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REVISING ACADEMIC GENEROSITY

ELLA COLLINS-WHITE, JENNIFER E. NICHOLSON,
AND SAMANTHA POULOS

ENTERING THE ACADEMIC WORLD is hard. From the very first moment we enrol as research students we are bombarded with statistics on a job market in crisis, told we have to publish or perish, advised to present at the right conferences, and encouraged to participate in the academic community, all while tasked with producing original work that should make a substantial contribution to our fields. With what feels like an ever-increasing pressure bearing down on us, academic work does not always seem like a process of discovery but instead like a long and arduous labour. After two years of reading about the dire future for the humanities PhD student, we wanted to ask: What could we do to have a positive impact on our futures and on those of our HDR peers?

The answer came from several sources, but the first and most impactful opportunity was a wonderful workshop put together by a professor in the University of Sydney's English department, Dr Anya Adair.¹ In this workshop, Dr Adair suggested that we, as fledging academics, should craft our own opportunities to grow, and to take responsibility for producing the much desired 'outputs' section of our CVs. From attending this workshop, and after participating in two inspirational postgraduate conferences in 2017—an interdisciplinary conference titled "Peripherality" based at the Department of English, and the annual Department of History postgraduate conference—we came up with the idea

1. In 2017, Dr Anya Adair, now Assistant Professor in Law and Humanities at the University of Hong Kong, led a workshop titled "Research, Teaching and the Professional Portfolio: A Workshop Series for the English Postgraduate." With those attending, Dr Adair shared invaluable skills regarding how to utilise one's time as a PhD candidate and how to pool resources with other students to generate opportunities and support each other.

to organise our own conference. Given the difficult and often precarious nature of academic work, we wanted to shift the focus of this conference on to the play and imagination that goes in to academic work but is rarely discussed or embraced.² We asked ourselves a range of questions: What if we saw possibilities instead of limitations? What if we focused on the joy of discovery? And how might this focus on possibility and joy affect our work? In late 2017, the result of these inquiries emerged in the form of a conference titled “‘What if?’: Reading Worlds of Possibility,” an event that has now transformed into this special volume of *Philament*. If we acknowledge that there are considerable obstacles to building an academic career, then remembering why one begins such a difficult endeavour and the joy that accompanies it is important. To that end, before moving into the interesting works that comprise this volume, we would like to spend some time revisiting how we approach, define, and practise academic work.

What reason does one have to undertake a PhD in the humanities? Perhaps the simplest answer to that question is that PhD candidates feel an intense passion for learning and harbour a deep love of research. However, for most of us, this zest for knowledge will dim while producing a PhD thesis. In fact, academic communities have formed around and been reinforced by the “trouble talk” which we engage in around the lunchroom table.³ The intense focus required by the often solitary condition of academic work makes these lunchtime sessions cathartic. However, when the ritual of commiserating over the tension, anxiety, and stress of academic work becomes our primary mode of communication, we postgraduates put our ability to celebrate at risk. Holding on to our initial exuberance for research is what gives us the resilience we need to survive as early career academics. In interviews with over five-hundred Australian early career academics (ECAs), Bosanquet and others used a “collective narrative approach” to capture the experiences described by the

2. For further discussion on the precarity of the early career academic see Ben Eldridge, “Institutional Peripherality: The Many Deaths of Humanity”, *Philament* 24, no. 1 (2018): 1–13; and Eldridge, “The Peripherality of Optimism; or, This Time It’s Personal,” *Philament* 24, no. 2 (2018): 1–14.

3. Inger Mewburn, “Troubling Talk: Assembling the PhD Candidate,” *Studies in Continuing Education* 33, no. 3 (2011): 331.

ECA community.⁴ The themes that consistently arose in their interviews were “uncertainty and insecurity of casualisation; pressures to prioritise research over teaching, administration and community engagement; the challenges of workload and work–life balance; and a love for academic work.”⁵ While three of these four themes highlight the difficulty faced by the changing academic workforce, what seems to keep people going in the early stages of their research careers is a desire to maintain a positive engagement with their academic work. Taking time to share issues and developments in their work with peers is an important part of preparing for the precarity of academic work; but, equally, taking time to share joys and successes with our peers is a vital way to remain inspired.

Where do public-facing publications and teaching experiences fit in among grant applications, the humanities monograph, and the alleged end goal of permanent work in the form of a lectureship (or what our American counterparts call the “tenure track”)? Teaching is a valuable way for a PhD candidate to think about themselves as a scholar. After all, while research-only positions exist, many humanities professors spend a good proportion of their semester time lecturing, tutoring, and marking. It should be noted that teaching itself can lead to a precarious situation in which ECAs receive no more than ongoing casual employment (“casualisation”) in the current university model. However, teaching can also enhance the research and writing activities to which we return after a day in the classroom. Teaching forces the scholar—whether new or experienced—to always be thinking about others in the room. Gathering feedback, modelling scholarly attitudes, and anticipating challenges and excitement alike: all of these are essential in the classroom—as well as outside of it. And what is peer review if not a rigorous, formalised mode of such scholarly feedback? What is the business of any department or faculty if it

4. Agnes Bosanquet, Alana Mailey, Kelly E. Matthews, et al., “Redefining ‘Early Career’ in Academia: A Collective Narrative Approach,” *Higher Education Research & Development* 36, no. 5 (2017): 890.

5. *Ibid.*, 895.

is not the *modelling* of scholarship, a process that allows students and scholars to watch each other in practice, and thus to learn? In editing this volume, we learnt how giving and receiving feedback within our teams was another model of generous and collaborative scholarship.⁶ Throughout this process we have experienced invaluable generosity from other students as well as members in and beyond our department, each of them providing valuable feedback. This kind of collaboration shows us the extent to which teaching and research are intricately linked. Although working in a precarious context, we turn with anticipation towards the work we are already doing as scholars, whether at our desks or in classrooms, and towards the work we might be doing next.

Although formally grounded in queer and affect theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work on paranoid and reparative reading can readily be applied to the kind of critical work done by postgraduates and ECAs. Thesis projects in particular require a paranoid and reflexive way of thinking. As Sedgwick writes, "In a world where no one need be delusional to find evidence of systematic oppression, to theorize out of anything *but* a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naïve, pious, or complacent."⁷ A higher degree research project in the humanities requires this kind of close reading. It demands that the scholar become the ultimate critical reader; they must anticipate that something significant will emerge from their research, and become a master in their chosen field. But such demands are difficult to shoulder: How can a scholar focus on discovery and mastery in the face of an uncertain future? The title of our conference, "What If?: Reading Worlds of Possibility," was developed in response to this push to become a paranoid critic. Instead of eliciting paranoid readings, we invited participants to produce generative—or what Sedgwick would call "reparative"—readings.⁸ We asked postgraduates and ECAs to situate themselves not only as critical investigators but also as creators, allowing themselves to be vulnerable to discussion and

6. While peer review refers to a formal process in scholarly publishing, we are only more conscious now that it is in itself a model of generous and collaborative scholarship.

7. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 126, 148–49.

8. *Ibid.*, 148–49.

feedback. Rather than invite paranoia, we designed a conference theme based on the exchange of ideas, encouraging presenters to find new ways of thinking about their research areas. With this edition of *Philament*, which we have titled “Revisions,” we continue the work of this project, which aims to encourage and be hopeful. It is important to allow new researchers a space in which they might make revisions of their work and in their field, and to insert themselves into the academic landscape while they are still developing their perspectives.

While editing this volume it became clear to us that asking authors to be open to limitless possibilities and a sense of discovery in their research had resulted in articles that thoughtfully reconsider their objects of study, and even to deal with very vulnerable and sensitive topics. Samantha Lewis’s article, “‘Shut Up or I’ll Shut You Up’: Family Violence in Christina Stead’s *The Man Who Loved Children*,” examines how Stead’s novel represents and explores family and domestic violence. Nicole Ong’s article, “The Language of Touch: Rethinking silence and Trauma in *Anil’s Ghost*,” engages with the field of trauma studies to understand how literature—as well as touch—may allow one to work through the deep and personal struggle of dealing with trauma. Cheryl O’Byrne’s “‘Betwixt and Between’: Reading *Poppy* as a Work of Autofiction” offers a revisionist theory of how form is used to produce and read novels, asking the reader to consider how “autofiction” achieves its effects as a literary genre. All of these articles approach the texts they study from a new perspective, asking what it means to revise the critical consensus, and to think about these novels in new ways. We particularly appreciated how each contributor responded to our prompts, both at the conference and in their articles, thus revising their own positions. In addition to our peer-reviewed articles, Nanda Jarosz’s review of Timothy Morton’s *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* offers a new way to approach scholarly revision;

and this volume's Excursions contributor, poet Dashiell Moore, also provides a revisionist perspective in his creative work.

