autobiographical impulse:

Autobiographical self-construction tends to cannibalise lost ‘relations’ through acts of inclusion. In the complementary tendency for autobiography to digress into biography, the written self projects – literally, throws up – those lost objects with which it identifies. In these movements of introjection and projection, the three senses of memoir coalesce: autobiography, biography, and memorial for the dead.⁷⁸

Reinhard and Lupton emphasise autobiography as it participates in literary mourning, aligning the text with the structure of or as allegory for the psyche in relation to its losses. The passage further supports a sense of autobiography as inclusive of its others. The digressive nature of autobiography suggests further a slippage between genres, which are not decidable or distinct in themselves: if ‘the three sense of memoir coalesce’ then life-writing (autobiography) necessitates or gives way to writing of the dead (memorial).

That autobiography is digressive is a point especially apt for ‘A Sketch of the Past’ in which Woolf describes herself as digressing and dribbling on, and which does indeed ‘digress into biography’ of Woolf’s dead relations, namely her mother, father, half-sister Stella Duckworth and brother Thoby Stephen.⁷⁹ Because of the postulation of ‘invisible presences’ comprising the self, memoir is prone to ‘so many failures’ according to Woolf just as mourning has been theorised as a necessary but untenable ethical task: in Woolf’s words, ‘[memoirs] leave out the person to whom

⁷⁸ Kenneth Reinhard and Julia Lupton, ‘Shapes of Grief: Freud, *Hamlet*, and Mourning’, *Genders*, 4 (March 1989), pp.50-67, p.63-64.

⁷⁹ ‘And thus I dribble on ...’ (‘Sketch’, p.119).

things happened' just as the lost object of mourning exceeds the work of mourning and is not reducible to the work of mourning.⁸⁰ What Woolf writes of memoir might as well be written of obituary: 'it is so difficult to describe any human being. So they say: "This is what happened"; but they do not say what the person was like to whom it happened'.⁸¹ But the definition of autobiography as digressive is nevertheless at tension with the tendency of autobiography (and mourning) to consolidate (or 'cannibalise'). Digression can be related to the impulses of narrative generally speaking understood as, on the one hand, the impulse toward the end of the narrative, which digression delays, and on the other hand, the impulse to defer the end of narrative, of which digression partakes. Digression 'is something that defers [narrative] desire, impedes its fulfilment, delays indefinitely the moment of crisis or the overwhelming question. On the other hand, digression is the narratological *consequence* of desire, constituting the structural manifestation of impulses that cannot be accommodated within the discipline of a teleological narrative structure'.⁸² If 'to digress' is the inclination of autobiography, as Reinhard and Lupton suggest, then we might say that autobiography in fact manifests the impossibility or excess of the consolidating (cannibalistic) attempt to impose the 'discipline of a teleological narrative structure' over the life of the autobiographical 'I', and so to securely lay one's objects to rest.

Regarding desire, and while Freud's speculation that life is a circuitous path or detour on the way to death comes to mind, in which sense life-writing would be aptly digressive, we can nevertheless say that any desire at work in 'Sketch' does *not* seem to be that of the Freudian model insofar as it is non-phallic – it is the desire neither to attain nor possess, nor hold on to a threatened thing, nor to securely situate that which is perceived to be missing.⁸³ Autobiographical digression is in this sense *anti-disciplinary*, which itself conforms to Woolf's sense that in writing 'Sketch' she is on 'holiday' from her professional writing endeavours, considering the connotations between 'holiday',

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.79. On mourning as a necessary but untenable task, see Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

⁸¹ 'Sketch', p.79.

⁸² J.J. Long, "'Perfume from a Dress ...' On Not Getting to the Point", *Textual Wanderings: The Theory and Practice of Narrative Digression*, ed. Rhian Atkin (London: Routledge, 2011), pp.1-13, p.5. See also Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

⁸³ Freud, 'Beyond', p.311.

leisure and the leave-taking of ordinary routines.⁸⁴ Woolf writes ‘Sketch’ ‘without stopping to choose my way, in the sure and certain knowledge that it will find itself – or if not it will not matter’ which isn’t exactly a goal-oriented aim of efficiency – more like one of Freud’s ‘circuitous paths’ – and further Woolf playfully and flippantly dismisses her grasp upon or even the possibility of ‘sure and certain knowledge’.⁸⁵ More than once, Woolf’s writing in ‘Sketch’ ‘leads to a digression’, as if the writer is following her nose without worry about getting lost, and indeed Woolf describes her ‘feeling’ ‘when I write’ with the sentence ‘The pen gets on the scent’ – according to which it is not even Woolf who leads the ‘way’ or ‘path’ of writing but the ‘pen’ which Woolf follows.⁸⁶

Scent signals covert desire in Woolf’s writing, in this case the desire for or erotics of writing, related to Woolf’s transformation of pain into pleasure.⁸⁷ The interaction of which (pain and pleasure) is evident when the ‘scent’ that Woolf’s pen ‘gets on’ is preceded, on the same page, by a reference Woolf makes to the hall of her childhood home during the period of mourning her mother Julia, which ‘reeked’ of the flowers representing a death in the family:

Of course the atmosphere of those three or four days before the funeral was so melodramatic, histrionic and unreal that any hallucination was possible. We lived through them in hush, in artificial light. Rooms were shut. People were creeping in and out. People were coming to the door all the time. We were all sitting in the drawing room round father’s chair sobbing. The hall reeked of flowers. They were piled on the hall table. The scent still brings back those days of astonishing intensity.⁸⁸

The ‘scent’ of the mourning flowers has followed Woolf through time and disorganises time, as desire is prone to do: if the scent, associated with mourning and loss, ‘brings back those days’, then it remains or is revived in the present where this scent has the power to bring ‘back’ the past. The hall is indeed the site of abuse from the past. We might then ask if the ‘scent’ Woolf’s pen ‘gets on’ involves

⁸⁴ Long writes of digression in relation to an ‘anti-disciplinary subjectivity, a subjectivity free to follow its inclinations – its desires – without regard for the usual demands for efficiency and forms of attentiveness to which modernity subjects us’ (Long, ‘On Not Getting to the Point’, p.7); ‘Sketch’, p.87.

⁸⁵ Freud, ‘Beyond’, p.311; ‘Sketch’, p.78.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.83; p.103.

⁸⁷ Heather Levy, ‘The Olfactory Economy of Lesbian Desire in Virginia Woolf’s Shorter Fiction and *Between the Acts*’, *Virginia Woolf Bulletin*, 13 (May 2003), pp.18-26.

⁸⁸ ‘Sketch’, p.103.

a return to those days of mourning the maternal presence and chasing the ‘astonishing intensity’ of childhood trauma and loss. Yet the third ‘sense’ of memoir that Reinhard and Lupton posit – memoir as ‘memorial for the dead’ – is disrupted by Woolf, as we see when we consider Woolf’s departure from her paternal inheritance of memorialisation.

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If memoir is prone to ‘so many failures’ because ‘[memoirs] leave out the person to whom things happened’, just as mourning has been theorised as a necessary but untenable task to which the lost object of mourning is not reducible, it is nevertheless the case that Woolf’s family were no strangers to life-writing.⁸⁹ As Alex Zwerdling describes, Woolf inherited and transformed a paternal legacy of memorialisation in the Stephen family that included *The Memoirs of James Stephen*, Woolf’s great-grandfather, written between 1819 and 1825 and published in 1954, and the biographical writings of Woolf’s father, Leslie Stephen. These included the official biography of his brother, Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, and the memoir about his wife, Woolf’s mother Julia Stephen, written after her early death for the private audience of their children, who teasingly named it ‘The Mausoleum Book’ (written 1895-1903, published in 1977).⁹⁰

As the Stephen children’s irreverent designation suggests, memoir can function as a vault or crypt for the honour of the dead, but in a manner that may be contested or affectionately derided by subsequent generations. Indeed, readings of Woolf’s fiction as elegy, epitaph or shrine are complicated by Woolf’s own sense of the complex relationship between writing and mourning and the limits of representation when it comes to the dead.⁹¹ For example, in another autobiographical piece collected in *Moments of Being* entitled ‘Reminiscences’ (1907-8), a text that is addressed to Woolf’s nephew Julian Bell, Woolf attempts to describe her dead mother in the same text in which she warns that ‘Written words of a person who is dead ... tend most unfortunately to drape themselves in

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.79.

⁹⁰ Zwerdling, *Memoir*, p.59-64.

⁹¹ John Mepham provides a reading in such terms. He reads *To the Lighthouse* (1927) as elegy for the mother, *Jacob’s Room* (1922) as epitaph for Woolf’s brother Thoby, and *The Waves* (1931) as ‘a kind of shrine’ or cinerary lace, a ‘commemorative artefact’ for the ashes of the dead (Mepham, ‘Mourning and Modernism’. p.137-56).

smooth folds annulling all evidence of life'.⁹² Woolf then continues: 'You will not find in what I say, or again in those sincere but conventional phrases in the life of your grandfather [Leslie Stephen], or in the noble lamentations with which he fills the pages of his autobiography, any semblance of a woman whom you can love'.⁹³ The suggestion that 'written words' struggle to do justice to the dead, threatening to deaden them further, anticipates contemporary theorisations of mourning as a paradoxical double bind in which the ethical task of commemoration struggles with the difficulty of articulating the lost other in language, when the other exceeds language and when language cannot compensate for their loss. Hence, for Jacques Derrida, the aporia of being called to speak of the dead in mourning, tribute, or as a gift to the lost other, when 'Speaking is impossible, but so too would be silence or absence or a refusal to share one's sadness'.⁹⁴

According to and in anticipation of this mourning paradox, Woolf evidently *does* write of the dead, and 'Reminiscences' contains both the lament that 'no one ever wrote down [my mother's] sayings and vivid ways of speech' and a catalogue of several of these ways of speech.⁹⁵ Notably, Woolf further writes of her dead parents in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), a text much relevant to 'A Sketch of the Past' and the critical interest taken in it. But Woolf's comment on the draping of words in life-annulling lamentation signals the difference between Woolf's writing of the dead and her paternal inheritance of Victorian memorialisation. Describing a shift of ground and perspective 'from male achievement to private experience', Zwerdling details Woolf's lifelong autobiographical project, variously called life-writing, memoir, family history, or autobiography, including her diaries, the circulation of a family newsletter, and her contributions to the 'Memoir Club'.⁹⁶ However, Zwerdling implicitly equates the shift away from male achievement with the privatisation of (female) experience,

⁹² Virginia Woolf, 'Reminiscences', *Moments of Being: Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Jeanna Schulkind (London: Pimlico, 2002), p.8.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p.8.

⁹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava, and Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p.xvi.

⁹⁵ 'Reminiscences', p.9.

⁹⁶ Woolf began her diaries aged fifteen and, having temporarily abandoned them fifteen years later, resumed them in her mid-thirties. From ages nine to thirteen, Woolf (then Virginia Stephen) and her siblings produced the weekly Hyde Park Gate News for family consumption. The 'Memoir Club' was founded by Molly MacCarthy in 1920 and involved the network of friends that emerged from Cambridge University in the 1900s and that would form the Bloomsbury Group. The Club required one or two members to share an autobiographical piece at each meeting (Zwerdling, *Memoir*, p.59-64). On the 'Memoir Club' see Hermione Lee's introduction to *Moments of Being*, p.xi-xii.

and considers 'Sketch' a 'private document' that Woolf wrote 'for herself rather than others'.⁹⁷ To write however is to posit a reader (to write, according to Derrida, is to be several). Woolf's conceptualisation of her present scene of writing as a 'platform to stand upon', cultivates in fact a sense of exposure and performance before an audience.⁹⁸ An audience that, as per Woolf's essay of the same period 'Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid' (1940), in which Woolf appeals to the 'millions of bodies yet to be born', may well be drawn from the future (as indeed it was).⁹⁹ Woolf felt that by 'writing, when I might be walking, running a shop, or learning to do something that will be useful if war comes, I feel that I am doing what is far more necessary than anything else'.¹⁰⁰ Writing and the public engagements of the war effort are not in binaristic tension for Woolf as writing itself partakes of necessity, as clarified by Woolf's emphasis in 'Thoughts on Peace' on the cultivation of critical thought so as to arrest and 'fight' repetitious cycles of nationalistic violence that construe war as inevitable: 'There is another way of fighting for freedom without arms; we can fight with the mind'.¹⁰¹ Likewise Woolf's construction in 'Thoughts on Peace' of a collective that might 'think peace into existence' attaches the struggle of the individual in the present – 'this one body in this one bed' – to the vast collective of the future – the 'millions of bodies yet to be born' – in a manner anticipating Derrida's call for a politics that can 'recognise in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer or for those others who are not yet *there*, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born'.¹⁰² Both of which construe the present as a site of connection across time, dislocating the confines of a 'private' experience of time/text.¹⁰³

⁹⁷ Zwerdling, *Memoir*, p.59.

⁹⁸ 'Sketch', p.87.

⁹⁹ Virginia Woolf, 'Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid', *Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid* (London: Penguin, 2009), pp.1-7, p.1.

¹⁰⁰ 'Sketch', p.86.

¹⁰¹ 'Thoughts on Peace', p.6.

¹⁰² Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 2006), p.xviii.

¹⁰³ Like Zwerdling, Theodore Koulouris construes Woolf's autobiographical texts as 'private' and 'liberated' from the public realm of the collective. Similarly, Anna Snaith reads anxiety into Woolf's sense of herself as 'turning away from something' so as to write her memoirs, as when on June 19th 1940 Woolf writes 'the dictators dictate their terms in France' and 'Meanwhile ... I sit in my room ... and turn to [a portrait of] my father'. Yet the life Woolf is writing is characterised by invasions to personal and private borders – as per the Duckworth molestation from Woolf's past, and the German planes that fly overhead as she writes in the (her) present (during the Battle of Britain). What is more, to 'turn to' the father is in fact an about turn for Woolf insofar as, as Freeman notes, 'Woolf's memories of her father are so profoundly bound up with dictatorship and powerlessness that political and personal histories collide.' Theodore Koulouris, *Hellenism and Loss in the*

Yet it is true that ‘Sketch’ writes Woolf’s shift away from the stifling scenes of patriarchal Victorian mourning ritual in the wake of the premature deaths of her mother in 1895 and her half-sister Stella Duckworth in 1987, when Woolf was aged thirteen and fifteen respectively. Against life-annulling lamentation and the written words that ‘drape themselves in smooth folds’ as if in mourning garb, Woolf writes in ‘Sketch’ that ‘my mother’s death unveiled and intensified; made me suddenly develop perceptions ... as if something was becoming visible without any effort’. The experience of unveiling contrasts with the ‘shrouded and curtained rooms at Hyde Park Gate’ in which the Stephen family mourns in an ‘atmosphere’ described by Woolf as ‘melodramatic, histrionic, and unreal’ to the extent that ‘A finger seemed laid on one’s lips’, and contrast equally with the leaden images of Victorian mourning ritual following Julia’s death such as the family’s daily walks around Kensington ‘under a haze of heavy emotion ... all dressed in unbroken black’.¹⁰⁴ Likewise the written words of the dead that ‘drape’ themselves, annulling life, differ from the ‘blaze’ of light that Woolf witnesses at Paddington Station in the days before her mother’s funeral which so ‘impressed’ and ‘exalted’ her – an experience of illumination in juxtaposition to the ‘shaded and dormant’ scene of Victorian mourning ritual.¹⁰⁵

Accordingly, Susan Bennett Smith states that Woolf’s fictional and autobiographical writings mark a ‘break’ with Victorian mourning ritual, commenting that the response to Virginia Stephen’s grief for her mother – the family doctor was called in to administer to Woolf’s reaction – made vivid ‘the transition from social grief practices to medical and psychological therapies’.¹⁰⁶ Bennett Smith traces the replacement of Victorian mourning ritual and a community of predominately female mourners, such as the ‘sympathetic women’ who visited Leslie Stephen after Julia’s death as detailed in ‘Sketch’, with the psychoanalyst or nerve specialist who assumed a causal link between grief and madness, especially in women.¹⁰⁷ After Julia Stephen’s death, the contemporary nerve specialist and

Work of Virginia Woolf (London: Routledge, 2016), p.68; Anna Snaith, *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), p. 140; Freeman, ‘Beating’, p.71; Woolf, ‘Sketch’, p.96; p.116.

¹⁰⁴ ‘Sketch’, p.103-104.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.103-104.

¹⁰⁶ Bennett Smith, ‘Grief Work’, p. 310. The autobiographical text to which Bennett Smith predominately refers is ‘Reminiscences’.

¹⁰⁷ ‘Sketch’, p.104.

Stephen family doctor George Savage was called in to treat Virginia and prescribed the rest cure, as he would once again after the death of Leslie Stephen in 1904.¹⁰⁸ Noting a wane in Victorian social grieving practices as medical discourses were empowered and physicians ‘quietly took over’, Bennett Smith follows feminist critics in interpreting the rest cure as a form of imitation death for women and ‘Victorian moral medicine which enforced the doctor’s domination over rebellious women’.¹⁰⁹ The rest cure was introduced in England in the 1880s as, in part, a remedy for nervous ‘breakdowns’ associated with female grief.¹¹⁰ Bennett Smith goes on to argue that Woolf’s fiction de-pathologises grief work and decouples mourning from gender, reading *To the Lighthouse* in terms of the completion and ‘optimistic consummations’ of Lily Briscoe’s and Mr Ramsey’s mourning for Mrs Ramsey. However, this reading posits a return in mourning to a pre-Romantic state articulated as somehow prior to gender difference, while at the same time retaining the heteronormative implications of a satisfying ‘consummation’ in the new association of Lily and Mr Ramsey.¹¹¹ The ‘pre-Romantic’ quality of mourning that Woolf makes use of according to Bennett Smith is related by Philippe Ariès to the state of nature and by Bennett Smith to the role of the working-class char-woman in the ‘Time Passes’ section of the novel, Mrs McNab, as if her class position simplistically confers an ‘unadulterated’ and ‘unmediated ... ideal of grief’.¹¹² Yet, as analysis in this chapter will show, ‘A Sketch of the Past’ suggests Woolf’s resistance to idealistic origins and return regarding the writing of mourning and loss.

The extent to which Bennett Smith’s argument invokes ‘A Sketch of the Past’ is further revealing of the manner in which ‘Sketch’ has for the most part *not* been read in terms of its own operations, as claimed at the opening of this chapter. Rather, Bennett Smith takes the text to facilitate readings of a straightforwardly ‘successful ... cure’ for grief through writing. This itself is suggestive of what more there may be to say about ‘Sketch’ beyond its use as a key to Woolf’s fictions. Like

¹⁰⁸ Bennett Smith, ‘Grief Work’, p.312.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.313.

¹¹⁰ On the misogynistic implications of the rest cure, see Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (Virago: London, 1985), esp. p.138-144.

¹¹¹ Bennett Smith reads Lily and Mr Ramsey’s mourning projects as ‘fundamentally the same’ (Bennett Smith, ‘Grief Work’, p.323).

¹¹² Bennett Smith does make the point in a footnote that in Woolf ‘privileged moments are for the privileged classes’ (*Ibid.*, p.320-326; p.326, n.18).

others, Bennett Smith invokes ‘Sketch’ to draw attention to the much-noted comment that by writing *To the Lighthouse*:

I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her.

I suppose I did for myself what psychoanalysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest.¹¹³

Taking the above in isolation without further analysis of the text in which the statement is situated, Bennett Smith carries forward Woolf’s claim to have freed herself of her object cathexis regarding her mother through the process of writing *To the Lighthouse*, noting how Woolf’s assessment corresponds to the early Freudian model of mourning as freeing the libido from the lost love object.¹¹⁴ In a more recent work, Reina Van Der Wiel suggests that Woolf’s triumphant retrospection might be ‘part phantasy’ but is nonetheless confident there is ‘no reason to doubt Woolf’s claim that writing *To the Lighthouse* purged her obsession with her parents. This entailed not only her mother’s traumatic, premature death, but also the difficulty of her father’s character, enhanced by his incessant mourning’.¹¹⁵

Yet the above oft-quoted passage indeed does not end there. The apparent finality of Woolf’s statement of mourning and the crux of critical interpretations of the text – ‘in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest’ – is couched by Woolf in questions such as ‘But what is the meaning of “explained” it?’. The conjunction ‘But’ indicates a contrast, exception or change of direction, as if to ‘explain’ requires its own explanation. It is therefore unclear when or how the mourning, and the analysis of it, will end:

I suppose I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest. But what is the meaning of “explained” it? Why, because I described [my mother] and my feeling for her in that book [*To the Lighthouse*], should my vision of her and my feeling for her become so much dimmer and weaker? Perhaps one of these days I shall hit on the reason; and

¹¹³ ‘Sketch’, p.93.

¹¹⁴ Bennett Smith, ‘Grief Work’, p.318.

¹¹⁵ Van Der Wiel, *Literary Aesthetics*, p.80.

if so, I will give it, but at the moment I will go on, describing what I can remember, for it may be true that what I remember of her now will weaken still further. (This note is made provisionally, in order to explain in part why it is now so difficult to give any clear description of her.)¹¹⁶

Revisiting a traumatic loss through language and through narrative has deprived the lost object of energy cathexis.¹¹⁷ Therefore the ‘vision of’ and ‘feeling for’ the maternal object is dimmer and weaker, a process of loss and an abating of memory. The reason why ‘I find it now so curiously difficult to describe both my feeling for [my mother], and her herself’ would be that Woolf’s work of mourning has been done, by way of her work of writing literature.¹¹⁸ The irony and risk of mourning is evident: the lost object is lost further. Hence, for Derrida, the *aporia* of fidelity in/of mourning and hence, for Riley, the focus of the following chapter, to re-enter the world after loss ‘[is] not a restoration you can celebrate’: ‘The dead slip away’ and ‘You would not have wanted this second, now final, loss’.¹¹⁹ Woolf thus writes: ‘I no longer hear [my mother’s] voice; I do not see her’.¹²⁰

Yet the persistent difficulty of describing the lost object continues to demarcate and negotiate loss through negative space – there is no ‘clear description’ of the lost mother – and the negative affirmation of her absence – ‘I do not see her’. This means that the drive to analyse and narrate loss as a process persists beyond the confines of analytic narrative expression or ‘successful’ mourning, as if Woolf’s desire to analyse exceeds her ‘analysis’. The impulse to ‘go on, describing’ loss exceeds the diminished capacity *to* describe what is lost. The sense of closure is thereby eschewed by the postulation of a future beyond (‘Perhaps one of these days ...’) which makes provisional the attempt to ‘hit on’ a ‘reason ... at the moment’ and, in so doing, stop writing. Woolf’s question – ‘But what is the meaning of “explained” it?’ – questions the meaning of her mourning, its expression in literature,

¹¹⁶ ‘Sketch’, p.93.

¹¹⁷ This is the early understanding of the purpose of analysis according to Freud, whereby the point of analysis is to defuse the unconscious via verbalisation: once articulated, unconscious symptoms and motivations lose their force and are deprived of energy cathexis. The purpose of going over the past in language would be to recognise the pastness of the past. Woolf as I am arguing disorganises this (early) psychoanalytic principle. Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, The Pelican Freud Library, Vol.2 (London: Penguin, 1973).

¹¹⁸ ‘Sketch’, p.92.

¹¹⁹ Derrida, *Work of Mourning*; Riley, *Time Lived*, p.80.

¹²⁰ ‘Sketch’, p.93.

and the task of analysis, compelling the work of (life) writing to 'go on' such that it does not tend towards completion; such that this other 'it' – that of writing – cannot be 'laid ... to rest' finally.

The text in which the statement that a lost object has been 'laid ... to rest' through writing is therefore the same text in which to 'rest' is to continue to write. Thus Woolf takes the mornings off in 'respite'¹²¹ from writing her official work-in-progress *Roger Fry*, but continues to do exactly as she does at work – that is, write: 'As it happens that I am sick of writing Roger's life, perhaps I will spend two or three mornings making a sketch'.¹²² It is as if 'the only alternative to writing is writing' as Freeman notes.¹²³ The tautology of this back-and-forth equation will be important regarding my comments to come on Woolf's playful non-progressive movement in 'Sketch', and regarding my suggestion to follow that 'Sketch' implies a form of play or joke, like the joke of Woolf's busman's 'holiday', which is to challenge the 'overdetermined privileging of trauma' in interpretations of her work.¹²⁴ Therefore, while I follow Freeman's singular work on 'Sketch' in interpreting the text in terms of originary difference, I depart from Freeman's formulation of writing as an addiction or 'lifelong habit' for Woolf insofar as this argument ties Woolf's writing, which Freeman refers to as her 'passion for compulsive inscription', to the symptomatic 'repetition of trauma'.¹²⁵ In this schema, writing becomes a symptom of traumatic experience and loss, rather than a means to transform it or, in reference back to Cixous and chapter one, to give 'life' to loss by taking up its 'challenge'.¹²⁶

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Considering 'A Sketch of the Past' in terms of negation and performative affirmation confirms what needs must be added to prevalent readings of Woolf's work. Her comment that 'I no longer hear [my dead mother's] voice; I do not see her' is in fact negated through performative affirmation, as follows on the same page with at least five examples of how Woolf is indeed still able to see and hear her dead mother:

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p.96.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p.78.

¹²³ Freeman, 'Beating', p.70.

¹²⁴ Woolf states that she writes 'Sketch' 'by way of a holiday from Roger' referring to her official work-in-progress, a biography of Roger Fry ('Sketch', p.87); Detloff, *Persistence*, p.26.

¹²⁵ Freeman, 'Beating', p.70-71.

¹²⁶ Hélène Cixous, 'Castration or Decapitation?', *Signs*, 7:1 (Autumn 1981), pp.41-55, p.54.

Then I see her ... Her voice is still faintly in my ears – decided, quick; and in particular the little drops with which her laugh ended – three diminishing ahs ... ‘Ah – ah – ah ...’ I sometimes end a laugh that way myself. And I see her hands ... She had three rings ... Also I hear the tinkle of her bracelets ... Certainly I have a vision of her now ...¹²⁷

Woolf explicitly negates only to performatively affirm her attachment to what is lost. ‘Sketch’ can be considered in similar terms more broadly, given Woolf’s emphasis on the failure of memoir (in her attempt at memoir), the difficulty of describing (what she is describing), her references to forgetting (in a text about memory and the past), and her presentation of ‘Sketch’ as not an ‘orderly and expressed work of art’ but a fragmented pile of ‘notes’ that is not (yet) literature but merely a ‘sketch’ of ‘my distracted and disconnected thoughts; to serve, should the time come, for notes’.¹²⁸ The following is typical of the emphasis on negation in ‘Sketch’, taken from the first entry, where Woolf is concerned with the problem of how to begin that which she has already begun (i.e. to describe her first memoirs and impressions, and the trouble with memoir-writing):

There are several difficulties ... - I cannot ... it will not matter ... I could spend hours trying to write that as it should be written ... But I should fail ... I do not know much of this ...

That is another memoir writer’s difficulty ... I have never been able to compare ... If I were a painter I should paint these first impressions ... I should make a picture ... I should make a picture of curved petals ... I should make curved shapes ... I cannot describe ... But again I cannot describe that rapture ... But instead of analysing this ... I have already forgotten ...¹²⁹

We might go so far as to say that ‘Sketch’ is not quite a text and Woolf is not quite a ‘real novelist’ in relation to it: thus Woolf appeals to painting in the above, and elsewhere identifies (up to a point) as an analyst, having done ‘what psycho-analysts do to their patients’.¹³⁰ What is more, the noun ‘sketch’ can further designate a brief comic performance, skit, or scene, a definition that connects to Woolf’s sense of herself as creating amusing ‘caricature[s]’ of figures from her past; that ‘scene making’ is her

¹²⁷ ‘Sketch’, p.93.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.103.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.78-83.

¹³⁰ Commenting on her idea of what makes a ‘real novelist’ in reference to Austen, Trollope, Thackeray, Dickens and Tolstoy, Woolf states that she will ‘leave the literary side alone for the moment’ (*Ibid.*, p.84); p.93.

‘natural way of marking the past’; the performative elements of her use of apophasis; and the melodramatic farce of the ‘conventions of sorrow’ in the aftermath of Julia Stephen’s death.¹³¹ The famous Duckworth passage that follows in the same first entry, in which Woolf describes her experience of sexual abuse by her half-brother Gerald, can likewise be read in terms of apophasis: Woolf’s noteworthy lack of registration of the event as traumatic itself cultivates a sense of disturbance and ‘shock’ throughout the text and reader, as critical commentaries evidence, affirming the traumatic status of the event through identification. In turn, apophasis affirms trauma in connection with the sacred and sublime – such as the postulation of a future beyond in which there would be no ‘But’ after the claim of mourning. Yet ‘A Sketch of the Past’ ultimately contests this connection.

Apophasis is a negative position that seeks to expose a transcendent field, a structure of negation linked to the sacred.¹³² As in negative theology, apophasis is predicated upon the apparent insufficiency of predicative language to ‘the essence, in truth to the hyperessentiality (the being beyond Being) of God; consequently, only a negative (“apophatic”) attribution can claim to approach God, and to prepare us for a silent intuition of God’.¹³³ Apophasis is therefore a form of not-saying in contrast with, for example, reticence which would imply linguistic potential, and the ‘[w]ritten words of a person who is dead or still alive [that] tend most unfortunately to drape themselves in smooth folds annulling all evidence of life’.¹³⁴ The injunction of silence in the Victorian mourning ritual from which Woolf shifts in ‘A Sketch of the Past’ in which ‘A finger seemed laid on one’s lips’, expresses mourning for the mother as a ban on speaking – and yet there is an implicit contrast between the injunction of silence and unspeakability in relation to death, and the writerly impulse to express of which ‘Sketch’ is a product. Thus Woolf may not be a painter but she performatively affirms a ‘picture’ of her past, asserting that she is not a painter so as to ‘paint’ with words.¹³⁵ Yet equally, it

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p.145; p.97; p.105.

¹³² Thomas Gould, *Silence in Modern Literature and Philosophy: Beckett, Barthes, Nancy, Stevens* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2018).

¹³³ Jacques Derrida, ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’, trans. Ken Frieden, *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp.73-142, p.74.

¹³⁴ ‘Reminiscences’, p.8.

¹³⁵ Woolf indeed describes her writing in ‘Sketch’ as if she is a painter, adding in and filling out a canvas: ‘Let me add a dream ...’; ‘How easy it is to fill in the picture ...’ (‘Sketch’, p.83; p.98).

remains the case that her name *as a writer* does not undersign this attempt at memoir with any singular nominal declaration or autobiographical ‘I’. If the task of memoir is to allow, as Woolf suggests, ‘the two people, I now, I then, [to] come out in contrast’, then memoir in general would mark the non-identity of the subject over time:

Who was I then? Adeline Virginia Stephen ... born on 25th January 1882 ... But ... I do not know how far I differ from other people. That is another memoir writer’s difficulty. Yet to describe oneself truly one must have some standard of comparison ... I have never been able to compare my gifts and defects with other people.¹³⁶

Woolf’s initial (and only) attempt to interpellate the subject of her memoir through the proper name is speculative and highly conditional, predicting its own failure as per apophasis, and thus resistant to normalising taxonomies of name, sex, and gender. Woolf stresses failure over success, troubling the notion (as per Bennett Smith) of a successful mourning. Success, argues Judith Halberstam, is heteronormative and equates too easily with forms of ‘reproductive maturity’ in relation to which failure can be cultivated as a ‘queer art’ of resistance and refusal: Halberstam highlights the conditional phrase in Woolf’s famous line from *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) – that ‘We think back through our mothers if we are women’ – to make the point that Woolf here actually ‘offers a way out of the reproduction of women as the other to man from one generation to the next’.¹³⁷ ‘But I should fail ...’, Woolf stresses in ‘Sketch’, ‘I dare say I should only succeed in having the luck if I had begun by describing Virginia herself’.¹³⁸ The third person reflexive pronoun and the use of conditionals (‘But I should fail ... I should only succeed ... if ...’) are non-identical with the ‘I’ that speculates, at the beginning of the memoir, on how to begin, and in any case the proper name that Woolf writes in reference to her (former) self – ‘Adeline Virginia Stephen’ – is *not* the proper name that would, but finally does not, undersign this unfinished memoir that was not intended for publication: that is, ‘Virginia Woolf’.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.79.