We would like to thank the many people who helped us stage the hold the initial conference and subsequently to produce this volume. We would like to begin by thanking Oliver Moore, our conference co-creator and organiser. Oliver's role in organising the conference, coming up with the theme, designing the posters, and chairing several sessions, was integral to the whole event. It is through their contribution that this was possible. We would also like to acknowledge everyone who helped make the conference possible. We give special thanks to the University of Sydney Department of English for its support, and particularly to Brigid Rooney, Sarah Gleeson-White, and Peter Marks, each of whom played a role in getting the conference off the ground. Many thanks to Georgia Holmes and Charlie Tapper for their administrative assistance, and to Brenda Zeng, Harry Nguyen, and SUPRA for their financial assistance. Thank you as well to Ben Eldridge for his support and advice, and to Dashiell Moore for his assistance. We also want to thank each of our invited guests, conference presenters, and anyone who contributed to our conference but whose names we have neglected. All of your contributions made this edition possible, and we hope to pay forward this kind of generosity in our own scholarly futures. A special thanks to *Philament* general editor Chris Rudge for supporting this special volume. Finally, thank you to our readers. We hope this volume demonstrates the generosity we seek to foster in our academic communities and that it encourages you to do the same in your academic practices.

“BETWIXT AND BETWEEN”: REREADING POPPY AS AUTOFICTION

CHERYL O'BYRNE

1. The term *autofiction* crops up frequently in literary podcasts and reviews: see, for example, Jia Tolentino, “Ocean Vuong’s *Life Sentences*,” June 3, 2019, *The New Yorker*; Alice Attlee, “Fiction of Facts,” May 9, 2019, *Times Literary Supplement*; Pamela Paul, “A New Novel Conjures Liv Ullmann and Ingmar Bergman,” January 19, 2019, in *The Book Review Podcast*, prod. Pedro Rosado, *The New York Times*.

2. Rachel Cusk, *Kudos* (London: Faber and Faber, 2018); Sheila Heti, *Motherhood* (London: Harvill Secker, 2018); Olivia Laing, *Crudo* (London: Picador, 2018); Karl Ove Knausgaard, *The End* (London: Harvill Secker, 2018).

3. Hywel Dix, ed., *Autofiction in English* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Marjorie Worthington, *The Story of “Me”: Contemporary American Autofiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018).

Introduction: An Ideal Candidate

AUTOFICTION HAS BEEN a buzzword within anglophone literary circles in recent years.¹ Several books published in 2018 stimulated the mainstream conversation, including Rachel Cusk’s *Kudos*, Sheila Heti’s *Motherhood*, Olivia Laing’s *Crudo*, and the final instalment of Karl Ove Knausgaard’s *My Struggle* series.² Scholarship on the mode also flourished in 2018: Hywel Dix edited a groundbreaking essay collection called *Autofiction in English*, and Marjorie Worthington published the first monograph on American autofiction.³ The concept of autofiction has been part of the French literary lexicon since the late 1970s, introduced by Serge Doubrovsky and developed by theorists

such as Vincent Colonna, Philippe Gasparini, Arnaud Genon, Isabelle Grell, and Philippe Vilain; its appearance in English-language conversations, however, is a recent phenomenon.⁴

This article contributes to the emergent discourse by rereading Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy* through the lens autofiction theory offers. The book, published in 1990, begins with Poppy's death and then tells the first-person story of a daughter's efforts to write Poppy's life. The book was co-winner of the New South Wales Premier's Douglas Stewart Prize for Non-Fiction in 1991, and reviewers widely lauded Modjeska's experimental blending of fiction, biography, and autobiography. Most critical discussions of *Poppy* situate the book in the context of second-wave feminism and interpret its hybridity as an attempt to articulate a female subjectivity.⁵ Such analyses reason that the traditional auto/biographical form, with its expectation that textual subject and historical subject correspond, is fashioned from a masculine standard, and so the overt presence of fiction in *Poppy* can be seen as a subversive, feminist act. Although I am wary of drawing a *causal* relationship between a challenge to genre norms and a challenge to patriarchal norms, I do agree with the view that associates form in *Poppy* with female subjectivity.⁶ The reason, however, this book is an ideal candidate for an interpretive "revision" is that a focus on the book's relationship between form and feminism offers a narrow view; a broader discussion of the book's features, in light of recent life-writing scholarship, invites us to appreciate more fully what this book achieves.

One persistent issue life-writing scholars engage with has to do with the disjunction between the textual self and the historical self. Many scholars have examined the ways life writers account for what is irretrievable, unrepresentable, forgotten, and otherwise unknown about their subjects; and they consider the ethics of varying approaches.⁷ It is into this area that autofiction wades, and it is here that *Poppy* makes its most significant

4. See Serge Doubrovsky, *Fils* (Paris: Galilée, 1977); Vincent Colonna, *Autofiction et Autres Mythomanies Littéraires* (Auch: Tristram, 2004); Philippe Gasparini, *Autofiction: Une Aventure du Langage* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2008); Arnaud Genon, *Autofiction: Pratiques et Théories: Articles* (Paris: Mon Petit Éditeur, 2013); Isabelle Grell, *Autofiction* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2014); Philippe Vilain, *Défense de Narcisse* (Paris: Grasset, 2005).

5. See Margaret Henderson, "Writing the Self In/After the Postmodern: *Poppy* and *Heddy and Me*," *LINQ* 25, no. 2 (1998): 9-21; Roberta Buffi, *Between Literature and Painting: Three Australian Women Writers* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

6. I rely here on arguments Rita Felski makes in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

statement. In this article, my purpose is neither to read *Poppy* for the way it marks a rupture with a “masculine” genre nor to identify the ideologies that may have informed its composition; instead, my “revision” claims the book is an exploration of the conundrum that exists when we try to document a life and recognise that the life exceeds any language we could assign to it.

In 1996, Gillian Whitlock praised *Poppy* for the way “the relationship between text and reality, experience, and representation, is blurred, quite deliberately and openly.”⁸ Here, Whitlock comes close to a definition of autofiction, although it is highly unlikely she had access to the term or to the theory behind it. This article will unpack Whitlock’s prescient statement. It begins by discussing the concept of autofiction and then reads *Poppy* according to three components which can be said to signal its autofictional status: its vacillation between fact and fiction, the pact for authenticity it offers the reader, and the way it balances voice with silence. I draw on Modjeska’s more recent memoir *Second Half First* and her essay “Writing *Poppy*” as I discuss the way the autofiction mode mitigates some of the reservations she expresses about writing her mother’s story. The article suggests that the autofictional strategies deployed in *Poppy* enable Modjeska to write her mother in an ethical way that honours both what can and what *cannot* be told of her subject’s life.

Autofiction: Fictionalise the Scene, but not the Self

There is little critical consensus on the definition of autofiction. Although one might assume the term applies to any text which overtly blends autobiography and fiction, such a broad definition belies the complexity of the concept. Certainly a mixing of what is “auto”—as in self-referential—and what is “fiction” is a necessary feature of the form; a precise definition, however, is more nuanced than this. In 1977, Doubrovsky

7. See Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Paul John Eakin, ed., *The Ethics of Life Writing* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); Thomas Larson, *The Memoir and the Memoirist: Reading and Writing Personal Narrative*. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007).

8. Gillian Whitlock, “Introduction: Disobedient Subjects,” in *Autographs: Contemporary Australian Autobiography*, ed. Gillian Whitlock (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1996), xi.

coined the word *autofiction* when he used it to describe his novel, *Fils*. In his usage, *autofiction* named a work which was “a fiction” yet was “made from strictly real events and facts.”⁹ Several years earlier, Philippe Lejeune had published his essay “Le Pacte Autobiographique” where he aimed to differentiate autobiography from fiction; one of the ways a reader could trust an autobiographer had referential intentions, Lejeune argued, was if the author’s name matched the narrator-protagonist’s name.¹⁰ *Fils* exploited a loophole in Lejeune’s formulation because the name of the author and the name of the protagonist *are* identical, yet the work does not attempt a factual account of Doubrovsky’s life. Doubrovsky refined his understanding of the term in subsequent years and arrived at a definition that proposes autofictional texts are at once referential and fictional because they intend not to write a life (for that is the work of autobiography) but instead to write a “self,” with all its attendant ambiguity.¹¹

Many scholars have elaborated on Doubrovsky’s theory. Karen Ferreira-Meyers articulates the difference between the fiction in autofiction and the fiction that necessarily exists in traditional autobiography. In a recent essay, she proffers what she calls the “most widely accepted understanding” of autofiction, and this definition highlights the writer’s “intention” to use fiction and their “disregarding” of readerly expectations about autobiography’s factual referentiality.¹² This is not the kind of fiction poststructuralists would argue inheres in all acts of textualisation; instead, Ferreira-Meyers’s language stresses the writer’s deliberate and strategic fictionalisation. It could be argued that autofiction calls attention to the inevitability of fictionalisation in autobiography by exaggerating its presence.