¹³⁷ Halberstam counters the wide interpretation of this phrase from *A Room of One’s Own* as a founding statement of a new matrilineal aesthetic lineage. Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p.2; p.125.

¹³⁸ ‘Sketch’, p.79.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.79.

As well as resisting naming apparatus, this posits a point of absence at the origin of the text which contests the implication of the apophatic sacred. Linked to the idea of the sacred is the mother, and in ‘A Sketch of the Past’ the figuration of the maternal is riven by difference, further complicating the lamentation of an ideal or sacred imaginary. The ‘first memory’ of childhood Woolf recollects in ‘Sketch’ is of a pattern, the purple, red and blue flowers on her mother’s black dress, a work of (sacred?) design and repetition with a difference. The sense of repetition is inscribed in Woolf’s description of the ‘red and purple flowers on a black ground – my mother’s dress; ... purple and red and blue, I think, against the black’.¹⁴⁰ But rather than postulate sacred design and therefore a transcendent field, the ‘first memory’ is itself plural: it is followed immediately by Woolf’s ‘other memory, which also seems to be my first memory, and in fact it is the most important of all my memoirs’.¹⁴¹ This ‘other’ first involves the very introduction of difference: ‘It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach’ at St Ives, ‘and then breaking, one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind’.¹⁴² Woolf’s memory of repetition, ‘one, two, one, two’, which is itself a ‘first’ memory broken in ‘two’, is the ‘most important’ because the rhythm of the breaking waves enacts the inauguration of difference and so alludes to Woolf’s genesis as a writer who ‘hears in the breaking waves the initiatory beat of language – one, two, one, two – ...’:

There is nothing before the beat. Woolf’s originary sense of difference, of the beat that divides one from two and in so doing inaugurates a difference that did not exist before the moment of beating, derives from hearing the waves break ... [H]earing the waves creates temporal and spatial distinctions between ‘one’ and ‘two’ that have no meaning prior to the auditory moment in which they are first heard.¹⁴³

Additionally, the intermittent ‘one, two’ rhythm described here relates back to the maternal, for Woolf as for Cixous. In ‘Reminiscences’, Woolf describes how ‘All lives directly [her mother Julia] crossed them seemed to form themselves into a pattern’, and then envisions her dead mother reappearing ‘now and again on more occasions than I can number, in bed at night, or in the street, or as I come into the

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.78.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.78.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p.78.

¹⁴³ Freeman, ‘Beating’, p.72-73.

room, there she is; ... closer than any of the living are, lighting our random lives as with a burning torch'.¹⁴⁴ The saintly maternal figure casts order over random existence, illuminating the way even after death. Yet the 'now and again' of the mother's reappearance implies intermittence in the illumination of (sacred) design. The intermittent appearance of the dead mother 'in bed at night, or in the street, or as I come into the room' locates the encounter with her at various thresholds, as an experience of the threshold (between life and death), as Woolf passes from one space to another: wakefulness to sleep, street to street, room to room.

Intermittence implies a 'now and again' rhythm of coming and going, like the photograph of the narrator's mother kept in a drawer by her father in *Or, les lettres de mon père*. The 'principle of intermittence' that has been interpreted in relation to *Or, les lettres de mon père* assists in my reading of Woolf's 'Sketch' at this point.¹⁴⁵ The 'very jerky disconnected way' in which Woolf wrote 'Sketch' implies intermittence, and the text is marked by the threat of Woolf's detachment from it: she 'break[s] off again' and again, suspecting that 'these breaks will be the end of this memoir', before then 'return[ing] to this free page'.¹⁴⁶ The diaristic form of dated entries provides the reader with a sense of the passage of time, a passage figured through the intervening space left empty upon the page between each entry, as well as a sense of Woolf's own passage, her coming and going, such as her passage across the English Channel.¹⁴⁷ The sense of Woolf's intermittent interaction with the scene of writing 'Sketch' is compounded by the expanse of time between certain entries (sometimes the interval is almost a year), and by Woolf's apparent neglect for 'this sheaf of notes, thrown away into my waste-paper basket. I had been tidying up'.¹⁴⁸

The idea of an intermittent absence relates to Freud's concept of the *fort/da* from chapter two of his 1920 essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, a form of play that connects to my discussion of Woolf's play developed towards the end of this chapter. As is well known, Freud speculates that his grandson's game of disappearance and return, in which a wooden reel with a string is thrown away by

¹⁴⁴ 'Reminiscences', p.7; p.12.

¹⁴⁵ Martha Segarra, 'Cixous, Derrida and Psychoanalysis: The Principle of Intermittence, or Dwelling on the Angle', *Paragraph*, 26: 2 (July 2013), pp.240-254, p.249-252.

¹⁴⁶ 'Sketch', p.105; p.108; p.122.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.105.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.109.

the boy and then pulled back, yields compensation for the intermittent absence of the child's mother. The 'pleasurable ending' of the game involving the 'joyful' return (*da* [there]) of the object that was formerly lost or gone (*fort*) is referenced by Cixous as Freud's aforementioned 'théorie de la jouissance subreptice' ('theory of surreptitious pleasure') in relation to the 'photo à éclipses' ('picture in eclipses') in *Or, les lettres de mon père*.¹⁴⁹ Derrida's reading of the *fort/da* in *The Post Card* is entitled 'Legs de Freud' (Freud's Legacy), which (in another instance in this thesis of a joke on Freud) makes a bilingual pun out of Freud's legs/legacy – that is, out of the forward-backward motion of the 'steps' of Freud's argument in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, going apparently nowhere (a *pas de thèse* or a *no-thesis*) as analysed by Derrida.¹⁵⁰ *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is therefore a work of negation or lack, in that it lacks any definable thesis (is an *athesis* in Derrida's neologism). Step in French is *pas*, which is also the most common word of negation.

Freud's rhythmic bobbing step in 1920 is like Woolf's coming and going in 1939-40, her 'turning' and 'returning' in/to her memoir, and indeed is also like her *stepping* out of water (the 'puddle' of the present) only to get back in (to the 'stream' of the past). Woolf's assertion of beginning on the first page of 'Sketch', 'I begin: the first memory', is in this sense not a step forward but a turning around (to the past and from the present) and about – the 'first memory' being, as noted, soon deprioritised in that it leads to Woolf's *second* 'first memory', the 'other memory, which also seems to be my first memory, and in fact it is the most important of all my memories'.¹⁵¹ The first step does not lead to a second, and the pronouncement 'I begin' leads to another beginning. In fact, it is already preceded by the much more speculative 'But if I begin to go ...' and the composition of 'Sketch' as a collection of dated fragments between which 'time passes' suggests that the memoir is itself a set of continual beginnings.¹⁵² To collect for now some of Woolf's turns, returns, and attempts

¹⁴⁹ Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1987), p.285.

¹⁵⁰ Derrida's translator Alan Bass explicates that for Derrida 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' has no definable thesis and is 'a book that always takes another step forward no matter what point it reaches'. Alan Bass in Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p.xiv; p.292. I refer to the French title 'Legs de Freud' as it provides a better sense of the joke on Freud than the title in translation.

¹⁵¹ 'Sketch', p.78; 'Time Passes' is the title of the middle section of *To the Lighthouse*. See Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, ed. Stella McNichol (London: Penguin, 2000).

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p.78.

to (re)begin: 'I turn ...'; 'I was forced to break off again ...'; 'To return to Anna ...'; 'But to return to Jack ...'; 'I ... turn to my father'; 'I return to this free page'; 'I shirk the task ...'.¹⁵³

The name 'Anna' (as in 'To return to Anna ...') is a palindrome that enacts a further repetition or return – the word returns to itself – and a forward-backward motion. The prefix *ana* returns us to the unravelling of the past in *analysis*, a word/work which, in a further 'turn', Woolf 'turns' or 'returns' to *herself* when she states that 'I suppose I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients'.¹⁵⁴ A further – different and colloquial – implication of turning – as in, to take a (funny) turn, or to take a turn for the worse – refers us to discussions of Woolf's mental illness and suicide. Woolf's 'turns' in 'A Sketch of the Past' resist sequential and developmental readings of past, present and future, and the generation of a future-oriented linear narrative drive. Rather, 'Sketch' displays an intermittent excess over even the attempt to create order and sequence. The orthodox psychoanalytic trajectory applied to readings of 'Sketch' as a form of proof that Woolf 'purged' herself of her attachments resist this insight, overlooking the restless complexity of 'Sketch' in favour of progressive cathartic relief. Yet Woolf's return of psychoanalysis *to herself* – 'I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients' – complicates the early psychoanalytic endeavour as a trajectory of libidinal renunciation.

*

If trauma cannot be spoken, an experience around which around speech must circle, it is curious to note that Woolf announces her memory of sexual abuse by her half-brother at the outset of 'A Sketch of the Past', as if getting it out of the way in order to move on to other – equally constitutive – matters. What has been read as a revelation of traumatic abuse, most notably by DeSalvo, is given in Woolf's first memoir entry, suggesting that while Woolf acknowledges the significance of the incident and the need to express her memory of unwanted sexual contact, her memoir (and by extension her construction of herself as the subject of memoir) will *not* follow the orthodox psychoanalytic trajectory of a search from traumatic origins. Rather, Woolf transcribes her memory of abuse (without naming it as such) in an early entry, before moving on to other memories, some of

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.96; p.108; p.111; p.113; p.116, p.122; p.140.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.93.

which may be related. Indeed the ‘incident’ of abuse that Woolf refers to so as to explain ‘why I was ashamed of looking at my own face’ in the mirror is just one of ‘some possible reasons; there may be others; I do not suppose that I have got at the truth’, undercutting the emphasis upon revelation.¹⁵⁵ The memory of the looking-glass/Duckworth ‘incident’ in the hall takes its place among a multiplicity of other memories and fragments from Woolf’s life, all of which are subject to the interpenetrating contingency of past and present: ‘2nd May ... [T]his past is much affected by the present moment. What I write today I should not write in a year’s time’.¹⁵⁶ Woolf’s awareness of contingency, and the urgency of the present at a time of war, imply the insufficiency of interpellating subjecthood *tout court* from within the specificities of past experiences of trauma insofar as such moments are themselves in flux in and through the present, subject to its contingencies. Thus, while Woolf’s division of the text into diaristic sections and the use of dates, which as Snaith writes ‘emphasises the partial, contingent and fragmentary nature of the text’ can be taken metaphorically to underscore the breakdown of a damaged psyche, equally the partial nature of the memoir reflects a subject in motion, writing their subjectivity as precisely that, who cannot be pinned down for long to a particular (pathological) status.¹⁵⁷

Reading ‘A Sketch of the Past’ in this light contributes to work that refuses the overdetermination of suffering and trauma in interpretations of Woolf’s life and writing. ‘A Sketch of the Past’ does not in this respect conform to the early psychoanalytic trajectory as a cathartic search for traumatic origins, nor does Woolf’s representation conform straightforwardly to narratives of victimhood and conceptualisations of trauma. While it is tempting to read Woolf’s understated, parenthetical representation of trauma symptomatically, as Freeman, DeSalvo and others have done, it is equally possible to interpret Woolf’s marginalised representation of the event of abuse as a lack of

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.82.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.87.

¹⁵⁷ Snaith, *Negotiations*, p.53-54. Woolf comments with a distancing element of irony upon the specific site in which her sexual abuse took place – the hallway of her family home at 22 Hyde Park Gate. After commenting on the ‘insanitary’ conditions in which the Stephen family housed their seven maids, the narrator remembers a strip of cardboard on the wall of the room in which she experienced male sexual violence upon which was written: “‘What is to be a gentleman? It is to be tender to women, chivalrous to servants ...’” ... What innocence, what incredible simplicity of mind it showed – to keep this cardboard quotation ... nailed to the wall in the hall ...’ Woolf in this way situates the sexual abuse that took place at 22 Hyde Park Gate within a wider culture of abuses by morally prescriptive and hypocritical patriarchal structures (‘Sketch’, p.124).

conformity to, or exposure of the insufficiency of, go-to narratives of female victimhood. In this, as Johnston notes, Woolf refutes Freud's seduction theory insofar as her memory of sexual abuse does not conceal a wish for seduction and is not a fantasy.¹⁵⁸ In this respect, 'A Sketch of the Past' places a check upon prevalent tendencies in contemporary thought to align trauma and subjectivation, thereby countering tendencies in Woolf scholarship to interpret Woolf's writing in light of her own mental illness and suicide (most notable of which is the work of DeSalvo, who reads Woolf's life and fiction with a view to the pathological impact of childhood abuse).¹⁵⁹

It is more the case that Woolf circumvents the position of 'patient'/analysand that the psychoanalytic encounter would demand of her. To do for oneself 'what psycho-analysts do for their patients' is to dispense with the psychoanalytic dyad, indeed of the very need for an (external, male) analytic authority, becoming one oneself. Woolf does not dispense with the *need* for analysis but refuses to reify herself in the position of the 'patient' (indeed Woolf did not undergo analysis herself). As argued in chapter one, Cixous sends up the figure of Freud in *Or, les lettres de mon père*, disrupting Freud's centrality by designating him her 'nuncle' (neither 'father' of psychoanalysis nor 'uncle'). As I have argued, Cixous's demotion of the 'father' of psychoanalysis to a place somewhat secondary to even his own project (i.e. the role of a non-uncle) is evident in Cixous's notion of Freud as the first 'lay-analyst', as well as in Cixous's side-stepping of learning Freudian psychoanalysis – 'I dropped Freud ... I had put Freud aside'.¹⁶⁰ Similarly, before Cixous, Woolf according to Elizabeth Abel 'displaced' psychoanalysis by literary criticism in apparently heated conversations with James Strachey, Freud's translator for the Woolf's Hogarth Press along with Alix Strachey, in the 1920s. Abel further notes Woolf's 'reticence', 'discursive rivalry', 'resistance' and 'anxiety' toward psychoanalysis at this time: 'Woolf's aversion to writing about psychoanalysis is matched by her resistance to reading about it', a resistance Abel ascribes to the 'singularly literary version' of psychoanalysis cultivated within the Bloomsbury Group, intensifying the 'potential threat'

¹⁵⁸ Johnston, *Queer Autobiography*, p.81.

¹⁵⁹ Likewise, Freeman more than once reads Woolf's representation of suicide in 'A Sketch of the Past' as a prefiguration of her own death by suicide.