A second feature of autofiction theorists highlight is its self-reflexivity. E. H. Jones points out that Doubrovsky was not claiming to be the first to incorporate fiction into autobiography but was distinguishing his writing for the way

9. Doubrovsky, *Fils*, back cover text, tr. Johnnie Gratton and quoted in Johnnie Gratton, “Autofiction,” in *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, ed. Margaretta Jolly (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001), 4-6.

10. Philippe Lejeune, “The Autobiographical Pact,” in *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin and trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 4-5.

11. My comments on Doubrovsky in this paragraph derive largely from Worthington’s *The Story of “Me,”* 6-9. The extent to which Doubrovsky’s definition of autofiction evolved is evident in Doubrovsky, “Autobiography/Truth/Psychoanalysis,” trans. Logan Whalen and John Ireland, *Genre* 26, no. 1 (1993): 27-42.

12. Karen Ferreira-Meyers, “Does Autofiction Belong to French or Francophone Authors and Readers Only?” in Dix (ed.), *Autofiction in English*, 31.

“the play with non-referential elements is overtly signalled to the reader.”¹³ Gasparini makes a similar claim when he argues that whereas a conventional autobiographer might mention the work’s referential limitations on its first page and then “follow . . . its mimetic course as if nothing happened,” a work of autofiction, in contrast, is characterised “by a constant questioning of the limits of its validity.”¹⁴ In other words, autofiction includes a metadiscursive layer that draws attention to itself both as performance and philosophical project.

In addition to clarifying Doubrovsky’s theory, Gasparini also modifies it by adding a caveat to Doubrovsky’s criteria regarding names. In Doubrovskian autofiction, the author’s and protagonist’s names are identical, but Gasparini argues that the author and protagonist can have different names as long as “an identitarian relationship” is established between them through other shared characteristics.¹⁵ This is the case in *Poppy*: Modjeska names her narrator-protagonist Lalage rather than Drusilla but aligns herself with Lalage through details such as age, gender, occupation, family, and nationality. Doubrovsky’s insistence on nominal unity served to challenge Lejeune’s pact, but is unnecessary to achieve the end he later ascribed to the form: to write a “self” rather than a “life.”

Another definition of autofiction has been circulating that departs significantly from what I have outlined above. Jones summarises the competing position well: whereas Doubrovskian autofiction fictionalises the scene in order to access a truth about the self, this alternately-defined autofiction fictionalises the self too.¹⁶ Worthington adopts this latter conceptualisation of the form in her book *The Story of “Me”*: *Contemporary American Autofiction*. Though Worthington does not dispute Doubrovsky’s definition, she finds it unsuited to the American literary tradition, arguing that in the US context Doubrovskian autofiction is equivalent to the American memoir

13. E. H. Jones, “Autofiction: A Brief History of a Neologism,” in *Life Writing: Essays on Autobiography, Biography and Literature*, ed. Richard Bradford (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 180.

14. Philippe Gasparini, “Autofiction vs Autobiography,” tr. Sakshi Tandon and S. B. Nayak, *Auto/Fiction 1*, no. 1 (2013): 5; originally published in *Tangence* 97 (2007): 11-24.

15. Jones summarises Gasparini’s position in “Autofiction,” 179.

16. *Ibid.*

and should, therefore, be subsumed under that latter name. In the United States, Worthington argues the term *autofiction* should be reserved for “novels that feature a character who shares his/her name with the author.”¹⁷ While the Doubrovskian definition might be thought to prioritise the “auto” half of the term, Worthington’s definition embraces the “fiction.”

In my view, the texts Worthington describes as autofictional are too distinct from Doubrovsky’s examples to justify using the term he devised; Worthington’s examples are novels which adopt the memoir form, rather than memoirs which toy with the novel form. When I use the term autofiction to discuss *Poppy*, I refer to a text that strategically and self-consciously incorporates fiction into an autobiography so as to produce a distinct form of life writing that explores its own parameters.

Toying with Reader’s Expectations:

***Poppy* as a Game of Chess**

The two models of autofiction I have outlined above are clearly incompatible; both, however, are premised on the interplay between fact and fiction, and the way Worthington addresses this common feature is helpful to any formulation of the mode. In the texts Worthington discusses, there is only a “correlation” between author and author-character.¹⁸ She makes the point, though, which is relevant to a definition of autofiction that finds *correlation* far too moderate a descriptor, that the uncertain relationship between author and character forces the reader into an experience of “code-switching”; rather than consistently applying memoiristic or novelistic conventions to their reading of a text, the autofiction reader must vacillate between the two.¹⁹ Such instability, Worthington contends, requires the reader to adjust their expectations around authorship and referentiality and truth-telling. This instability is created in *Poppy* and the “code-switching” it engenders shapes our experience of the text as autofiction.

17. Worthington, *The Story of “Me,”* 1. Worthington traces this alternate understanding of autofiction to French literary theorist Gérard Genette; see *The Story of “Me,”* 11.

18. *Ibid.*, 9.

19. *Ibid.*, 16.

The first-person voice that narrates the opening pages of *Poppy* evokes an intimacy characteristic of memoir. Modjeska unsettles this, however, twenty pages in, when the narrator reproduces a letter addressed to herself which begins not “Dear Drusilla” (as we may expect) but “Dear Lalage.”²⁰ Despite signalling here that the reader should not assume a unity between author and narrator, elsewhere—in interviews and in other extratextual sources—Modjeska encourages readers to recognise the likeness between herself and Lalage. Among many other congruences, the author and her narrator were both born in 1946, are both academics, and both left London for Australia after an early marriage. In her essay “Writing *Poppy*,” Modjeska goes so far as to follow the name Lalage with “me” in parentheses.²¹ In an interview, Modjeska said that she chose the name Lalage for her narrator because it could have been her own: Lalage and Drusilla are sisters in her mother’s favourite book.²² There is a similar relationship between *Poppy* and Modjeska’s mother: in *Second Half First*, Modjeska reveals that *Poppy* is a variation of her mother’s name, Pookie.²³ These names signal at once the proximity and distance between the text and real life: they are alike (whether as alternate namesake or by aural similitude) without suggesting equivalence.²⁴

The book’s dedication page further destabilises the relationship between Modjeska and Lalage. The dedication, which assumes an unmediated authorial voice, reads, “For my mother who died in 1984 and never kept a diary.” Within the first chapter, however, Lalage tells us, “I have the books *Poppy* read, the diaries she kept” and throughout the book refers to—even quotes at length from—these nonexistent diaries (11). The literary theorist Gérard Genette describes the dedication of a text as not only an address to the dedicatee but also as a statement that “proclaims a relationship . . . and this proclamation is always at the service of the work, as a reason for elevating the work’s

20. Drusilla Modjeska, *Poppy* (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1990; London: Serpent’s Tail, 1991), 20. All subsequent references are to this edition and cited in the text.

21. Drusilla Modjeska, “Writing *Poppy*,” in *Timepieces* (Sydney: Picador Pan Macmillan, 2002), 90.

22. Bronwyn Rivers, “Of Life and Love and Art: An Interview with Drusilla Modjeska,” *Meanjin* 56, no. 2 (1997): 332.

23. Drusilla Modjeska, *Second Half First: A Memoir* (North Sydney: Knopf, 2015), 36.

24. Other instances in which Modjeska has suggested an equivalence between herself and Lalage appear in Victoria Glendinning, Brian Matthews and Drusilla Modjeska, “Writers’ Week Panel: Biography,” *Southern Review* 22 (1989): 32-34; Drusilla Modjeska, “Introduction,” in *Sisters*, ed. Drusilla Modjeska (Pymble: Angus & Robertson, 1993), 7.

standing or as a theme for commentary.”²⁵ Modjeska’s dedication is, indeed, “at the service of the work.” It evokes the similitude between author and narrator as both respond to a mother and her 1984 death. At the same time, however, the dedication insists on a divide between the two figures through the detail of the diaries—texts that exist in the fictional but not in the historical realm.

Modjeska also draws attention to the slippage between nonfiction and fiction, author and narrator, through a metadiscursive layer that runs through the text. In a review, Kate Jennings refers to *Poppy* as “a book which intentionally allows us a view of the dressing rooms and the wings simultaneously with the performance on the stage.”²⁶ This kind of “backstage access” is a common trope in memoirs: memoirists frequently show themselves at their writing desks, in conversation with sources, or otherwise engaged in the work of considering and creating the text.²⁷ All of these scenes are present in *Poppy*, but they are complicated by the fact that it is Lalage—not Drusilla—whom we see occupied with these tasks. In a traditional memoir, such scenes unveil the writer behind the text, and this can help readers to feel a heightened sense of access to the writerly process. In *Poppy*, Modjeska invites us into this austere space of the writer at work, but at the same time demystifies this by ensuring we know Lalage both is and is not the writer.

In “Writing *Poppy*,” Modjeska compares her writing process to playing a game: “I was running events together, moving people around as if on a chess board.”²⁸ This metaphor positions the author as orchestrator of Worthington’s “code-switching” and the reader as opponent at the board, countering her moves. The way Modjeska creates a proximate relationship between herself and Lalage and then repeatedly undercuts it leaves the reader hesitant about what their next move should be. The text, as autofiction, is both referential *and* fictional and disallows a confident reading predicated on one or the other. Instead,

25. Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 135.

26. Kate Jennings, “Melancholy Baby in Search of Mother and Self,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 13, 1990, 78.

27. There is considerable variation in scholarly treatment of the terms *memoir* and *autobiography*. I am guided by Leigh Gilmore’s understanding of the terms. Gilmore reasons that an autobiographer positions the reader as adjudicator of the text’s accuracy whereas a memoirist positions the reader more flexibly; a memoir assumes a reader’s willingness to accept the writer as “knowing subject” rather than one aspiring to verifiable transparency. See Gilmore’s *The Limits of Autobiography*, 143-8.

28. Modjeska, “Writing *Poppy*,” 73.

Poppy places the reader in a vulnerable, reactive position, requiring them to stay alert to the text's manoeuvres.

The Autofictional Pact

Autofictions reject Lejeune's autobiographical pact—that a unity between author, protagonist, and narrator is a sign to the reader of the author's attempt at referentiality—and in its place establish a new set of terms. Bran Nicol describes how this alternative, autofictional pact sets up “a mutually respectful dialogue between writer and reader” in which “an author can be trusted to try to communicate authentically to a reader despite trading in fiction rather than in fact.”²⁹ His use of the word “dialogue” here is reminiscent of Modjeska's chess metaphor; the writer, both suggest, signposts the fiction and offers it as integral to the reader's experience. Nicol links the dialogue to a sense of authenticity, and we can understand this on two levels. The first involves the way an autofiction dramatises the gap between historical person and textual character as discussed above. The second is the focus of this section: if we accept that gap exists, what can a text, nevertheless, claim to represent of the self or of another? If *Poppy* does not promise to attempt a factual account of the mother's life, then what *does* it promise its readers?

As she begins her project of writing *Poppy's* life, Lalage aspires to a referential account. To understand the pact for authenticity that Modjeska comes to adopt, it is useful first to examine the alternative she rejects. Lalage spends much of the last month of *Poppy's* life asking *Poppy* personal questions. She says of this time, frustrated by *Poppy's* unwillingness to respond to all her queries, “I wanted to pin her down” and “chart her inner struggles” (64–65). These metaphors comparing the mother to a pinned object or a charted dataset reveal Lalage's early conception of her subject as finite and quantifiable. Lalage reflects on *Poppy's* lifelong habit of making twine from braided scraps of material and thinks

29. Bran Nicol, “Eye to I: American Autofiction and its Contexts from Jerzy Kosinski to Dave Eggers,” in Dix (ed.), *Autofiction in English*, 267–8.

I should have kept every ball of it, and then all I'd have to do would be to trace the twine back, thread by thread, and unplait it into a perfect record of her life, laid out in an order I could follow, step by step, thread by thread, back to the first knot. (16)

The image illustrates Lalage's initial conception of herself as unraveller of her mother's life; she implies that if only she had adequate evidence then she could lay the twine/life on the page in a way that all of its components would be untangled and visible.

Lalage's intention to write a verifiable, orderly biography is thwarted on several fronts. In those final conversations with Poppy, Lalage accepts, "Nothing she said amounted to the definitive answers I was hoping for" (8). She turns instead to the papers she finds in Poppy's attic and expects to "find her there, fully formed and acquiescent" (67); the archive gives her the basic facts of Poppy's life, such as evidence of "her kin and progeny," but Lalage concedes, "it doesn't tell me who she was" (12). Even in situations where Lalage does have access to what seems like ample resources, such as in relation to Poppy's professional life, she finds, "they do not necessarily help, as if their weight acts as a damper on the imagination and I run the risk of reducing Poppy's work to a list of creditable credentials" (138). Lalage is looking for the "marrow" of Poppy's life but realises this kind of inner, essential knowledge is absent from any sources she can consult.³⁰ Instead of revelation, they provide only this inhibiting "weight."

In *Second Half First*, Modjeska recalls reading *Rebecca West: A Life*, a biography written by Victoria Glendinning and published while Modjeska was working on *Poppy*.³¹ There is no mention of Glendinning's book in *Poppy*, but the later memoir suggests it had a determinative effect on Modjeska's writing process. At one point, Modjeska describes how *Rebecca West* "took the life of a woman . . . and treated it in a way that made me furious."³² Her disdain stems from her view that Glendinning's biography approaches West's complex story in a one-dimensional,

30. Modjeska, "Writing Poppy," 73.

31. Victoria Glendinning, *Rebecca West: A Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987).

32. Modjeska, *Second Half First*, 54.

condemnatory way, with “everything hammered into place, as if there should be one story, one history.”³³ After “slamming down *Rebecca West* on the table” she reflects on its lesson for her own biographical project: “Ambivalence, uncertainty; the experience of life between the lines of the tide: that was the story, not the certainty of bricks.”³⁴ Lalage’s early efforts to locate her mother—questioning, charting, unplaiting—are a brick-building exercise. *Rebecca West* becomes a cautionary tale, and she changes course.

Sidonie Smith discusses an additional factor that motivates Lalage’s decision to write her mother in a more loosely-hewn way. In an essay on the role of photographs in three Australian autobiographies, Smith draws attention to a description of Lalage’s study. On one wall Lalage has drawn a family tree which provides her with “documentary evidence” and on the other wall she has pinned photographs which, in contrast, show only “phantasms” and therefore “deliver primarily the sense of absence, loss.”³⁵ This sense of “absence” and “loss” derives not only from the way the photographs flaunt a dead mother who can never be recovered but also from their tendency to reduce Poppy to just one, captured moment. Smith argues that Lalage resolves to write Poppy in a way that accounts for her irrecoverability and also that “releas[es] her from a singular snapshot.”³⁶ In other words, recognising the illusiveness of the photographs prompts Lalage to ensure her own portrait of her mother somehow accounts for all that lies outside the frame.

Modjeska progresses from wanting to write a definitive account of her mother to a “collapse of certainty” that such a pursuit is achievable.³⁷ Despite the setbacks, she never suggests she will abandon the project; instead, she experiments with a form that will allow for ambiguity and the complexity of life outside the photographic frame. She will enable her mother’s life “to lift lightly from the page” rather than “battening [it] down” (68)—all that is lacking in *Rebecca*

33. *Ibid.*, 171.

34. *Ibid.*, 60.

35. Sidonie Smith, “Re-Citing, Re-Siting, and Re-Sighting Likeness: Reading the Family Archive in Drusilla Modjeska’s *Poppy*, Donna Williams’ *Nobody Nowhere*, and Sally Morgan’s *My Place*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 40, no.3 (1994): 514–515.

36. *Ibid.*, 518.