¹⁶⁰ Hélène Cixous, 'A Kind of Magic', *Paragraph*, 26:2 (2013), pp.161-188, p.165-170.

psychoanalytic discourse posed to literature.¹⁶¹ Woolf's claim years later in 'A Sketch of the Past' in the entry dated 19th June 1940 that she has just read Freud 'for the first time' – despite the fact that the Hogarth Press had been publishing the English translations of Freud's work since 1924, and Woolf had been involved in the publication process – suggests something of the flippancy, or deep-seated ambivalence,¹⁶² of Woolf's attitude toward the Freudian text of psychoanalysis.¹⁶³ Of note is less the precise dating of Woolf's reading of Freud, more the manner of Woolf's self-presentation with regard to it: either reading Freud was a forgettable experience for Woolf, the psychoanalytic implications of such amnesia or 'resistance' we could go into, or Woolf treats – or wants to appear to treat – the Freudian text with nonchalance. The temporal unsettling at work in/of 'Sketch' is further demonstrated by this point, and it is not only the Freudian *text* that Woolf disorganises: upon meeting Freud in 1939, Woolf described in her diary 'A screwed up shrunk very old man' with a 'monkeys ... light eyes' who treated Woolf and Leonard 'like patients on chairs', a caricature I read as implicit in 'Sketch'.¹⁶⁴

Or is the relation to reading, and the implication of forgetting, rather one of pleasure? To recall Cixous's concept of *l'oubli* as discussed in chapter one, we can say that Woolf (it is highly

¹⁶¹ For example, in 1914 Leonard Woolf described Freud's writing as 'characteristic of the poet'. The literary interpretation of psychoanalytic writing was coupled with interpretations of its conceptual unverifiability on orthodox scientific grounds. It is important to make clear, however, that both the Bloomsbury Group and Hogarth Press championed and distributed psychoanalytic works. Likewise, Woolf's brother Adrian and her sister-in-law were psychoanalysts, and Woolf met Freud in London in 1939, when Freud presented Woolf with a narcissus as Woolf records in her diary. As Johnston notes, the gift codes Freud's own theories on female sexuality according to which women are narcissistic (Johnston, *Queer Autobiography*, p.79). On Woolf's 'objections' to Freud, choice not to undergo analysis herself, and the divisions within the Bloomsbury group regarding psychoanalysis, see Elizabeth Abel, *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

¹⁶² Woolf's relation to reading Freud and to Freudian thought does seem to be one of ambivalence. Writing in a diary entry during the period 'Sketch' is being written, Friday 8th December 1939, Woolf writes that she is 'gulping up Freud'. A day later Woolf writes in her diary 'Freud is upsetting: reducing one to whirlpool; & I daresay truly'. These comments suggest a mixture of voracious enjoyment, and displeasure and upset, caused by the Freudian text. Indeed, Woolf designates as 'Ambivalence' her own emotional state at this time (in the 8th December letter): 'I dislike this excitement. Yet enjoy it. Ambivalence as Freud calls it'. That Woolf chooses the expression 'gulping up Freud' has its own psychoanalytic resonance: consuming and incorporating the object, but at the same time destroying it (*Diary of Virginia Woolf*, p.249-250).

¹⁶³ 'Sketch', p.116; see also Abel, *Fictions*, p.13-15.

¹⁶⁴ Woolf as quoted in Johnston. Johnston herself reads 'Sketch' as a parody of the Freudian case history that, despite Woolf's proclaimed amateur knowledge of Freud, produces Freudian theory in excess. 'This excess production in a Freudian context alongside the proclamation of lack of knowledge reveals Woolf working as a textually conscious ironist, who reduces Freud to an easily digested and repeatable model. The text mimics and satirises, exposing Woolf's antagonism toward Freud's theories and coterminous indirect method of challenging them' (Johnston, *Queer Autobiography*, p.80-82).

likely) reads Freud only to forget what she has read, only to experience the pleasure of (re)reading Freud *as if* ‘for the first time’.¹⁶⁵ I have suggested throughout that ‘Sketch’ can be construed in terms of pleasure. Woolf states that by putting painful experiences into writing ‘I make it whole ...; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me’.¹⁶⁶ The narrative of the past is clearly subject to the constraints and crises of the present: the fragmented form of ‘Sketch’ demonstrating, as described, precisely the inability to ‘make it whole’ at a time of war when, as Woolf writes on June 8th 1940, ‘book writing becomes doubtful’.¹⁶⁷ War constitutes a ‘break’ within or breakage of the present that must be ‘smooth, habitual’ if the memoirist is to ‘feel the present sliding over the depths of the past’.¹⁶⁸ As Woolf has already noted in the entry dated 2nd May 1939, she includes the present date of writing at the beginning of each entry so as ‘to make them include the present – at least enough of the present to serve as platform to stand upon.’¹⁶⁹ But for the memoirist or mourner to ‘see through’ the thin surface or ‘platform’ of the present to the ‘deep river’ of the past, ‘peace is necessary’:

The past only comes back when the present runs so smoothly that it is like the sliding surface of a deep river. Then one sees through the surface to the depths. In those moments I find one of my greatest satisfactions, not that I am thinking of the past; but that I am living most fully in the present. For the present when backed by the past is a thousand times deeper than the present when it presses so closely that you can feel nothing else, when the film on the camera reaches only the eye. But to feel the present sliding over the depths of the past, peace is necessary. The present must be smooth, habitual. For this reason – that it destroys the fullness of life – any break – ... causes me extreme distress; it breaks; it shallows; it turns the depth [of the past] into hard thin splinters.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁵ ‘Sketch’, p.116. In a diary entry of 2nd December 1939, Woolf also writes that she ‘Began reading Freud last night; to enlarge the circumference, to give my brain a wider scope ... Always takes on new things. Break the rhythm &c.’. That Woolf reads Freud in part to ‘break the rhythm’ itself contributes the suggestion of disorganised and intermittence temporalities at work in this chapter (*Diary of Virginia Woolf*, p.248).

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.85.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.109.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.108.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.87.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.108.

The meaning of this passage is far from self-evident. To end, I will attend to its strangeness, and the possibility that a pleasurable relation to the past persists for Woolf in writing ‘Sketch’. That is, Woolf’s losses have not been ‘laid ... to rest’ in the remit of fiction but, with ‘Sketch’, Woolf continues to give life to the losses of the past.

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Woolf interprets war as a ‘break’ in the habitual present which depletes and disrupts the ability of the past to ‘come back’ with any continuity. War therefore ‘destroys the fullness of life’ understood as a deep receptacle propped up by the past that ‘one fills and fills and fills’.¹⁷¹ Insofar as ‘it breaks, it shallows, it turns the depth into hard thin splinters’ war unmakes the human capacities of language, description, material creation and self-extension required for imaginative creative work.¹⁷² The ‘sketchiness’ of ‘Sketch’ is then a product of Woolf’s wartime writing conditions, the hybrid form of this ‘tentative autobiography’ emerging ‘not only as the outcome of an exercise in self-exploration but also from the tension between private remembering and collective trauma’ as Suzanna Zink has noted.¹⁷³ The ‘hard thin splinters’ to which the depth of the past is reduced when the present ‘presses so close that you can feel nothing else’ expresses the pain Woolf associates with the non-adherence of past and present and the shallowing out of the past, a splintering manifest in the broken up and fragmented form of ‘Sketch’ itself.¹⁷⁴ Or rather, more properly, Woolf attempts to express this pain: pain is incommunicable according to much of *The Body in Pain* by Elaine Scarry, which is also part of Woolf’s claim in her essay ‘On Being Ill’ (1930) to which Scarry makes reference, although I will contest the assumption of inexpressibility in the next and final chapter of this thesis.¹⁷⁵

The shattering force of war, reducing the present to a splintered and ‘broken surface’, recalls the vocabulary of trauma as a shattering experience resistant to narrativisation that can be represented

¹⁷¹ As Woolf writes, ‘If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills – then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory [of St Ives].’ *Ibid.*, p.78.

¹⁷² Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.161.

¹⁷³ Susanna Zink, *Virginia Woolf’s Rooms and The Spaces of Modernity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2018), p.87.

¹⁷⁴ ‘Sketch’, p.108.

¹⁷⁵ As Scarry writes, ‘... pain comes unsharably in our midst ... Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language’. Scarry then goes on to quote ‘On Being Ill’ (Scarry, *Body*, p.4). See also my comments on Scarry towards the end of the following chapter.

only retroactively as a consequence of repetition.¹⁷⁶ Contributing to this interpretation is Woolf's characterisation of the present as a 'little platform of present time on which I stand', which recalls both the 'base' of memories that life 'stands upon' and the 'slab outside the dining room door' on top of which Woolf was sexually abused as a child.¹⁷⁷ The inscription of these prior incidents and moments in Woolf's conceptualisation of the 'platform' of the present seem to confirm her speculation that 'strong emotion must leave its trace' (the comment also recollects Freud's speculations of the previous decade in 'A Note Upon The "Mystic Writing-Pad"' (1924) regarding the inscription of traces in the psyche).¹⁷⁸ The need for reflection upon community and accountability implied in the mirror scene of La Trobe's pageant in *Between the Acts* – that search for 'Ourselves' in the 'mirrors' of history and art – is reduced in 'Sketch' to a sharp experience of splintering. It is as if in the difference between Woolf's fiction and her autobiographical 'sketching' is the difference between an ideal community of reflective sociohistorical agents, and a reality of fragmentation in which one can feel 'nothing' but the pain and 'distress' of the present.¹⁷⁹ Reflection upon injury can cause us to consider how cycles of violence may be arrested and averted, as Judith Butler argues, this being precisely what is missing when the present 'presses so closely that you can feel nothing else, when the film on the camera reaches only the eye'.¹⁸⁰

Yet the very sensuousness of Woolf's 'feel' for the present suggests a tactile temporality that exceeds our attempt to explain it. The intermittent interaction between present and past, self and other, that I have argued 'A Sketch of the Past' represents is complemented here by the inability to reduce Woolf's conceptualisation of time to order and sense: Woolf's expression 'when the film on the camera reaches only the eye' is not one I can understand other than in terms of strangeness, although it does in this way provoke a perceptual shift. A sensual, corporeal and haptic dimension is introduced by the 'feel', 'slide' and 'smooth[ness]' of the present; by the temporal pain of the 'splinters' of the past; by the present that reaches only the 'eye'. Implied is time as something that might be felt and

¹⁷⁶ 'Sketch', p.108.

¹⁷⁷ 'Sketch', p.96; p.78; p.82.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.81; Sigmund Freud, 'A Note Upon the "Mystic Writing-Pad"', *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1987), p.429.

¹⁷⁹ 'Sketch', p.108.

¹⁸⁰ See Butler, *Precarious*.

touched, that might come close through pleasure or through pain, a temporal touch that would show, as Carolyn Dinshaw writes on the notion of 'queer touch', 'something disjunctive within unities that are presumed unproblematic, even natural'.¹⁸¹ This disjunctive 'something' has been crucial to my reading of temporal unsettling and interaction in 'A Sketch of the Past'. The tactile relation to temporality evidences the excess of the present, the experience of which we cannot reduce to sense. I would end, then, by relating this excess not to pain nor redemptive sublimity, but to pleasure. While the inscription of 'touch' in 'A Sketch of the Past' may most obviously refer us to Woolf's memory of being abused by Duckworth, 'the feel of his hand' and the 'feeling' that 'certain parts of the body ... must not be touched', as well as indeed to 'Jack's hand gripping my wrist' in search of comfort as he mourns Woolf's half-sister Stella, I note how, rather than reify these instances of trauma and mourning, Woolf reiterates her own 'touch' as a writer, and thus the 'pleasure' and 'delight' she finds therein, her description of Gerald's act throwing 'light ... upon the problem that *I touched* on the first page ...'¹⁸² While the emotions, events and attachments of the past evidently do leave a 'trace' across time, the unsettled temporality of 'A Sketch of the Past' compels us to imagine this disjunctive 'something' as not the residue of trauma's past, as if the 'touch' of time must be fully 'laid ... to rest' through writing, but, to paraphrase Cixous, as part of the ongoing 'challenge' of 'giv[ing] ... life' to new writings and readings in the hybrid present.

¹⁸¹ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), p.150-152.

¹⁸² 'Sketch', p.82; p.85. Italics my own.

4. 'A Kindly Fiction': Denise Riley's Poetry and *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (2012)

Denise Riley is a contemporary poet and philosopher, known for early poetic works associated with 1970s British female experimentalism and small press publication, as well as for her materialist histories of 'woman' and theoretical investigations into language and subjectivation. Early poetic works such as *Marxism for Infants* (1977) and *No Fee* (1978), the latter co-authored with publisher and poet Wendy Mulford, explore the gendered interpellation of subjectivity and the socio-economic conditions of community and care, 'the fine steely wires which run to and fro between love & economics', as Riley writes in 'Affections must not' from *Marxism for Infants*.¹ More recently, and having not published a new poem since 2000 – it was thought Riley had 'abandoned the activity' – Riley has gained further acclaim for poetry and prose work written in response to the unexpected death of her adult son, addressed as 'you' or simply 'J'.²

'A Part Song', which was first published in the *London Review of Books* in 2012 and later collected in Riley's latest collection, *Say Something Back* (2016), is a series of twenty poems, of four to fourteen lines, that address the dead boy; bewail his 'shiny crimson unresponse'; express death's absurdity through occasional comedic moments; and demand that the dead son return or respond ('Come home I tell you / And end this tasteless melodrama – quit / Playing dead at all, by now it's well beyond / A joke').³ Riley's recent prose work, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (2012), is considered an accompaniment and companion piece to the poetic sequence, and it details, in dated diaristic entries or fragments, Riley's three-year experience of arrested time during her bereavement. The production of a poetry *and* a prose work in response to loss is itself of note: Peter Riley suggests that 'A Part Song' demonstrates 'its own necessity beyond what prose can perform' in relation to loss, the poetic work being 'an extra, a thing not demanded by any rational sense of [the] completion' of

¹ Denise Riley, *Selected Poems 1976-2016* (London: Picador, 2019), p.22.

² Peter Riley, 'Denise Riley's Force of Bereavement', *Fortnightly Review* (2012) [<https://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/2012/03/denise-riley-force-of-bereavement/#fn-6541-1>] (Accessed 26th September 2019).

³ *Selected*, p.141.

mourning, while for Georgina Colby the absence of lyric sequence in *Time Lived* attests aptly to the non-sequential nature of Riley's state of a-chronicity after loss.⁴

Associated thus with the writing of loss and temporal arrest, in *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* Riley nevertheless explicitly refuses the dictions of mourning and trauma. As I argue in this chapter, Riley thereby enables an encounter with the pain of loss beyond influential paradigms of privacy and unsharability in relation to loss and the pain of others. While, as Judith Butler writes, grief is a state assumed to be personal, privatising, and therefore depoliticising, Riley's response to loss in *Time Lived* entails an almost immediate imaginative encounter with others, in a gesture toward the 'transpersonal' sharing of death and bereavement.⁵ Drawing out the implications of Riley's imagined empathetic encounter, this chapter departs from the interpretation that Riley's work contains 'an echo of trauma ... [which] will never go away' as well as a 'turn[ing] away from mass politics ... toward the capacity of the individual to bear and deflect personal harm'.⁶ *Time Lived* demands a further movement be made, borne out of loss, toward a shared 'literature of consolation'.⁷ Despite, at this point, the dearth of scholarly work on *Time Lived*, Colby has worked to draw out the implications of intimacy between the living and the dead for Riley, focussing in particular on her use of simile as 'a mode of inscribing the ineffable'.⁸ Attention in this chapter turns instead to the parallel strand of encounter at work in *Time Lived*, that amongst the living themselves, as altered by proximity to death and loss. Rather than postulate ineffability, this chapter argues away from psychoanalytically orthodox ideas of unspeakable experience that may only be represented retroactively or repeated symptomatically. The 'linguistic limits' upon which the communicability of loss depend are not therefore inherent, but mutable and a matter of perception. Indeed, Riley writes *Time Lived* in recognition of a state that, while it is 'rare[ly]' addressed in published accounts, is 'common enough

⁴ Riley, 'Force of Bereavement'; n.p.; Georgina Colby, 'Imaginary Intimacies: Death and New Temporalities in the Work of Denise Riley and Nicholas Royle', *New Formations*, 89/90 (Autumn/Winter 2016), pp.170-191, p.181.

⁵ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), p.22; Denise Riley, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (London: Picador, 2019), p.84.

⁶ Andrea Brady, 'Echo, Irony, and Repetition in the Writings of Denise Riley', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 7:3 (November 2013), pp.138-156, p.140.

⁷ Riley, *Time Lived*, p.74.

⁸ Colby, 'Imaginary Intimacies', p.182.

and capable of being openly discussed'.⁹ Focusing upon *Time Lived* thus allows me to argue that the loneliness of the contemporary bereaved subject, as experienced by Riley, is not due to any inherent isolation in loss but the social paradigm of unsharability and unimaginability surrounding loss, which Riley in response to loss urges us to overcome.