37. Modjeska, “Writing Poppy,” 73.

West and the photographs on Lalage's study wall. The decision to insert herself into the text as visible daughter-biographer-narrator enables her to reflect openly on the interaction between fact and imagination and to claim her position as observer through whom the story is filtered, or, as Susan Scarparo puts it, to "both claim and disclaim authority as story-teller."³⁸ Once she decided to include herself in the text, however, Modjeska would have faced the expectation of Lejeune's pact, that she would present a unified author/narrator/protagonist and a text as closely aligned with her own and her mother's lives as could be possible. Clearly, she rejects this; such a text, for her, would be brick-like and reductive. On the contrary, Modjeska's "pact" resembles the one for authenticity that characterises autofiction.

Lalage recounts a scene in which she is walking near the water with her sister, May, and May hands her a piece of driftwood with a hole in it that resembles an eye. Lalage continues:

I brought the eye home and propped it up by my window so that the light shines through the almond shaped aperture. I stare at it as if it were a gateway, or frontier, and all I have to do is let it pull me through to another life. (38)

Perhaps we can read the book as "a gateway, or frontier" which opens onto the mother's life. Lalage will not write *Poppy* as an object that can or should be hammered into place, but at the same time she is promising an effort, emblematised by this eye-shaped driftwood, to "see" her through her singular perspective.

Giving Poppy a Voice

Thus far this essay has tried to demonstrate the ways in which *Poppy* announces what it will *not* attempt to achieve. It refuses the fact/fiction binary and the simpler reading experience such clarity might offer. It refuses to promote an equivalence between author and narrator or any facade of mimicry. It refuses to provide a portrait of the mother that fixes

38. Susanna Scarparo, *Elusive Subjects: Biography as Gendered Metafiction* (Leicester: Troubador, 2005), xv.

her in place no matter how satisfying such a portrait might be. As I have argued, these qualities mark *Poppy* as an exemplar of the autofictional form: the text is self-conscious about the limitations of life writing and exposes the genre's complexities from the inside. A work of autofiction, however, should not be reduced to its negative space; it is trying to be, after all, both fictional *and* referential. In this section, then, I consider how *Poppy* also attempts to communicate something substantial about the lives that fill its pages. I propose that what the text offers its reader most, in this regard, is a daughter's recognition of her mother's subjectivity and, especially, her voice.

Lalage is preoccupied with trying to make sense of why her mother spent two years as a patient in a psychiatric hospital. These years, during Lalage's adolescence, were marked by Poppy's inability to speak. In retrospect, Lalage associates her mother's literal voicelessness with a social and cultural silencing. Poppy was married in England in 1945 and had three children in a postwar period when "the mother [was] at centre stage of government policy, psychiatric strategy, popular sociology and everyday thinking" (86). Lalage describes how Poppy's husband placed her "at the heart of his life" yet "couldn't see that it gave her nothing to press against; object to his subject, holding the thread for his life and for ours, she was cut short on a journey she might otherwise have made" (50). Lalage avoids giving any conclusive reason for Poppy's breakdown or her prolonged hospitalisation, but intimates through these comments that Poppy's plight was a consequence of a life bereft of personal agency.

Poppy arrived at a sense of healing, Lalage suggests, only after she left the hospital and left her marriage. In place of these institutions, she befriended Rosa and Marcus with whom "she found her way out of silence and began to express the longings that she had once turned against herself" (118). The other significant event for Poppy occurred when she

began paid work, in the criminal justice system, and in her role there found “the ability to speak freely, and as a woman” (150). Lalage attributes her mother’s recovery to this transition from silence to voice; Poppy found forums, in friendship and in a professional context, where her voice was heard. Lalage ensures she maintains this hard-won position on Poppy’s behalf; she writes the mother as a voiced subject rather than a silenced object and as traveller on her own, non-domestic journey.

Lalage achieves this, primarily, by including the imagined diary extracts and also fictive letters Poppy wrote to Lalage and to Marcus.³⁹ Freya Latona reflects on “the use of epistolary writing in memoir” and suggests that in a memoir about a deceased person, the decision to incorporate letters that the subject wrote can be an ethical choice because it enables the writer to include the subject’s voice directly into the work and perhaps “grant . . . them some power over their own representation.”⁴⁰ Although Latona does not refer to letters or diaries that are imagined, it is arguable her ideas apply to these fictional materials too. Modjeska tells us, in “Writing *Poppy*,” that some readers felt cheated when they realise she invented the diaries. She defends her choice by arguing

for me in writing them, they seemed one of the most truthful parts of the book. Until then I was digging myself into a hole with my own voice firing away like a machete chopping trees.⁴¹

The power granted by these diaries and letters, in Latona’s sense, arises from the way they prevent a situation in which Poppy is flattened, like a tree felled by Modjeska’s machete, into a character who can only be spoken for and who exists only as mother to the daughter-biographer. The diaries and letters, notably, do not restrict Poppy to the domestic or maternal spheres; instead, they imagine her friendships, her intimate relationship with Marcus, her travels, her work, and her dreams.

39. That Modjeska invented the letters in the same way she invented the diaries is not explicitly stated in *Poppy* or in her epitextual reflections on the text. We can assume they are inventions, however, given that she reproduces sixteen letters Marcus and Poppy wrote to one another over a three week period in February 1976 while Poppy was in Sydney and Marcus in London. It is clear that each letter is written in response to a letter received; this could be believable if they were writing emails but not letters delivered to post boxes between countries. It is less clear if the letters between Lalage and Poppy were inventions; however, the fact that Modjeska leaves this an open question is typical of autofiction.

40. Freya Latona, “The Epistolary Thread as Collaborative Writing in Grief Memoir,” in *Mediating Memory*, ed. Buntj Avieson, Fiona Giles, and Sue Joseph (New York: Routledge, 2018), 251, 258.

41. Modjeska, “Writing Poppy,” 89.

We can recognise what Modjeska accomplishes by comparing her text to other biographies that do not afford their subjects the same latitude. *Rebecca West* is one example Modjeska provides herself. Another is Brian Matthews's *Louisa*, a biography of Henry Lawson's mother, published in 1987.⁴² Modjeska cites *Louisa* as a model for *Poppy* in terms of its melding of history and fiction and its incorporation of the biographer into the biography.⁴³ Helen Thomson, on the other hand, is disparaging of Matthews's work. She argues that although Matthews might claim his book resurrects an undervalued female subject, the reality is that he displaces Louisa's voice with his own.⁴⁴ A third text that is useful here is Germaine Greer's *Daddy, We Hardly Knew You* which was published in 1989, one year prior to *Poppy*.⁴⁵ Both *Poppy* and *Daddy* are a quest for a parent coupled with the self-reflexive narration of the quest, but they differ markedly in tone. In "Writing *Poppy*," Modjeska insists an indictment of her subject is "precisely what I did not want"; *Daddy*, on the other hand, can be read as the site where Greer "regains mastery" over her father.⁴⁶ These texts succumb to—even court—the pitfalls *Poppy* actively tries to avoid: displacement, indictment, mastery.

Thomson finds that *Poppy* succeeds as a feminist text precisely where *Louisa* fails: Modjeska values *Poppy*'s voice and Matthews tramples *Louisa*'s.⁴⁷ Stephanie Trigg argues, similarly, that Matthews's text is "a testimony to its own cleverness" and not a testimony to its subject as it purports to be.⁴⁸ Arguably some level of "trampling" is unavoidable when writing another's life, but *Poppy* absorbs and tries to counter this condition of biography in a way *Louisa* and *Daddy* do not. Modjeska accomplishes this, I am arguing, primarily by including the mother's writings and calling attention to their constructedness. *Poppy* certainly is not "a testimony to its own cleverness"; there is a playfulness in the way the dedication alerts the reader to Modjeska's inventiveness, but this playfulness is not an end in itself. On the contrary, the fictive

42. Brian Matthews, *Louisa* (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1987).

43. See Glendinning, "Writers' Week Panel," 34.

44. Helen Thomson, *Bio-Fictions: Brian Matthews, Drusilla Modjeska and Elizabeth Jolley* (James Cook University: Foundation for Australian Literary Studies, 1994), 1-18.

45. Germaine Greer, *Daddy, We Hardly Knew You* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989).

46. Modjeska, "Writing *Poppy*," 89; Roger Porter, *Bureau of Missing Persons: Writing the Secret Lives of Fathers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 65; Stephanie Trigg makes a similar comparison between *Poppy* and *Daddy* in "A Gift of Sorrow," *Scripta* 6, no. 3 (1990), 138.

47. Thomson, *Bio-Fictions*, 19-35.

48. Trigg, "A Gift of Sorrow," 138.

diaries and letters Modjeska includes in her book have the effect of obscuring (rather than underlining) the daughter-biographer so that *Poppy* represents the mother in a generous, subjectifying way.

“To Maintain and Even to Celebrate Silence”

Regardless of how much effort Modjeska applied to the task of writing an honest, voiced account of her mother, there would always remain gaps in what she could know: there would be details she could not access, memories she could not trust and her own impartiality which would colour any account she could give.⁴⁹ There also would be what Judith Butler refers to as an essential “opacity” we are each born into; Butler labels any effort to disavow this opacity, any attempt at “complete coherence” of oneself or another, a form of “ethical violence.”⁵⁰ In other words, even if Modjeska could gather all conceivable evidence to construct a comprehensive portrait of her mother, still there would remain an innate mysteriousness which she could never be resolved. When earlier I discussed the autofictional pact *Poppy* offers its readers, I tried to demonstrate the book’s awareness of these layers of unknowability. Modjeska responds to these layers, in part, by dwelling on what *can* be accomplished (offering the mother a subject position in the text); the other, concomitant response, which I explore in this section, is that she balances giving voice to her subject with allowing her subject to be silent.

At the same time that Lalage attributes the restoration of Poppy’s mental health to her ability to speak, she also points to instances when a choice away from speech is empowering for Poppy. In one of Poppy’s diary entries she recounts a scene of her father’s cruelty and then writes of silence as her “only weapon” against him (19). Later, Lalage tells a story in which Poppy’s brother, Guy, punches their father, Jack, and then she muses of Poppy, “She could never knock Jack out cold on the street. Her strategies were fluid and unobtrusive. In silence she would reach through him to

49. Jack Bowers makes a similar argument about Modjeska’s awareness of the “boundaries of interpretation,” but he discusses her response to this primarily in terms of “the ordering of the material,” the “weaving” of past and present and the inclusion of multiple viewpoints rather than in terms of her play of fact and fiction. See Bowers, *Strangers at Home: Place, Belonging, and Australian Life Writing* (Amherst, New York: Cambria Press, 2016), 63.

50. Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 32.

other possibilities” (24). Poppy’s silence is depicted as a tool she can use to circumvent the father’s attempts at dominating her, and it has the same, defensive effect as Guy’s punch. Lalage also writes that her mother was unwilling to tell particular family stories because she “was wary of the danger of giving them a shape that would work its way into her” (24). Here again Poppy’s silence is a defence—not against her father’s authority but against the authority and certitude a fully articulated story might wield.

In her study of women’s biography, *Thinking Through the Mothers*, Janet Beizer identifies a category of objectionable texts she labels “salvation narratives.”⁵¹ These are texts in which the “biographer has a mission . . . to retrieve a lost woman’s life” (either a mother or “foremother”) and “to represent the quest that led to her.”⁵² At first glance, both *Louisa* and *Poppy* may appear to be examples of salvation narratives, but as Beizer describes the genre in more detail it becomes clear it no longer applies to *Poppy*. Salvation narratives are troubling to Beizer, mostly because of the way in which the authors claim to adopt a feminist stance yet are “imposing another consciousness—the sensibility of another age” on the subject’s life.⁵³ Of one such text—*Alias Olympia*, a biography of a model who appeared in some of Manet’s paintings—Beizer writes that the biographer’s subject “is arguably smothered by the narrator’s embrace of recognition.”⁵⁴ *Louisa* is similarly “smothered”; of *Poppy*, however, Beizer might form a different opinion. Beizer argues that these retrieving, questing narratives can be tenable only if they are written in a way that shows an awareness of the form’s inherent limitations. To do this, Beizer argues, a writer must strive “to maintain and even to celebrate silence, in this way perhaps paradoxically establishing maternal presence in and through the unvoiced.”⁵⁵ Though Modjeska cannot help but impose her consciousness on her mother, her autofictional approach draws attention to this dilemma and balances the

51. Janet Beizer, *Thinking through the Mothers: Reimagining Women’s Biographies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 10.

52. *Ibid.*, 25, 26.

53. *Ibid.*, 63.

54. *Ibid.*, 17; Eunice Lipton, *Alias Olympia: A Woman’s Search for Manet’s Notorious Model and Her Own Desire* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993).

55. *Ibid.*, 64n9.

voiced with the unvoiced to ensure Poppy can breathe.

Beizer does not use the term *autofiction*, but this mode of writing, by its very definition, bypasses the suffocating dangers she warns against. The space that *Poppy* leaves for silence is evident in the imaginative leaps Modjeska takes to tell the mother's story and in the way she discloses this to the reader. The dedication and the mismatched names alert us to the text's fictionality, but we still never know precisely where the fiction ends and the history begins; the entire text, therefore, is rendered indefinite and incomplete. Butler insists that to "let the other live" we must substitute a demand for a cohesive subject with an "affirmation of partial transparency."⁵⁶ When Lalage mentions her mother's reluctance to give shape to her stories Lalage appreciates there is a sense of "honour" in this position (24); perhaps Lalage recognises the way "partial transparency"—offsetting the mother's voice with her silence—is a life-giving act.

Conclusion: "The Shuffling of Feet on the Pavement"

Even if Modjeska's mother had kept a diary and even if Modjeska was able to find a satisfactory answer to every question she asked about her mother's life, still *Poppy*'s fictional aspects would be valuable to the text. The imagined details are not included simply to challenge a traditional style nor to create a more cohesive, readable narrative than would otherwise be possible. Instead, the fiction in an autofiction is about "sketching an imaginary framework through which a truth can be told."⁵⁷ In *Poppy*, Modjeska's attempt to speak truth through fiction tells us not just something about who her mother was but also something about the process of trying to write Poppy's story.

The truth the book tells about Modjeska's mother exceeds the facts of Poppy's life. Modjeska recalls her sister May's reaction to reading *Poppy*: "It wasn't her mother, she said, as if I

56. Butler, *Giving an Account*, 33, 31.

57. Jones, "Autofiction," 180.

had made a promise, which perhaps I had, to restore the woman we'd been born to, fully realised in a book."⁵⁸ It is arguable May read the book according to the realist standard of biography to which Modjeska first aspired—a standard that, as Sharon O'Brien points out, has been inherited from the nineteenth-century novel.⁵⁹ It is likely May felt disappointed because she did not find the realist tropes she was expecting: "a transparent medium capable of representing the world" where "character and the self are knowable" and told with "cause-and-effect linearity."⁶⁰ May reread the book years later, however, and this time responded differently, telling Modjeska, "I think you may have got her after all."⁶¹ Modjeska does not elaborate on her sister's changed opinion, but it seems that May noticed the autofictional pact and accepted its terms. She may have found a mother who was adventurous, wise, conflicted and forthright and for whom motherhood was only one component of her identity. May also would have found a daughter-narrator who exposed her own partiality and enabled her mother's essential mysteriousness to remain intact and unchallenged.

The other truth *Poppy* allows readers to recognise is that a considerable distance divides a textual person from a historical person but attempting to marry the two is still a worthwhile endeavour. Ferreira-Meyers describes how autofiction "encourage[s] the reader to question first and foremost the text, its truth and validity; but, more importantly, the truth and veracity of the self; memory; and the (non)ability to (re) create or invent reality."⁶² An image of the beach, which appears in *Second Half First*, helps us to understand how Modjeska puts the reader into this questioning position. Modjeska writes that her favourite part of a beach is the "zone . . . between the high tide and the low; that liminal space, betwixt and between, with its own life of crabs and seaweeds and feeding birds."⁶³ *Poppy* is a book of the "betwixt and between." Modjeska offers

58. Modjeska, "Writing Poppy," 86.

59. Sharon O'Brien, "Feminist Theory and Literary Biography," in *Contesting the Subject: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism*, ed. William H. Epstein (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1991), 125.

60. Ibid.

61. Modjeska, "Writing Poppy," 87.

62. Ferreira-Meyers, "Does Autofiction Belong," 40.

63. Modjeska, *Second Half First*, 25.

many details about her mother's life but then pulls them back by alerting us to her inventiveness; she presents herself as narrator of the mother's story but then shatters this, too, with a new name and by showing herself agonising as artist over her craft; she provides a platform for her mother's voice to be heard, but then limits this by honouring her silence. There certainly is life in this zone: crabs, seaweed, birds and an inviolate mother.