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'There's no specific noun for a parent of a dead child; nothing like the terms for other losses such as "orphan" or "widower" ... For such a historically common condition as outliving your own child, the vocabulary is curiously thin'.¹⁰ Pointing to a scarcity of words and material in relation to her particular form of loss, as will be elaborated on in due course, Riley's reference to naming and namelessness recalls earlier aspects of her work on language and interpellation.

In theoretical works such as '*Am I That Name?*' *Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (1988), and '*Is There Linguistic Guilt?*' (1997), Riley stresses the Althusserian tableau of interpellation as a calling-into-being of the subject in language, an account in which, according to Riley's rendition, the female subject is called-out with gendered hostility, whereby 'naming conveys being by issuing an aggressive charge against its addressee'.¹¹ It therefore becomes the task of poetry and the poet to reconcile the double bind of subjectivation, which is to say 'the task of rethinking the lyric self while retaining the potential for subject constitution that the speaking "I" opens'.¹² The hostile charge of interpellation, according to Riley's theoretical understanding, finds particular force and historical-situatedness in Riley's recollection of her own past in her memoir '*Waiting*' (1985). In '*Waiting*', the adopted protagonist (Riley as a child) is referred to in the third person by the memoir's narrator (Riley), as well as by her adoptive parents, who refer to the young Riley as 'She'. 'To think that your name was She until you were about four', Riley writes.¹³ The dehumanising 'She' of

⁹ Riley, *Time Lived*, p.15; p.58-59.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.17.

¹¹ Denise Riley, '*Is There Linguistic Guilt?*', *Critical Quarterly*, 39:1 (1997), pp.75-110, p.83; Denise Riley, '*Am I That Name?*' *Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1988), p.97. On Althusserian interpellation from a feminist perspective see also chapter four of Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (California: Stanford University Press, 1997).

¹² Linda Kinnahan, 'Experimental Poetics and the Lyrics in British Women's Poetry: Geraldine Monk, Wendy Mulford, and Denise Riley', *Contemporary Literature*, 37:4 (1996), pp.620-670, p.626. An important body of work on this period of British poetry is *New British Poetries 1970-1990: The Scope of the Possible*, ed. Robert Hampson and Peter Barry (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

¹³ '*Waiting*', p.238.

childhood harm is however ironically repeated by the older Riley, invested in evading disciplinary naming through poetic and creative work.¹⁴ For, in addition to being constituted by forces of hostility that precede the subject, Riley claims that ‘I also decide to take on this categorisation, however vexing, as my project – I also want to make something out of it – [and] then something very different is happening through that act of consent that I undertake’.¹⁵

If, in this respect, repetition and recitation can produce transformative difference, in ‘Waiting’ Riley also stresses that ‘There is cruelty which cannot be dissolved into history or sympathetic sociology’, suggesting a (traumatic?) remainder that cannot be beneficially integrated within the story of the self.¹⁶ If, according to Virginia Woolf in *her* autobiographical work ‘A Sketch of the Past’ (1939/1940), pain can be ‘take[n] away’ by the ‘strongest pleasure’ of writing, as explored in chapter three, for Riley in ‘Waiting’ ‘No ameliorating reconstruction’ of the past ‘is possible’, and ‘[t]o claim “understanding” would be a kindly fiction. I understand nothing, and refuse to’.¹⁷ In this chapter, and across this thesis, I argue for *kindly fictions* – that is, the past *can* be creatively reworked in the present. As underscored in my Introduction, the very *fictionality* of the encounter with loss, that Riley here refuses, can avoid uncritical assumptions of empathy, and mitigate ideas of “unimaginable” loss, that Riley will herself come to critique.¹⁸ Yet it is nevertheless the case that Riley, in ‘Waiting’ and elsewhere, stands against any ameliorating pleasures associated with textual or creative reconstruction. Positing in ‘Waiting’ a residual ‘cruelty’ that refuses narrative integration and socialisation, Riley contrives directly the purpose and promise of memoir as, according to Roger Luckhurst, ‘a redemptive account of how the post-traumatic self might be re-configured around its woundedness’.¹⁹ Rather for Riley, the subject is ‘irrevocably wounded’ by hostile interpellation.²⁰ And while poetry might display its own necessity, as noted by Peter Riley above, works by Riley,

¹⁴ *Selected*, p.3; Brady, ‘Echo, Irony’, p.139.

¹⁵ Denise Riley, ‘Historic Passions: Reflections in the Archive?’, *History Workshop Journal*, 44 (Autumn 1997), pp. 238-242, p.241.

¹⁶ Denise Riley, ‘Waiting’, *Truth, Dare or Promise: Girls Growing Up in the Fifties*, ed. Liz Heron (London: Virago, 1985), pp.237-248, p.247-248.

¹⁷ Virginia Woolf, ‘A Sketch of the Past’, *Moments of Being: Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Jeanna Schulkind (London: Pimlico, 2002), p.85; Riley, ‘Waiting’, p.247-248.

¹⁸ Riley, *Time Lived*, p.18.

¹⁹ Roger Luckhurst, ‘Reflections on Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking*’, *New Formations*, 67 (Summer 2009), pp.91-100, p.91.

²⁰ ‘Historic Passions’, p.241.

such as 'Cruelty without beauty' from *Mop Mop Georgette* (1993), nevertheless expose wounds that the speaker doesn't even want to work through. Here is the beginning of the poem:

Go on working around my hairline with a blade
and all you'll come to is a white sheen of bone
and all that would tell you is that I'm, what else,
human. I can tell you that now. Don't make
yourself into such a fine instrument of knowledge
that you slice uselessly back into your own hand
shocking yourself. There is a body, or soul, under
your skin too, but you won't assuage your doubts
about it by unpeeling me; no, that will uncover nothing
but your worse original anxiety. If I speak with formal
heaviness, that's the weigh of stiff grief bending down
leaves, and the mid rain spotting their dust into rings.
No I don't much like this bland authoritative tone either
but it is what I took from years of reworded loss.
So if my skin slid downwards to the ground
you would see only a standing pillar of blood.
Believe that this would be true also of you ...²¹

In this poem (excerpted here), woundedness does not give rise to reconfiguration, but rebounds upon the attempt to redeem knowledge or beauty from cruelty. The anatomist/analyst tries to expose and penetrate the other, but uncovers only the universally obvious; inflicts a deeper wound; or is cut open in turn. The poem appears to refute subjective interiority as such, and thus the psychoanalytic project understood as the identification and verbalisation of unconscious motivations.²² Thus, against *both* melancholic interiorisation *and* psychoanalytic decathexis via

²¹ *Selected*, p.91.

²² As expressed in Freud's well known phrase 'Where Id was, Ego shall be'. Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, The Pelican Freud Library, Vol. 2 (London: Penguin, 1973), p.112.

symbolic repetition, in ‘Cruelty without beauty’, beneath human skin and bone, there is neither unconscious nor Id nor internalised lost other but, phenomenologically, ‘only a standing pillar of blood’ that is, as Riley writes elsewhere, ‘clean of all depths ... no darkly glowing cavity stuffed with dreaming secrets’.²³ For Riley, there is ‘unexpected relief’ in this refusal of subjective interiority, perhaps because of the suggestion that one need no longer work through the emotional residue of past experience – because there is none.²⁴ Thus, the poetic speaker’s ‘bland authoritative tone’ of ‘formal / heaviness’, associated with the ‘weight of stiff grief bending down’, is a cold ‘clinic voice’ that finally gets ‘drop[ped]’ – the ‘years of reworded loss’ (years of analysis?) have not worked – in favour of the ‘hot scowl’ of lyric ‘rage’, as the poem continues. According to which, wounds are not worked through but flaunted and, as the poem goes on, are left ‘weeping / open’. ‘Show your wound: Ah yes mine’s deeper’.²⁵

By the end of ‘Cruelty without beauty’ the ‘wound’ coagulates without healing, the ending asserting raw exposure and a ‘deadly / wish’:

Crows in the wood

Faced to the wind, pinned on high branches. Dark
blobs. Clacks on the wind. The drumming light.
Yet no one should say to me, Nothing’s enough
for you, ever. But I do want to kill and die.²⁶

Despite the ‘hot scowl’ of the lyrical force against the cold ‘clinic voice’ of analysis, the poem does not resolve for reader or poetic speaker, as violence and desire remain unworked through until the end.

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²³ *Ibid.*, p.91; Denise Riley, ‘Is There Linguistic Guilt?’, *Critical Quarterly*, 39:1 (1997), pp.75-110, p.81.

²⁴ In ‘Is There Linguistic Guilt?’ Riley recounts her ‘unexpected relief’ upon first seeing Damien Hirst’s sculpture *Mother and Child Divided* (1993) which displays the four halves of a cow and calf bisected and preserved in formaldehyde – like the ‘standing pillar[s] of blood’ (and guts) in ‘Cruelty without beauty’, ‘neither the dead cow nor the dead calf’s skull offered the least vacant space for the soul or the unconscious, for all was crammed full of pallid organs, right up to the edge of the skin’ (*Ibid.*, p.81).

²⁵ *Selected*, p.92.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.92.

Repetition may not assuredly heal, and working through may be starkly refused as per my reading of ‘Cruelty without beauty’ above, but we can also ask what it is Riley ‘does’ with such woundedness. If ‘Cruelty without beauty’ goes so far as to put the reader ‘in psycholinguistic harm’s way’, the conditions and overcoming of *social* harm are at stake in other poems (and explored in Riley’s theoretical, historically materialist prose writings).²⁷ The following, from *Marxism for Infants*, serves to illustrate the tentative movement out toward others that, as this chapter will come to elaborate, characterises Riley’s response to loss in *Time Lived, Without Its Flow*:

You have a family? It is impermissible.

There is only myself complete and arched

like a rainbow or an old tree

with gracious arms descending

over the rest of me who is the young

children in my shelter who grow

up under my leaves and rain

In our own shade

we embrace each other gravely &

look out tenderly upon the world

seeking only contemporaries

and speech and light, no father.²⁸

The poem interrogates the different modes of self as an originary sociality in a feminised community (of mother and children). ‘There is only myself’ and yet ‘me ... is the young / children in my shelter’: ‘me’ becomes ‘our own’ and ‘we’ ‘look out tenderly upon the world’, seeking likeness/lightness.

While the self is a sociality or ‘shelter’ for others who need tenderness and care, a sense of loneliness

²⁷ Deveson, ‘Affect’, p.156. In *War in The Nursery*, Riley presents a materialist history of childcare and motherhood in the context of post-war British childcare provision. Denise Riley, *War in The Nursery: Theories of the Child and Mother* (London: Virago, 1983).

²⁸ *Selected*, p.12.

remains: the social space of the family, in particular the single mother household, is separate or excluded from the broader sociality of others who are afforded agency in defining what counts as ‘contemporary’ – and indeed this family is ‘impermissible’ for there is ‘no father’.²⁹ The mother-as-sheltering-tree offers ‘shade’ and ‘shelter’ but no roots or embeddedness socio-economically, which brings out the ambivalence of Riley’s poem in contrast to other readings: the rootless old tree is a fragile shelter and a ‘rainbow’ hard to reach, ever receding.³⁰

However, the poem still strains toward ‘speech and light, no father’: the feminised ‘we’ of mothers and children ‘look[s] out’ for a socio-symbolic alternative to the ‘gravely’ enclosed orders of kinship, property and possession (‘family’ as that which you ‘have’), and the corresponding ‘law’ of the father that, elsewhere, *Marxism for Infants* ‘refuses’.³¹ Writing in *History Workshop Journal* in 1997, Riley describes ‘those ferociously ingenious struggles to find some way of being able to support our children, very often as single mothers, while refusing to become abject, refusing to abandon hopes for some full and cheerful life with and for those children ... an awkwardly-translated dream of flexibility – impossibilist enough ... but a gesture towards needs and their untidiness’.³² Might the ‘rainbow’ in ‘You have a family?’ relate to that ‘dream of flexibility’ and the hope for a ‘cheerful life’? ‘[A]wkwardly-translated’ perhaps, but a politically mobilising horizon nevertheless.³³

²⁹ Regarding loneliness, see Brady’s crucial work on ‘the loneliness of lyric’ (Brady, ‘Echo, Irony’, p.141-145). Brady writes on Riley in dialogue with the (likewise crucial) work of Samuel Solomon, who theorises Riley’s ‘lonely sociality’ in Samuel Solomon, *Lyric Pedagogy and Marxist-Feminism: Social Reproduction and the Institutions of Poetry* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), esp. p.152-161. Ongoing work by both Brady and Solomon helps to situate Riley’s body of work contextually within the lived socio-historical conditions of 1970s and 1980s Thatcherite England, and the feminist socialist struggles over housing, childcare and the wage therein. (In which respect, as Solomon argues, poetry is saturated with social meaning as opposed to being the site of a pre-social, pre-political moral training (*Ibid.*, p.81; p.87). My work in this chapter should therefore be read alongside that of Brady and Solomon.

³⁰ Solomon reads the ‘rainbow’ of Riley’s poem unambivalently as a stock attribute of motherhood, rather than an indication of the impossible conditions of motherhood, or a political dream/horizon for motherhood (*Ibid.*, p.85).

³¹ There is a question in ‘You have a family ...’ as to whether one can ‘have’ a family at all: the line ‘You have a family?’ repeats an earlier line from *Marxism for Infants* that is also answered in the negative – ‘You have a family, then? No’. The untitled latter poem is not collected in *Selected Poems*. See Denise Riley, *Marxism for Infants* (Cambridge: Street Editions, 1977), n.p. Elsewhere, ‘the law’ (of the father) is ‘refuse[d]’: ‘I won’t place or / describe it It is & refuses the law’ (*Selected*, p.14).

³² ‘Historic Passions’, p.238-239.

³³ The series of mostly untitled poems comprising *Marxism for Infants* may be read as a sustained work rather than a collection of individual lyrics. Riley’s self-citation across poetic and theoretical disciplinary divides (her poems are often quoted and analysed in her theoretical works), and her poetic and theoretical interest in echo, suggest that poems themselves act as porous echoes of each other, ‘such that no effort at writing [the socialised individual] can possibly contain the problem in a single, self-contained lyric’ (Solomon, *Lyric Pedagogy*, p.98-99). However, I disagree with Solomon’s reading of *Marxism for Infants* as ‘numbers in a series best read in

The need for an alternative socio-symbolic perspective, and the seeking out of others that ‘You have a family?’ tentatively expresses, is I suggest likewise evident in Riley’s 2012 essayistic prose work *Time Lived, Without Its Flow*, which tracks Riley’s suspended temporal state after loss from a position of ‘sheer externality’ to one that seeks and enables the consolations of commonality.³⁴ Thus, as will now be demonstrated, Brady’s view that Riley ‘turns away from mass politics and toward the capacity of the individual to bear and deflect personal harm’ can be augmented and revised, as is timely in light of Riley’s more recent work in response to the death of her adult son ‘J’.³⁵

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Namelessness, as in the namelessness of the adopted child ‘She’, is a condition to which Riley returns later in life, after the death of her son.³⁶ Related to such namelessness is the condition of timelessness that loss inaugurates for Riley. *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* is Riley’s attempt to convey ‘this extraordinary feeling of a-temporality’ that falls upon the mother after the death of her son, for whom it is as if ‘You share in the death of your child’, ‘A vicarious death. If a sheet of blackness fell on him, it has fallen on me too. As if I also know that blackness after his loss of consciousness’.³⁷ Riley’s shift from ‘blackness’ to ‘blankness’ marks linguistically the loss of consciousness, a fading out to nothing. The bereaved mother is desolate and alone, ‘Wandering around in an empty plain’, a state of inner emptiness that is reproduced externally, ‘as if an enormous drained landscape lying behind your eyes had turned itself outward’.³⁸ Yet while words might mark Riley’s ‘blankness’, it is precisely language

quick succession’ (*Ibid.*, p.98). Riley’s comment at a reading at the Cambridge Poetry Festival that ‘I want to read a poem of mine that goes on for fifteen minutes. It’s called *Marxism for Infants*’ suggests that the poem/s are a matter of duration not division. Emphasising *the time it takes* to read her poem/s out loud, a poem that ‘goes on’, suggests to me the way in which the poem/s take up time and space rather than how they can be codified or counted *within* time and space, as an ordered telos of numerical sequence, rapidly read. Indeed, the original Street Editions publication has no page numbers. In which sense, the poem/s persist after the duration of reading and endure ‘after the silence’ of the speaker: ‘after the silence / and does try and will try / and the past weight and the future’, as it goes at the end of *Marxism for Infants*, stretching the poem on toward the time ‘after’ it is finished (*Marxism*, n.p). Further, Riley’s emphasis on temporal ‘weight’ implies a heavy being-in-time, perhaps even an *embodied* time, recalling my work in this thesis on the physicality of Woolf’s queer temporal touch, more than it does a quick movement through time. On Riley’s interest in echo, see ‘Affections of the Ear’, *Selected*, p.116; and Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (California: Stanford University Press, 2000), p.116.