Modjeska names Virginia Woolf among a list of female modernists who influenced her work.⁶⁴ She does not refer specifically to Woolf's 1931 novel *The Waves*, but its reverberations throughout *Poppy* are unmistakable. Woolf's text, like Modjeska's, questions our capacity to find language to express the experience of being—or observing—a self. One of the novel's characters, Bernard, reflects on the "illusion" that his life might be something he could detach "as one breaks off a bunch of grapes" and then hand it to another.⁶⁵ He realises he must, instead, tell a story to communicate his life, but this, too, he finds troublesome: he compares stories to "Toys I twist, bubbles I blow" and full of "phrases that come down beautifully with all their feet on the ground!"⁶⁶ Rather than a manufactured, graceful story, he says he "long[s] for some little language such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffling of feet on the pavement."⁶⁷

Woolf returns at intervals throughout the novel to italicised images of waves on a beach, and the motif illustrates the unifying force of our shared lives; no single wave, or self, can be detached from the whole and singled out as one, finite, fully realised entity.

As Modjeska proceeds with her project, she accepts, as Bernard does, that her mother's life cannot be broken off and given to the reader like a bunch of grapes. Any straightforward story would be like a toy twisted into animation, and its language would be too grounded and sure. Though this kind of portrait might be pleasing to readers and writer alike, it would be inauthentic. The approach Modjeska formulates instead more

64. Drusilla Modjeska, "Apprentice Piece," in *Timepieces* (Sydney: Picador Pan Macmillan, 2002), 36.

65. Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1931; repr., London: Vintage Random House, 2004), 158-9. Citations refer to the Vintage edition.

I thank *Philament's* editors for suggesting I include *The Waves* in this article.

66. *Ibid.*, 94, 159.

67. *Ibid.*, 159.

closely resembles Bernard's desire for "the shuffling of feet on the pavement": she imbues her story with hesitation and leaves a porous boundary around the mother. She finds the balanced space between the ocean and the tide line in which she both does and does not write the mother. She offers us an autofiction, and rereading *Poppy* as such places the book in dialogue with some of our most contemporary concerns—literary and otherwise—about the relationship between fact and fiction.

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THE LANGUAGE OF TOUCH: RE- THINKING SILENCE AND TRAUMA RESTORATION IN *ANIL'S GHOST*

NICOLE ONG

IN *TRAUMA FICTION*, Anne Whitehead outlines the paradox that typically complicates trauma theory's relationship with its object of study, trauma fiction: "If trauma comprises an event or experience which overwhelms the individual and resists language or representation, how then can it be narrativised in fiction?"¹ Like many first-wave literary trauma theorists, Whitehead begins her inquiry with the assumption that trauma is characterised by unspeakability—the idea that trauma cannot be "spoken" or represented in language.² This starting point inevitably prompts crucial questions about the efficacy of trauma fiction, whose essential task is to represent trauma. For instance, given that fiction constitutes worlds constructed entirely by words, how does trauma fiction attend to an experience that is

1. Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 3.

2. Other first-wave theorists of trauma include Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Exploration in Memory* (Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); and Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 2002).

thought incapable of representation in language? And if literary trauma theorists were to use language to explain the trauma in these fictional texts, effectively transforming these unrepresented experiences into spoken ones, would they not then be *speaking for*, or even effacing, an experience not theirs to explain?

In order to avoid the unethical implications of writing about trauma, Whitehead and other literary trauma theorists have instead analysed the way in which trauma fiction and its language portray trauma as unspeakable. Naomi Mandel observes this tendency especially in the critical responses to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which have tended to trace the ways the trauma of the novel's protagonist is characterised by its unknowability. *Beloved* is a well-known 1987 novel about the traumatic consequences that arise when Sethe, an African-American slave, murders her baby daughter—an act she commits in an attempt to save her child from being captured into slavery.³ As Mandel notes, many critical readings of the texts have assumed that Sethe's significant trauma is "unspeakable" insofar as it is said to exhaust "the limits of language"—a limit "that trauma imposes."⁴

However, in her analysis of *Beloved*, Mandel concludes that neither silence nor a critical appeal to the many problems associated with speaking about trauma—such as "the paradoxes of language and silence, the unspeakable and speech, narrative and trauma, rememory and forgetting"—is an "acceptable response to a history of atrocity."⁵ In other words, Mandel argues that critics who refer to the *difficulty* of speaking about trauma only maintain "an uneasy equilibrium between two uncomfortable choices"—namely, silence or speaking the unspeakable—while denying "the problematic implications of either."⁶ Contrary to these critics, Mandel points out that the characters in *Beloved* do not have the "privilege" of escaping these difficult choices with clever rhetoric.⁷ Instead, in order to "survive both their past and their future," Sethe "must speak the unspeakable" and

3. Naomi Mandel, "'I Made the Ink': Identity, Complicity, 60 Million, and More," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 48, no. 3 (2002): 606–7.

Among others, Mandel cites James Phelan, "Toward a Reader-Response Criticism: The Difficult, the Stubborn, and the Ending of *Beloved*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 38, nos. 3 and 4 (1993): 709–728; and Mark Ledbetter, *Victims and the Postmodern Narrative* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996).

4. *Ibid.*, 606–608.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

“face the disturbing consequences of their complicit actions.”⁸ In other words, no matter how well literary trauma theorists outline the challenges or complex paradoxes posed by speaking about trauma, they do not answer the fundamental questions about trauma fiction: How does trauma fiction bear witness to what trauma is and give those who have suffered a voice?

Mandel’s alternative approach to *Beloved* is quite unlike those of the trauma theorists she cites, who read *Beloved* as testifying to the sheer impossibility of speaking about the trauma of the Middle Passage and slavery. Instead, Mandel offers a bold interpretation of what it could mean to “speak the unspeakable,” reading the “doubleness” of the title “Beloved” as both a signifier that points to her child and one that also effaces her real name. As Mandel writes, the title bears witness to the way in which Sethe’s trauma complicates her ability to grieve for her child: on the one hand, Sethe desires to evoke the memory of her child; but, on the other, her attempt to do so ensures that her daughter stays buried in silence—precisely because Sethe can only refer to her circuitously.⁹

While there is value in Mandel’s call to think about trauma in new ways—ones that go beyond the paradox of “narrating the unnarratable”—and even though she admirably demonstrates how novels “must speak the unspeakable,” two points in Mandel’s argument are problematic.¹⁰ The first point is one to which she draws attention herself. Mandel acknowledges that, in using language to speak circuitously to her trauma, Sethe becomes complicit with the consequences of speaking: after all, she writes, Sethe “is the one replacing and effacing her murdered daughter with the word on the tombstone.”¹¹ In other words, as Sethe uses language to create signs for the silence, to point to the silence, she risks commemorating these signs instead of her daughter. And by referring to her daughter as “Beloved” (rather than using her

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, 589.

10. *Ibid.*, 608.

11. *Ibid.*, 589.

given name), Sethe obscures her daughter's identity, and thereby becomes complicit in hiding a part of her daughter's story.

The second problematic point in Mandel's analysis is her assertion that the characters in *Beloved* "must speak the unspeakable" in order to survive—problematic because Mandel does not consider the context that makes, or would make, it possible for these characters to speak.¹² This omission implies Mandel's assumption that Sethe always had the right conditions in which to vocalise her unspeakable pain, and perhaps that it was simply for a lack of trying—or even by choice—that Sethe does not immediately do so. However, Sethe's eventual ability to cope with the trauma of killing her child is conditioned by certain favourable circumstances. For instance, because Sethe's encounter with the spirit of her dead daughter, Beloved, happens some eighteen years after she kills her child, Sethe has the benefit of distance in time from that initial traumatic event. Moreover, after she kills her child and is imprisoned, Sethe's former slave owner loses interest in her. Hence, upon her release, Sethe is no longer a hunted woman, a situation that affords her the agency she needs to buy the tombstone for her child and mourn her freely. Both of these factors are crucial to the space that Morrison creates for Sethe to grapple with the trauma of killing her child. They indicate that it is a suitable time for her to speak the unspeakable; in the diegesis, they establish an external world that is stable enough for her to bring the tumult of her internal world to the fore safely. But these factors are not present for every trauma survivor. Some may be in situations that make it physically dangerous to vocalise pain, while others may simply not have had the benefit of sufficient distance from the traumatic experience—spatial, temporal or affective—to cope with its impacts. Thus, although Mandel's prescription that all survivors must speak the unspeakable may be useful in theory, it is important to acknowledge that certain conditions have to exist before survivors can be protected from the consequences of speaking

12. *Ibid.*, 608.

their pain. Indeed, to blankly state that survivors *must* speak risks being damaging and counterproductive to their recovery—or, as this essay terms the process, their “restoration.”