³⁴ *Time Lived*, p.25.

³⁵ Brady, ‘Echo, Irony’, p.140.

³⁶ *Time Lived*, p.17.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.14. p.20; p.28.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.25.

that fails to express the arrested time of loss, given the imbrication of narrative in linear time: ‘A summer has gone, a cold autumn is setting in, but I’ve no sense of my time as having any duration, or any future. Time now is a plateau. I only know whether an event came before or after the date of the death’.³⁹ If ‘A-temporality brings with it then a cessation of narrative time’, as Colby has explicated, how then, as Riley asks, could ‘such a striking condition ever be voiced?’:

This ‘arrested time’ is also a question about what is describable; about the linguistic limits of what can be conveyed. I’m not keen on conceding to any such limits. Yet it seems that the possibilities for describing, and the kinds of temporality that you inhabit, may be intimately allied. For there do turn out to be ‘kinds’, in the plural’.⁴⁰

In which respect, it is noteworthy that *Time Lived* is written by Riley, the poet, in prose. In a 1995 interview with Romana Huk, Riley speaks of the lyric as able to ‘carry a savagely distressed content’ as if, according to Huk, lyric functions ‘for all its decorative fragility, as a kind of platform covering darker, unspeakable things’.⁴¹ The sudden death of one’s child may be traumatic content that cannot be covered over. Lyric sound implies sequence as one sound leans towards another, ‘anticipating and promising it’, sound being thus ‘the natural ally or shelter of the sequential or consecutive’.⁴² The loss of a child shatters the shelter of sequence: ‘Apparently almost half a year has gone by since J disappeared, and it could be five minutes or half a century, I don’t know which. There is very little movement’.⁴³ Gone is the promise implied in lyric sequence, and along with it any politically hopeful futurity gleaned from the figure of the child: the ‘old tree’ related to motherhood in Riley’s earlier poem ‘You have a family?’, as analysed above, is now ‘cut down’ as ‘the time of your child ... quietly uncoiling inside your own ... is cut away by its death, [and] your doubled inner time ... “untimely ripped”’ ... The severance of the child’s life makes a cut through your own’.⁴⁴ Thus, where Carol Watts discovers in Riley’s lyric mode the site of a ‘working through’ (of Riley’s gendered

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.26.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.14; Colby, ‘Intimacies’, p.174.

⁴¹ Romana Huk, ‘In Conversation with Denise Riley’, *PN Review*, 21:5 (1995) [https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=1912]. [Accessed October 3rd 2019].

⁴² *Time Lived*, p.70-71.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.23.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.20; p.50. On the Child as figure for futurity see Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

linguistic designation and its failure to fully account for subjectivity), such a reading is inadequate to the experience of arrested time described in *Time Lived, Without Its Flow*.⁴⁵ ‘Working through’ is precisely that which *Time Lived* contests insofar as, for the mother of a dead child, there is no time left through which to work:

To tell someone with a dead child, ‘You should move on’ is doubly thoughtless because there’s no medium left through which to move anywhere. We were drifting through our former time like underwater creatures furnished with gills that they didn’t notice they had, until they were fished up out of their element and their breathing apparatus failed.⁴⁶

Remarkable here is Riley’s refusal of the dictates of mourning and moving on. *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* is an ‘essay about the being of grief’ that at the same time explicitly differentiates itself from ‘this so-called “work of grief”’.⁴⁷ Composed of a collection of intermittent notations, the diaristic entries of *Time Lived* were written by Riley in the immediate aftermath of death and loss, to which Riley has added a preface and postscript written some years later ‘about what I’ve had to learn about living in arrested time’.⁴⁸ Recalling the hybrid form of Woolf’s ‘A Sketch of the Past’, *Time Lived* demonstrates, on the one hand, the desire to make meaning out of loss through writing and, on the other hand, the difficulty of confining the experience of bereavement to generic and temporal categories. The notations begin ‘Two weeks after the death’ and yet continually attest to the difficulty of narrative and notation, whether through the infrequency of Riley’s entries; her grappling with the namelessness of her state and how to ‘characterise’ it; the implausibility of recounting what is going on in written form; or through the repeated appeal to simile, ‘These skeins of “as ifs”’ which help to provide a ‘sheltering thicket’ for the bereaved.⁴⁹

Stating in the preface that ‘The prospect of recounting [the experience of arrested time] in a written form stayed, for me, both repugnant and implausible for well over two and a half years after

⁴⁵ Carol Watts, ‘Beyond Interpellation? Affect, Embodiment and the Poetics of Denise Riley’, *Contemporary Women’s Poetry: Reading/Writing/Practice*, ed. Alison Mark and Deryn Rees-Jones, p.158.

⁴⁶ *Time Lived*, p.41.

⁴⁷ Max Porter in Introduction to *Ibid.*, p.3; *Time Lived*, p.21.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.54.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.17; p.16; p.48; p.46. On Riley’s use of simile in *Time Lived* see Colby, p.177-179.

the death', Riley places a question over the written notations that follow.⁵⁰ Beginning these '*Two weeks after the death*', it is as the notations themselves occupy a position outside of temporal or formal designation, refusing to partake of duration or narrative explication. To inscribe loss in narrative time would involve for Riley the 'acceptance' of loss, implying a binaristic paradigm of loss that Riley's position of 'knowing and not knowing' not only complicates but, as Riley writes five months after the death, is itself 'useful, for it allows the truthful richness of all those shades of acknowledging and dissenting ... – so many distinctions, all of them nicely in play'.⁵¹ Yet while 'You can't, it seems, take the slightest interest in the activity of writing unless you possess some feeling of futurity', since 'Narrating would imply at least a hint of "and then" and "after that"', futurity being precisely what is suspended under conditions of a-temporality, it is nevertheless the event of death, instigator of a-temporality, that provides Riley with the paradoxical starting point from which her writing may begin.

The title of each entry in *Time Lived* is the time elapsed since 'the date of the death' (for example, '*One month after the death*'; '*Six months after*'; '*Two years after*'; '*Two and a half years later*').⁵² The date of the death is privileged over the death itself since 'He is not dead to me' (more like 'vanished').⁵³ The use of the definite article rather than the possessive pronoun expresses the struggle of conventional grammar to accommodate death, the presence implied in the structures of language at tension with the absence of the dead. The tension between language and death, the 'crisis of the referent', engenders literary experimentalism, as argues Colby.⁵⁴ Riley's statement that 'Even the plainest "he died" is a strange sentence, since there's no longer a human subject to sustain that "he"' closely parallels the question posed by Roland Barthes, on October 29th 1977, in his own *Mourning Diary* (1977).⁵⁵ Published posthumously in 2009, *Mourning Diary* is written – like *Time Lived* – in the immediate wake of death and loss (of Barthes's mother), and as a series of apparently rapidly written dated notations: 'In the sentence "She's no longer suffering", to what, to whom does

⁵⁰ *Time Lived*, p.16.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.23-24.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.26.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.42; p.27.

⁵⁴ Colby, 'Imaginary Intimacies', p.175.

⁵⁵ *Time Lived*, p.61.

“she” refer? What does that present tense mean?”.⁵⁶ As with the insistence in *Time Lived* upon the ‘after’(math) of loss, according to which death overshadows and prohibits the present which would move continually on into the future, *Mourning Diary* is written over the course of two years, and yet gives rise to temporalities of recurrence and repetition: Barthes wrote his entries (which are frequently no more than a sentence or paragraph, if even a sentence) upon small square slips of paper, writing several each day, each slip of paper dated at the top. The impression for the reader turning the pages is therefore of a day that will not pass, a loss that cannot be mourned. In which regard, Barthes’s and Riley’s mourning diaries both inscribe immobility and ‘a pure repetition of the instant’, the latter in its attention to the period ‘after’ death and loss whereby the very before-after relation is made redundant, because one is ‘living in this instant’.⁵⁷ There is no ‘after’ loss because the loss saturates present and future. Indeed, the mother ‘shares’ in the death of the son (more on which to come). The futurity implied by the diary form is thus denied, and mourning will not be made into an object of narrative.⁵⁸

However, once *reread*, a diary no longer occupies the instant. In which sense mourning ‘gradually succumbs to a historical development, or narrative’.⁵⁹ Aligning with Woolf, Riley insists that one *is* time, ‘Time “is” the person. You’re soaked through with it’, in which respect the retrospective gaze upon the past implied by memoir is impossible to achieve.⁶⁰ Yet Riley’s writing of *Time Lived*, and inclusion of preface and postscript, mean that the work itself occupies more than one temporality, including Riley’s notations ‘after’ loss *and* her reflections upon her response to loss, from a somewhat separate temporal position. (Both analyst and analysand then, like Woolf.) The eventual movement from ‘*after the death*’ to ‘*later*’, important in this respect, signifies the gradual

⁵⁶ Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Notting Hill Editions, 2011), p.15.

⁵⁷ *Time Lived*, p.53.

⁵⁸ As Antoine Compagnon writes of *Mourning Diary*. Antoine Compagnon, ‘Writing Mourning’, *Textual Practice*, 30:2, (2016), pp.209-219, p.211.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.214. Indeed *Mourning Diary* leads Barthes to writing *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980), which I have discussed in chapter one in terms of mourning the object that at the same time one can or will not approach. Thus Barthes writes ‘this book around *maman*’: ‘around’ – as in, moving around, not quite encountering, the tangential approach to the object that inscribes an empty space, again as analysed in chapter one of this thesis. ‘I transform “Work” in its analytic meaning (the Work of Mourning, the Dream-Work) into the real “Work” – of writing’. Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, p.134.

⁶⁰ *Time Lived*, p.52.

uncoupling of death from inscription.⁶¹ That is, Riley's writing of arrested time has made a difference over time. But what is this difference?

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For Riley, the difference of writing is not to do with the work of mourning, nor is the belated temporality expressed in *Time Lived* a form of traumatic temporality. 'This state is physically raw, and has nothing whatever to do with thinking sad thoughts or with "mourning"'.⁶² Whilst 'you feel that the spirit of the child has leaped into you', Riley's experience is likewise not easily characterised as a melancholic interiorisation of the other, since 'it's also something removed from any direct "identification"'.⁶³ Further, 'Because I'm considering a state [outliving one's child] that's not rare, but for many is lived daily, I shan't be having recourse to the diction of "trauma". And whether it might be considered to fall within the compass of pathology doesn't greatly bother me here'.⁶⁴ Riley is clear that existing discourses of loss and trauma do not account for the arrested time of the bereaved, which has 'nothing to do with "mourning"' as you might have once fancied it', nor is it enough to state 'that your sense of time is "distorted". What's changed is more radical than that. Simply, you are no longer *in time*'.⁶⁵ The state of a-temporality of the bereaved is not rare according to Riley, yet the literature on it is: 'Whatever's the name' for the experience of arrested time itself; 'What then do we call [it] ...?'; 'Wherever can you find written accounts of this lived time without consequence? It's rare'.⁶⁶

Part of Riley's contention in *Time Lived* is that a 'literature of consolation' is needed, and that 'we might reconsider the possibility of [such] a literature ..., what that could be or what it might do':

[S]o very little seems to have been published about the effects of a child's sudden death on the experienced time of those left living. While through the usual memorial outlets, most published expressions of sentiment tend to be highly convention-bound. Neither this

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.42-43.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p.28.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.20; p.48.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.7.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.53; p.41.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.45; p.48; p.40.

descriptive silence nor this sweetened overlay is surprising, if you think of the impassable structural barriers to telling.⁶⁷

This thesis has thus far indicated how the ‘structural barriers to telling’ trauma, death and loss are variously breached or set in motion by Cixous, Rhys, and Woolf, contributing in this way to the reconsideration of the ‘literature of consolation’ that Riley, in *Time Lived*, is seeking (and enacting, as will become clear). A-temporality itself contributes to the discussion of the previous chapter in which Woolf disorganises unidirectional understandings of time, drawing attention ‘to the side’ of temporal logics of inevitability. Writing six months after the death of her son, Riley concurs: ‘I am inching along. But not forward, or in any other decipherable direction. If it’s crabwise, then it’s without effective pinchers’.⁶⁸ However, Woolf’s appeal to metaphoricity is shattered for Riley in the wake of loss: recalling Woolf’s representation of the river of the past (according to which Woolf’s own positionality – is she inside or outside the story she is telling? – remained undecidable), Riley writes ‘If time was once flowing, extended, elongated – a river, a road, a ribbon – now the river is dammed, the road blocked, the ribbon slashed. Well-worn metaphors all shot to pieces’.⁶⁹ Nor will negation do (such as Woolf’s use of apophasis).⁷⁰

Clearly, the question remains for Riley as to how the non-hegemonic state of the bereaved can be translated into actual or emancipatory social conditions of consolation or amelioration (that is, how the ‘crabwise’ movement can be given ‘effective pinchers’), especially given the ‘deep tiredness’ of the bereaved ‘as if sharing [the] grave’ of the dead.⁷¹ Riley’s answer is, however, located precisely in the state of sharing. While Colby has already considered the intimacy between the living and the dead in *Time Lived*, here I take up the question of sharing between the living and the bereaved. For Riley’s response to loss in fact entails the cultivation of empathy and solidarity, the ‘enlargement of human sympathy’ that for Riley follows from loss, entailing the compassionate capacity to imagine or share

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.65-68.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.29.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.42.

⁷⁰ The performative use of apophasis, which is affirmation through negation as seen regarding Woolf in chapter three, will not do for Riley for whom ‘negatives are true but unhelpful’ (*Ibid.*, p.34).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.29.

in the loss and suffering of even distant others.⁷² While the ethical efficacy of empathy ought not to be assumed, Riley refuses to vicariously identify with the loss and suffering of others, but at the same time does not deem others' suffering ineffable, unthinkable or beyond encounter. Against the 'disavowal of the possibility of empathy' that Riley detects in the formulaic expressions of kindly onlookers, such as "I can't imagine what you are feeling", I argue that Riley cultivates empathetic imagination as a counter to the assumed (however kindly) unsharability of loss.⁷³

For according to Riley, in contemporary culture in the twenty-first century the bereaved are consigned to the "unimaginable", the response to loss and death is (as above) silence or the 'sweetened overlay' of convention-bound sentiment.⁷⁴ Likewise, 'Your very *will to tell*' of loss 'is sapped, because you sense that your most determined efforts can't reach others'.⁷⁵ On the instinctive use by 'kindly onlookers' of the formula "I can't imagine what you are feeling", Riley writes that 'There's a paradox in this remark, for it's an expression of sympathy, yet in the same breath it's a disavowal of the possibility of empathy'.⁷⁶ While vicarious identification with loss and trauma ought not to be assumed, Riley contends that those at a distance from loss might therefore 'try to imagine; it's not so difficult. Even if it's inevitable, or at any rate unsurprising, that those with dead children are regarded with concealed horror, they don't need to be further shepherded into the inhuman remote realms of the "unimaginable"'.⁷⁷ Riley's use of 'you' is thus an appeal that 'reaches' the other of the reader, an appeal to the imagination. This is a question of the 'compass' of the 'discussable': if Riley is to convey her experience of loss 'you'd need to admit this strangeness fully into the compass of the discussable. Perhaps there may be at least a half-tellable ordinariness here. This demands witness'.⁷⁸ Riley therefore writes toward the recognition of a state which is 'common enough and capable of being openly discussed', contra the psychoanalytic orthodoxy of unspeakable and ineffable traumatic experience that may only be represented retroactively and symptomatically.⁷⁹ The 'linguistic limits'

⁷² *Ibid.*, p.22.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.18.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.65; Colby, 'Intimacies', p.172.

⁷⁵ *Time Lived*, p.65.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.18.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.18.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.47; p.18-19.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.58-59.

upon which the communicability of loss depends are not therefore inherent but mutable, a matter of perception or concession, and Riley is herself clearly ‘not keen on conceding any such limits’.⁸⁰ Additionally, the social norm of the ‘unimaginability’ of another’s loss to which Riley points concedes that loss is all too imaginable. The very presence of the ‘convention’ of sentimental linguistic formulas to respond to loss, to which Riley points, presupposes and partially acknowledges that it is possible to imagine and emotionally share in another’s experience of loss, or else the convention would not be needed or used.⁸¹ *Time Lived* therefore moves from the position of ‘sheer exteriority’ of a-temporality to acknowledging ‘an altered condition of life’ that can – through language, imagination, and empathetic encounter – be shared socially.⁸²

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Time Lived documents a number of encounters whereby the experience of death and loss are given the opportunity to translate (or not) across the ‘structural barriers to telling’ that Riley writes it against.⁸³ Riley’s encounters, in the following examples, point to a breakdown in convention and communication, and thus the need to extend the ‘compass’ of the discussable to include ‘the myriad specificities of different losses’.⁸⁴ For example, Riley writes of one encounter in which the unspeakability of her loss is stark: ‘That first day afterwards, speaking by phone to the funeral director, I needed to yet could not get the word “ashes” out of my mouth without a strenuous physical struggle. “Aa-aassh-aashhes”, came a dry stammer. As if uttered through sawdust’.⁸⁵ Context is crucial here: while we do not know if or how the funeral director replied to Riley in this example (and in this sense the bereaved mother is indeed met with silence insofar as the reader of *Time Lived* is concerned), the context of the call from bereaved mother to funeral director suggests that adequate understanding of loss would likely be in place for the opportunity for empathy to be upheld. The struggle to speak the word that enunciates the state of the dead (‘ashes’) need not pertain to a full breakdown in understanding. The very struggle to speak can offer testimony to loss insofar as the

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.14.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.67.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p.25; p.13.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p.65.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.59.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.44.

living mimic the dead: ‘My jaw must have worked over the word “ashes” like that of a dying fish. Or it must have been as slack as J’s own mouth once the rigor mortis had worn off’.⁸⁶

The paradigm of unspeakability, however, may not itself fit. For the word ‘ashes’ *is* spoken, yet spoken differently. “‘Aa-aassh-aashhes’”. A shift of emphasis is thus required from what is or is not speakable and tellable, to what is hearable or receivable without being shattering.⁸⁷ Despite Riley’s ‘firm intention to speak’, the ‘translation can fail’, thus allowing ‘No passage across the lips, the brain could calmly entertain the word the mouth would not. “‘Aaah-sssh ...” it went. As if it had itself become sifted up thickly with ashes’.⁸⁸ Yet while the sound ‘Aaah-sssh ...’ may not quite ‘translate’ the meaning of ‘ashes’, it does communicate a commonly understood expression of suffering and pain (‘Aaah’). There *is* a ‘passage across the lips’, and this passage resembles the emergence of an altered or nascent language, as if the narrator expresses anew or differently after loss. ‘Ash’ is itself the remainder of an alteration, or a new and different form, related to the possibility of transformation. Rather than diagnose traumatic symptoms of unspeakability then, we can ask what would need to be in place to properly listen to this language. To respond to the struggle to speak without recourse to silence or convention-bound sentiment would mean ‘admit[ting] this strangeness’ between language and loss, admitting the way in which loss alters and extends language, and thereby extending the linguistic ‘compass’ of the discussable so as to sustain social bonds in the wake of loss. Emphasised is the ability of loss to extend language, rather than the rupture of linguistic possibility and representation due to loss.

In a second example of encounter, and the expressive and social translation (or not) of loss, Riley has read the autopsy report of her son’s death and, ‘So that the local surgery could close my son’s file, I take the translated autopsy report to a young GP, who glances at it, then sits with his head in his hands, saying, “I wasn’t trained to deal with this. We didn’t get to read autopsies. This is

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.44-45.

⁸⁷ Jacqueline Rose writes recently of a shift of ground from trauma understood as something that defies representation, an idea ‘which ... has very nearly come to be orthodoxy’, to trauma as that which ‘shatters the very basis of human communication, since there is no one either inside or outside the head to address, no one there to listen’. In this chapter I therefore emphasise the context of listening and communication that must take place if this paradigm of shattering (within which Rose remains, despite the shifting of ground) is not to be sustained. Jacqueline Rose, ‘One Long Scream: On Trauma and Justice in South Africa’, *London Review of Books*, 41:10 (May 2019), pp.10-14.

⁸⁸ *Time Lived*, p.45.

absolutely horrendous”’. In response, Riley does ‘[her] best to reassure him that it’s usual to search out each detail, to try to know. To keep your child company in its death’.⁸⁹ The failure to comprehend, on the part of the other, provokes Riley’s expression of companionship with more radical others – with the dead.⁹⁰ The GP reacts with distress to the autopsy report in a manner likely to compound the distress of the bereaved, yet Riley responds with sympathy and understanding, attempting to reassure, in an imaginative and empathetic (if gendered) movement toward the experience of the unknown other (‘Perhaps he doesn’t yet have children of his own. Or he does’), appealing to shared experience and commonality in loss (‘it’s usual to search out each detail, to try to know’).

This latter example is demonstrative of tensions between medical discourses and the lived experience of pain and suffering. The rise of illness narrative and ‘pathography’ speak to the attempt to bridge the gap between objective and subjective, and thereby better alleviate the experience of suffering, as distinct from pain.⁹¹ While symptoms involving pain may persist, the experience of suffering can be alleviated through the restoration of social bonds and symbolic meaning.⁹² Narrative is crucial to the restoration of meaning and subjectivity, for as already noted ‘what the narrative memoir promises is a redemptive account of how the post-traumatic self might be re-configured around its woundedness’.⁹³ Yet Riley writes away from dictions of trauma ‘to save [her account of loss] from being treated as unapproachable, and exceptional’.⁹⁴ The subject is not reconfigured around an unspeakable wound, but language (and literature) are set in motion by the very struggle to speak.

My comments upon illness and pathography are not to pathologise the response to loss. Rather, there is an overlap in perceptual and ethical problematics arising around experiences of suffering including illness and loss. I took note in chapter three of Woolf’s expression of (temporal)

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.38.

⁹⁰ Colby’s work on *Time Lived* has focused on such ‘imaginary intimacies’. In this chapter, I therefore attend to the imaginary intimacies with the living *as a consequence of death* rather than Riley’s imagined intimacy with the dead.

⁹¹ Ann Hunsaker Hawkins in 1993 coined the term ‘pathography’ in her study of memoirs about the experience of death and disease. Hawkins noted how, after 1950, the illness memoir or ‘pathography’ genre emerged and then accelerated, doubling between 1993 and 1999. Ann Hunsaker Hawkins, *Reconstructing Illness: Studies in Pathography* (IN: Purdue University Press, 1999). Interestingly for my purposes, Hawkins’s work was motivated by her father’s death and was in this sense a work of mourning. As Roger Luckhurst notes, ‘the critical work thus shared the very impulse it sought to analyse’ (Luckhurst, ‘Reflections’, p.91).

⁹² Eric J. Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁹³ Luckhurst, ‘Reflections’, p.91.

⁹⁴ *Time Lived*, p.59.

pain regarding wartime in 'A Sketch of the Past' – the haptic quality of the 'hard thin splinters' to which the experience of past and present is reduced for Woolf during war.⁹⁵ Woolf *attempts* to express this pain, I argued, for pain is inexpressible according to much of Elaine Scarry's analysis.⁹⁶ But this requires reevaluation. Woolf's description of the 'hard thin splinters' of past and present may not straightforwardly transmit the experience of splintering pain, nor even directly express Woolf's state, but Woolf's description does offer an analogy of pain that makes way for an imaginative experience in which pain is registered and, in this way at least, shared. The argument of chapter three itself would suggest that while (temporal) pain may not be inherently meaningful, it is not ineffable and can be given meaning and proximity through writing and language. The political and perceptual problems that arise from the apparent inexpressibility and unsharability of pain, to which Scarry points, may then be the result of choice and sensibility rather than linguistic impossibility or limitation.⁹⁷ Thus Riley – wryly – emphasises the *attempt* that can be made by those at a distance from loss and suffering to 'try to imagine' what is to them "unimaginable" because – simply put – 'it's not so difficult'.⁹⁸

Indeed, if Woolf gives meaning to pain via the imaginative appeal of analogy, pain can be to some extent shared, contra Scarry. Scarry quotes Woolf's 'On Being Ill' (1930) to demonstrate that 'Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned'.⁹⁹ In 'On Being Ill', Woolf – as is widely quoted – contends that English 'which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear has no words for the shiver or the headache ... Let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry'.¹⁰⁰ Yet we remain aware of Woolf's use of apophasis, or affirmation through negation. Both 'A Sketch of the

⁹⁵ Woolf, 'Sketch', p.108.

⁹⁶ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

⁹⁷ Lucy Bending accordingly argues, with reference to Victorian literature and in disagreement with Scarry, that pain is referential and is given meaning through language. Bending argues pain is richly described in literature and is used to describe other things also. Lucy Bending, *The Representation of Bodily Pain in Late Nineteenth-Century English Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

⁹⁸ *Time Lived*, p.18.

⁹⁹ Scarry, *Body in Pain*, p.4.

¹⁰⁰ Virginia Woolf, *On Being Ill* (Massachusetts: Paris Press, 2002), p.6-7.

Past' and Riley's *Time Lived* foreground the fluidity of language and time through water imagery rather than its depletion, such that Riley perceives, two weeks after her son's death, 'how rapidly the surface of the world, like a sheet of water that's briefly agitated, will close again silently and smoothly over a death'.¹⁰¹ Language has not 'run dry' but has been 'briefly agitated' according to Riley, and perception has been altered if not expanded over 'the surface of the world'. Accordingly, Woolf in fact suggests that, while language to adequately express pain may not be readily available, it is possible for such language to be devised for, as Madelyn Detloff puts it, 'sufficient words must be invented through artifice'.¹⁰² Pain, suffering, and the loss of a loved one are distinct if interrelated phenomenal, psychological and emotional states. Yet, contra Scarry's reading, Woolf's indication in 'On Being Ill' that aches and pains can lead to the (re)beginning and futurity of language, can be carried over to my reading of Riley. For Riley herself stresses the physicality of a-temporality in alignment with Woolf's temporal touch: '*Five months after*: ... At first I had to lie down flat for an hour each afternoon, because of feeling crushed as if by a leaden sheet, but by now I don't need to lie down. This slight physical change is my only intimation of time'; '*Six months after*: ... This state is physically raw ... It thuds into you. Inexorable carnal knowledge'; '*Sixteen months after*: Superficially "fine" as my daily air of cheerfulness carries me around with an unseen crater blown into my head'.¹⁰³ A-temporality is taken up by the pained body (indeed Riley reiterates a pregnancy analogy).¹⁰⁴ The very attempt to express the physical quality of loss through simile and structures of imagining ('feeling crushed as if by a leaden sheet'; 'It thuds into you') presupposes the referential proximity between language, pain and loss.

Such proximity produces new sound from which linguistic possibility and sequence may emerge:

¹⁰¹ *Time Lived*, p.20.

¹⁰² Madelyn Detloff, *The Persistence of Modernism: Loss and Mourning in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2009), p.29.

¹⁰³ *Time Lived*, p.23; p.28; p.39.

¹⁰⁴ '*Nine months after*: ... the duration of a pregnancy, since he vanished. As if pregnancy had by now been wound backwards past the point of conception and way into its pre-existence' (*Ibid.*, p.29). Evident is the unruly and non-linear temporality that was crucial to my reading of Cixous's relation to her father's letters in chapter one, and Woolf's conception of the past in chapter three.

There is nothing ready made for [the sufferer of pain]. He is forced to coin words himself, and, taking his pain in one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other (as perhaps the inhabitants of Babel did in the beginning) so to crush them together that a brand new word in the end drops out. Probably it will be something laughable.¹⁰⁵

Beyond Woolf's indication of the dialectical relationship between pleasure and pain that I have likewise drawn attention to in 'A Sketch of the Past' (insofar as, in the above, the experience of pain and suffering elicits 'something laughable', laughter being associated with pleasure), it is not the case in the above that language is destroyed by pain, as Scarry contends, nor is Woolf's nor Riley's state 'anterior to language' (as Scarry contends of Woolf).¹⁰⁶ Both instead emphasise the attempt to imagine and make anew, as indeed does Scarry. However, as indicated by Woolf's 'something laughable' – who is laughing? is laughter aimed *at* the sufferer of pain and their attempt to speak it, from a position of superiority? – suffering, and proximity to the suffering of others, are not ethically unambivalent.

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Against the 'disavowal of the possibility of empathy' that Riley detects in the formulaic expressions of kindly onlookers ("I can't imagine what you are feeling"), she posits the 'instant enlargement of human sympathy' that 'arrived in [Riley] at once' after the premature death of her son.¹⁰⁷ Judith Herman Lewis contends that the restoration of social bonds is key to recovery from loss and trauma. Traumatic events are likely to 'destroy the sustaining bonds between individual and community' but 'the group as a whole has a capacity to bear and integrate traumatic experience that is greater than that of any individual member', since 'each member can draw upon the shared resources of the group to foster her own integration'.¹⁰⁸ Lewis emphasises sharing, although sharing is not simple: 'The destructive potential of groups is equal to their therapeutic promise'.¹⁰⁹ Given the distance between

¹⁰⁵ Woolf, 'On Being Ill', p.11.

¹⁰⁶ On the pleasures of laughter see Stephanie Bird, *Comedy and Trauma in Germany and Austria after 1945: The Inner Side of Mourning* (London: Routledge, 2015), p.7; Scarry, *Body in Pain*, p.4.

¹⁰⁷ *Time Lived*, p.18; p.22.

¹⁰⁸ Judith Herman Lewis, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence* (London: Pandora, 1994), p.215-216.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.217.

spectatorship and suffering, group situations of sharing can end up erecting a ‘dubious hierarchy of grief’ that would quantify and reify losses and identities.¹¹⁰ Riley herself avoids ‘all and any expressed measurements of loss. Never would I compare my state with that of, say, a widow’s. Never would I lay claim to “the worst grief of all”.’¹¹¹ Yet although there is remarkable empathy in Riley’s ‘instant enlargement of human sympathy’, it is not clear that empathy, or sharing pain and suffering, readily translates into action or the alleviation of suffering.

Empathy can involve a projection into the interiority of the other, as if the other is readily occupiable by the (white western) onlooker. According to Susan Sontag, an enlargement of sympathy to those whose family have been ‘obliterated’ by war is unlikely if not impossible for, as Sontag concludes in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), ‘We truly can’t imagine what it was like ... Can’t understand, can’t imagine’.¹¹² Further, the assumed ethical indisputability of empathy can act as a sustaining device for hegemonic forces according to Lauren Berlant. Not only would collective solidarity with suffering others depend upon sentiments gleaned from suffering, thereby sustaining the injustice that leads to structural social harm, but a mischaracterisation occurs regarding the identity of the other whereby ‘what a person is’ is exchanged for ‘what a person becomes in the experience of concrete social negation’.¹¹³ ‘It is also possible’, Berlant continues, ‘that counterhegemonic deployments of pain as the measure of structural injustice actually sustain the utopian image of a homogenous national metaculture, which can look like a healed or healthy body in contrast to the divergently scarred and exhausted ones’.¹¹⁴ In *Time Lived*, Riley ‘demands witness’ to her writing and experience of loss, extending her own capacity to ‘witness’ the suffering of distant others.¹¹⁵ Evidently, however, the ethical efficacy of the witness is not itself assured.

‘Laibach Lyrik: Slovenia 1991’ is Riley’s celebrated poem from *Mop Mop Georgette*. In the poem, Riley warns against the ease with which the outsider to suffering returns to the safe sphere of

¹¹⁰ *Time Lived*, p.49.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.49.

¹¹² Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Other* (London: Penguin, 2003), p.113.

¹¹³ Lauren Berlant, ‘The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and Politics’, *Cultural Studies and Political Theory*, ed. Jodi Dean (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), p.45.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.45.

¹¹⁵ *Time Lived*, p.19.

the same, ‘The usual spectator’s cocky journey home’ from scenes of others’ suffering, while at the same time the poem posits a healthy, national body against the ‘divergently scarred’ nation, identity with which is figured as a ‘*settling scar*’ in the poem.¹¹⁶ The poem shifts from Ljubljana to London, transcribing the voices of displaced Bosnians and Croatians as it questions identity formation through ‘*past damage*’ and national wounding. ‘The deaths of twenty thousand make me this / that I don’t want to be. But that blood lost means I must take that name –’; ‘*A rage to be some wholeness gropes / past damage that it half recalls – / where it was, I will found my name*’.¹¹⁷ The poem then moves from the voices of displaced women to the perspective of the British outsider poetic speaker, who crucially refuses to vicariously identify in the acknowledgment of self-positioning: ‘I’m not these, never could be, am by accident of place of birth protected’.¹¹⁸ While this does project the healed ‘image of a homogenous national metaculture’, it is at the same time precisely because the British lyric speaker is (assumed to be or more likely to be) ‘protected’ as a ‘nation-sheltered onlooker’ that she ‘must try to think’ about the experiences of displaced others, and her own relation to systemic suffering.¹¹⁹ The poetic speaker ‘must try’ to listen to the voices telling the ‘imperfect story’ of ‘present history’, rather than refuse the encounter and take the ‘spectator’s ... journey home through stupidity’: ‘I’m not these, never could be, am by accident of place of birth protected, yet exactly as / this nation-sheltered onlooker, must try to think’.¹²⁰

Riley again underscores the *attempt* to think and imagine the experience of the other. Acknowledging self-positioning, and the shaping of history and identity, ‘Laibach Lyrik’ posits the contingency or ‘accident’ of identity formation within national history, prompting the speaker (and reader?) to trace their own embeddedness in practices that produce the wounding and dislocation of others elsewhere.¹²¹ The ‘nation-sheltered onlooker’ must ‘try to think’ precisely because she *is* a ‘nation-sheltered onlooker’ and so, the poem suggests, is obliged to critique and act against suffering.

¹¹⁶ *Selected*, p.48.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.47-48.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.47.

¹¹⁹ Berlant, ‘True Feeling’, p.45.

¹²⁰ *Selected*, p.47.

¹²¹ History appears as a figure in the room with the displaced women in ‘Laibach Lyrik’, a figure that the poetic speaker can see and (possibly) encounter or communicate with: ‘I’m seeing present history / glance round it for support’. Further the poem ends upon the question ‘*What is it that shapes us [?]*’, asking the reader to answer, to some extent, to their own contingent shaping in nation and history (*Ibid.*, p.47-48).

But equally, she must and can only think ‘exactly *as* / this nation-sheltered onlooker’: the onlooker cannot presume to know the experience of the other and must acknowledge their own location within privileging discourses and the loss-producing practices of nations.¹²²

Refusing to vicariously identify with the loss and suffering of others, ‘Laibach Lyrik’ at the same time does not deem the suffering of others’ ineffable and unthinkable, nor beyond encounter. The complex and shifting positionings and placements of ‘Laibach Lyrik’, in which the lyric speaking ‘I’ moves between national identifications (Bosnian, Yugoslavian, ‘ambiguously Croatian’, to the ‘I’ of the spectator, and finally the ‘we’ of the ‘Illyrian[s]’), suggests that while the ‘nation-sheltered’ onlooker is able to ‘leave’ the scene of suffering and is not at pains to identify with the ‘dictates of those deaths’ elsewhere, an interconnection is acknowledged.¹²³ This presents the possibility of identifications other than assumptions of an all too easy empathy or utter alterity, and away perhaps from history underscored as a cycle of harm with which we are condemned to identify and repeat. Thus, while Brady concludes that for Riley the materiality of words is ‘a poor substitute for the material forces of violence’, it is also the case that, as Riley writes in the poem ‘There aren’t any stories’ from *Say Something Back* (2016), ‘those to whom violence was done aren’t / fated to hand it down’.¹²⁴ The very production by Riley of another poetry collection after the death of her son, and attendant experience of a-temporal suspension, testifies to Riley’s eventual ability to set loss in creative motion, not unlike Barthes whose *Mourning Diary* ‘announces a book to come’, i.e. Barthes final work *Camera Lucida*.¹²⁵ The insight of arrested temporality following loss enables insights of historical agency, contingency and responsibility, and thus the ability to arrest the generational transmission of wounding and harm.¹²⁶

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¹²² *Ibid.*, p.47. Italics my own.

¹²³ *Selected*, p.45-47.

¹²⁴ Brady, ‘Echo, Irony’, p.155; *Selected*, p.150. On generationally ‘handed down’ traumas and the possibility of therapeutic recovery, see also Françoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière, *History Beyond Trauma: Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one cannot stay silent*, trans. Susan Fairfield (New York: Other Press, 2004).

¹²⁵ Compagnon, ‘Writing Mourning’, p.214.

¹²⁶ I would also, however, like to resist the reduction of *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* to a teleological narrative of the poetic work to come, and so would call to mind Cixous’s opened ended promise in *Or, les lettres de mon père* (1997), as discussed in chapter one, according to which writing/reading remains open and unfulfilled.

The attempt to imaginatively encounter the losses of others, which according to Riley in *Time Lived* is ‘not so difficult’, is therefore not without impact – as indeed reading ‘Laibach Lyrik’ or *Time Lived* is not without impact.¹²⁷ Moving from the lyric position of loneliness and loss associated with ‘the isolation and unmet need for response of the lyric subject’, whereby the wounds of the past will not heal, Riley registers a state in which harm is no longer ‘hand[ed] ... down’ but can be communicated *around* a community of others.¹²⁸ Yet, we might still want to ask by way of conclusion, what does it mean that Riley’s empathy is ‘imagined’? ‘Such imagined empathy seals your sense of stopped time’, writes Riley, describing her experience after loss of ‘an imagined solidarity [with other bereaved parents]. I sought them out ... and I listen ardently to how they try to live on’.¹²⁹ In her chapter on pain and imagining, Scarry points to the relation between the imagination and the material. Not only can imagining transform conditions of absence into presence, according to Scarry, but the imaginer capable of ‘picturing, making present, an absent friend’, for example, is also capable of inventing other ideas and material forms capable of ‘transforming the condition of absence into presence’ (such as the telephone).¹³⁰ The capacity to imagine can bring about material change in the world at least modestly for, as Detloff confirms, ‘Although the imagined thing is impossible or unreal, the creative effort nevertheless brings about material change’.¹³¹ This change, related to creative effort, requires movement from imagination to the making of artefacts that can be shared with others:

While imagining may entail a revolution of the entire order of things, the eclipse of the given by a *total reinvention of the world*, an artefact (a relocated piece of coal, a sentence, a cup, a piece of lace) is a *fragment of world alteration*. Imagining a city, the human being ‘makes’ a house; imagining a political utopia, he or she instead helps to build a country; imagining the elimination of suffering from the world, the person instead nurses a friend back to health.

¹²⁷ *Time Lived*, p.18.

¹²⁸ Brady, ‘Echo, Irony’, p.154-155.

¹²⁹ *Time Lived*, p.47; p.27.

¹³⁰ Scarry points to the role of imagination in ‘the deepest events of loss’ and indeed to the role of loss and absence as instigators of the imagination. To imagine an absent friend occurs when the friend is ‘away, lost’: the absence of the friend occasions the ‘introduction of the image’ of the friend into mental life, and while the imagined friend is likely to be ‘barely present’ compared to the ‘real-friend-when-present’, the imagined friend is ‘much more vibrantly present’ compared to the wholly absent or lost friend (Scarry, *Body in Pain*, p.163-164).

¹³¹ Detloff, *Persistence*, p.29.

Although, however, artifice is more modest and fragmentary than imagining, its objects have the immense advantage over imagined objects of being real, and because real, sharable; and because the objects are sharable, in the end artifice has a scale as large as that in imagining because its outcome is for the first time collective.¹³²

Time Lived is a 'real' creative artefact or 'a fragment of world alteration' that can and has been shared ('because real, sharable'). With it, Riley enacts the very 'literature of consolation' that she seeks. As clarified by Max Porter in his introduction and emphasised across this chapter, *Time Lived* emphasises sharing in relation to loss: the 'Sharing time' between the living and the dead, as Colby's contribution has underscored, but also the 'manifestation of care' *Time Lived* proposes amongst the living and bereaved themselves, as contributed and analysed in this chapter. Porter thus describes *Time Lived* as 'a radically kind book' which he 'rushed to share ... with others. That is what it's for'.¹³³

To conclude, the attempt to share in 'The grief of groups, of nation states' may be beyond the scope of any reading, and is open to important ethical critique, just as the translation between self and other 'can fail', as Riley concludes of her 'ashes' example.¹³⁴ Yet the imaginative attempt to encounter and hear the losses of others, and the acknowledgment of self-positioning therein, extends the self beyond isolated limitation, thereby admitting the strangeness of loss into shared and expanded language. Loss is thus 'intermingled with each person' for Riley, 'run[ning] across and between people, so to speak, ... become[ing] transpersonal', which lends a lively motion to loss in contrast to melancholic interiority and identification.¹³⁵ '[P]revious history' can as such be 'reshaped' by loss for Riley, temporality 'becom[ing] demarcated differently': 'boundaries' are not shattered traumatically for Riley following loss, but instead 'are extended by and then after ... death'.¹³⁶ The 'abundance in loss' that *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* ultimately articulates is not held in isolation, nor is it retained through melancholic identification, but is shared in a crucially *imagined* impulse toward even distant others.¹³⁷ Such self-extension is not 'remotely melancholic' for Riley. Returning us once more, then,

¹³² Scarry, *Body in Pain*, p.171.

¹³³ Max Porter in Introduction, *Time Lived*, p.9-10.

¹³⁴ *Time Lived*, p.9-10; p.45.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.84.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.83.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.83-84.

to Hélène Cixous's 'challenge of loss' as established in chapter one, Riley's loss involves a 'fresh kind of "carrying forward"' of the lost object, into the living future.¹³⁸

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.83-84.

Conclusion: ‘Something Else’

I began this thesis with a wager, gamble, or game. As established in chapter one, Hélène Cixous suggests in 1981 that her reader take up the ‘challenge of loss’ according to which one ‘gives [loss] life’.¹ Each chapter has taken up Cixous’s challenge in various ways, giving diverse life to loss. Complicating redemptive accounts of the past and the melancholic sublime, the narrative and textual ‘challenge of loss’ that I have interrogated reveals a response to loss that is grounded in the possibilities and contingencies of the hybrid present, and attempts to encounter loss beyond the ‘impassable structural barriers to telling’.² Broad relevance has thereby been given to my investigations in this thesis, insofar as I argue that the pain of loss can be rearticulated creatively as imaginable and sharable.

While Freud’s ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ (1917) is certainly ‘an essential source of definitions and a model to be revised and challenged’, it is also subject to an internal textual instability regarding the meaning of mourning and melancholia, as my Introduction has worked to show.³ When Freud comes later to rewrite his *own* attitude to loss, after the death of his daughter Sophie, writing that ‘No matter what may fill the gap’ left by loss, ‘even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else’, he perpetuates a promise of possibility through non-identity: while a gap can be ‘filled completely’, ‘something else’ will remain possible, open and different.⁴ Freud writes this on what would have been Sophie’s thirty-sixth birthday.⁵ Virginia Woolf, writing ‘A Sketch of the Past’ in May 1939, similarly comes to realise that it is ‘now almost exactly to a day, forty-four years ago – when my mother died’.⁶ Writing opens – unwittingly? – a space for encountering the ‘something else’ left by loss, without making haste to enclose loss or know what it is. Constituted by difference and oriented toward the future, writing can mitigate the charge of traumatic repetition and arrest: articulating, in Denise Riley’s words, which echo those of Cixous, ‘a

¹ Hélène Cixous, ‘Castration or Decapitation?’, *Signs*, 7:1 (Autumn 1981), pp.41-55, p.54.

² Denise Riley, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (London: Picador, 2019), p.65.

³ Jennifer Rushworth, *Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch, and Proust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p.6.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Letters of Sigmund Freud 1873-1939*, ed. Ernst L. Freud, trans. Tania and James Stern (London: Hogarth Press, 1970), p.386.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.386.

⁶ Virginia Woolf, ‘A Sketch of the Past’, *Moments of Being: Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Jeanna Schulkind (London: Pimlico, 2002), p.91.

recommencing which doesn't entail an imagined restoration or a smoothing over of what is lost ... a return ... [that] won't be an arrival at the same place'.⁷ 'The dead slip away', Riley writes toward the end of *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (2012). 'You would not have wanted this second, now final, loss'.⁸ Troubling trajectories, and so the very capacity to conclude, mourning gives rise to its own losses.

However, and despite an emphasis upon contingency, difference and futurity, some areas of comparison across this thesis have less positive ethical and political potential. While Jean Rhys pushes for an understanding of affect, gender, race and class at the intersection of patriarchy and colonialism, the primary writers under discussion in this thesis can nonetheless suggest an enquiry dominated by white women with relative class privilege, who assume at times an uncritical empathy or overidentification with trauma, loss, and victimhood. Given the scrutiny by Dominick LaCapra and others of contemporary cultural investments in traumatic subjectivities and the appropriation of victimhood by those who are not victims, we would do well to note Angela Carter's criticism of the 'Self-Inflicted Wounds' involved in the mode of writing she felt Rhys typified, whereby womanhood becomes a narrative of abstract harm and passive struggle, in which loss and absence are elided.⁹ Yet as has been shown, the field of enquiry presented in this thesis, while it may not be representative, posits a suggestive space of encounter that does not seek to reify loss or enclose the other within the scope of the same, highlighting instead the importance of self-positioning and instances of comic incongruity and excess, that challenge the melancholic entrenchment of self and situate subjects as agents in narrative and history.

This thesis has shown loss to be playfully set in motion across a diversity of narrative texts, in heterogenous genres and contexts, in so doing disorganising temporal logics of inevitability; displacing exclusionary identifications; and grounding the work, writer, and reader in the pleasures of the present and the potentially emancipatory promise of the future. It is crucial, however, as I have shown in my second chapter, to interrogate the complex meaning of this pleasure, which can

⁷ Riley, *Time Lived*, p.74-76.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.80.

⁹ Edmund Gordon, *The Invention of Angela Carter: The Authorised Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2016), p.217; p.277.

undergird affective economies of social subjection and suffering. Likewise, as I have shown in my final chapter, it is crucial that empathy and solidarity remain critical, in order to obstruct self-gratifying and vicarious identification with the loss and trauma of others, given that empathy, as Saidiya V. Hartman underscores, often ‘fails to expand the space of the other but merely places the self in its stead’.¹⁰ Ultimately, this thesis has intervened in the overprivileging of melancholia and trauma in relation to works by Cixous, Rhys, Woolf, and Riley, enabling an encounter with loss that might move us beyond the imbrication of ethics in traumatic shattering, and the ‘impassable structural barriers to telling’ of loss in contemporary life.¹¹ The meaning of the pleasure derived by the *reader* through representations of loss and trauma, the promise that keeps *us* reading pleasurably, remains to be seen.

¹⁰ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.20.

¹¹ Riley, *Time Lived*, p.65.

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