Silence Speaks

Although her response to *Beloved* differs from the typical literary responses to the novel, Mandel’s resistance to a rhetoric of silence and her prescription to speak is still very much in line with the conventional trauma model. Without moving beyond the binary in which speaking (here synonymous with healing) is privileged over silence (here synonymous with trauma), Mandel is bound to think of silence/trauma only as the antithesis of speaking/healing. In this model, all silence is effectively reduced to an impenetrable abyss that must be overcome, while the act of speaking, or inscribing one’s trauma into language, is always privileged as something cathartic and sought after. But whether this conceptualisation is theoretically sound is questionable. In *The Language of Silence*, Leslie Kane poetically elucidates some of the many meanings and functions that silence bears:

The dumb silence of apathy, the sober silence of solemnity, the fertile silence of awareness, the active silence of perception, the baffled silence of confusion, the uneasy silence of impasse, the muzzled silence of outrage, the expectant silence of waiting, the reproachful silence of censure, the tacit silence of approval, the vituperative silence of menace, the peaceful silence of communion, and the irrevocable silence of death...¹³

Even though this taxonomy of silence illustrates many instances of experience in which we respond without words, we typically do not conflate them. Instead, each instance of silence is given meaning through an interpretation of the specific context in which it is observed. Likewise, within the discourse of literary trauma theory, the silence of the traumatised being—the immutable silence of trauma—does not unequivocally point to the absence of a voice. Rather, to borrow the words of Harald Knutson

13. Leslie Kane, *The Language of Silence: On the Unspoken and the Unspeakable in Modern Drama* (New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1984), 15.

and Aslaug Kristiansen, silence has the potential to be heard, and even understood “with an adequate level of precision when context is considered, for context is the map on which the phenomenon will be understood.” As they continue,

The manifestation of silence in and of itself is so rich and has so many “voices” that context is crucial to its understanding. By reducing the universe of contexts and focusing on the few probable ones, the level of precision for understanding silence is heightened.¹⁴

Contrary to Mandel’s proposition that the only ethical or palliative response to traumatic silence is to “speak” of it—or to find a way, however circuitously, to wrest speech from a survivor—Knutson and Kristiansen’s taxonomy reminds us that language can first serve a more efficacious function for the observer: namely, to make plain the context surrounding the traumatised’s silence. Characterising silence in more than two ways allows us to interpret and understand silence in a way that might better preserve the singularity of the survivor’s traumatic experience. Indeed, acknowledging that silence may have many meanings is precisely what the conventional conceptualisation of trauma renders unrecognisable; the simplistic binary of “speaking is good/silence is bad” does not account for the fact that not all silence from a traumatised subject is traumatic silence, and, *mutatis mutandis*, not all silence is something detrimental to be overcome. In other words, the conventional reading of silence prevents us from acknowledging that, in specific contexts, some silences may be “speaking silences” necessary for healing and restoration, whereas others may be different to these. Conceptualising silence as something that, in its unique context, can and should “speak for itself” would allow critics of literary trauma to perceive silence in more imaginative and complex ways, and to avoid the act of effacement that comes with turning all silences into static examples of language and narration.

While in Morrison’s *Beloved*, time and space afford Sethe the ability to address her traumatic experiences, in Michael

14. Harald Victor Knutson and Aslaug Kristiansen, “Varieties of Silence: Understanding Different Form and Functions of Silence in a Psychotherapeutic Setting,” *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 51, no. 1 (2015): 4–5.

Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, the characters do not share this same privilege.¹⁵ Instead, they are situated in the thick of the Sri Lankan civil war—a war infamous for the fact that it forced a minority group, the Tamils, into implacable silence. In the context of this conflict, the characters' traumas remain too raw and their external world too volatile for them to talk about their pain safely; indeed, these figures have no choice but to remain in silence to survive. The stark contrast between the world of *Anil's Ghost* and that which Sethe inhabits is marked, highlighting the fact that no two traumatic contexts are the same and underscoring the need for a more nuanced treatment of silence in theories of trauma recovery and restoration that can accommodate these marked differences.

In 1983, the longstanding tension in Sri Lanka between the Sinhalese (predominantly Buddhist) and Tamils (predominantly Hindu) had reached its peak. For decades, the Sinhalese had “resented what they saw as British favouritism to the Tamils under colonial rule,” where colonial policies “privileged a Tamil ‘minority’ at the expense of a Sinhalese ‘majority.’”¹⁶ When Sri Lanka finally attained independence, the Sinhalese-led government adopted a series of policies and imposed several laws that elevated the status of the Buddhists and Sinhalese but oppressed the Tamil minority. As the human rights scholars and art historians Caroline Turner and John Webb note, the Tamils “had long protested against the laws that effectively discriminated against them in respect of entry to higher education and public service.”¹⁷ Their protests ultimately transformed into a violent uprising in 1983 when the armed Tamil national resistance, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), killed thirteen Sri Lankan soldiers.¹⁸ The state responded violently, and reacted with “acts of genocide against ordinary Tamil citizens,” catalysing an “endless cycle of violence and more violence” as both the state and LTTE continued to war and

15. Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost* (London: Vintage, 2011). All subsequent citations to this novel will be given in the text of this essay in parentheses.

16. Julie McGonegal, *Imagining Justice: The Politics of Postcolonial Forgiveness and Reconciliation* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), 83, 89.

17. Caroline Turner and Jenn Webb, *Art and Human Rights: Contemporary Asian Contexts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 83.

18. *Ibid.*

retaliate without restraint.¹⁹ In this conflict, the “vehemence of these two nationalisms” and both factions’ “incompatibility and unwillingness to compromise” ensnared them in a civil war that would claim over 100,000 civilian lives by its end in 2009.²⁰

With this state of violence as its backdrop, *Anil’s Ghost* focuses on the impact of the war on the Sri Lankan civilians. The act of demonstrating “public sorrow” against the war, however, was unthinkable, with fathers fearing that the act of protesting a child’s death would lead to further deaths in his family (52). For “if people you knew disappeared, there was a chance they might stay alive if you did not cause trouble” (52). In this state of civil war, language—typically a means of creating and demonstrating a shared sense of identity and belonging within families—is now the same thing that could destroy the family. This subversion of language and family caused extreme trauma—“a scarring psychosis”—in which the loss of the familiar created deep pockets of silence, spaces now emptied of language and its attendant bonds (52). The violent context of the civil war and the trauma it induces in *Anil’s Ghost’s* characters, make it untenable for them to speak. In order to represent the survivor’s traumatic experience, the novel both thematises and performs the process in which one becomes a witness who listens to silence without dragging it prematurely into the realm of language. The novel allows readers to witness the growth of its primary focaliser, Anil, as she develops acute insights into the importance of context for apprehending and understanding silence. As she becomes more observant of the Sri Lankans, Anil discovers that, far from saying nothing through their silence, these figures’ non-verbal gestures constitute another form of speaking. As she develops a greater appreciation of the context in which these silent characters live, Anil (and the reader) learns how to decode the language of their touch. In this way, Ondaatje’s novel demonstrates fiction’s capacity to do more than merely represent trauma as unspeakable. It also reveals the

19. McGonegal, *Imagining Justice*, 90.

20. *Ibid.*

way in which language may be used to trace the different realities, cultural contexts, and worlds of trauma, thus giving trauma's seemingly insurmountable silences a comprehensible shape.

Tears and Touch: Shaping a Witness Who Sees

Anil is a Sri Lankan woman who has spent most of her adulthood working in the West as a forensic scientist; she carries herself aloofly, proud that when she meets a guarded person who seems closed off, “she could close down too” (28). For Anil, silence is a choice—it is a romanticised form of power and control, and a defence mechanism through which she may protect herself from rejection. However, as Anil returns to Sri Lanka as part of a United Nations’ Human Rights Investigation to examine the increasing number of civilian deaths in the civil war, she is thrust into a context in which silence is a consequence of more tragic causes. Here she discovers the silence of survival (Sarath), the silence of a political death (Sailor), and the silence of trauma (Ananda). But for someone who perceives herself to be in control, as well as a person who, as a forensic scientist, unearths the dead’s “secrets,” Anil is unprepared for the impenetrable and frustrating silence of those she meets in Sri Lanka—a silence that refuses to yield to her investigations.

Initially, Anil insists on imposing her pre-existing framework of silence onto Sri Lankan culture, an approach that impedes her ability to recognise the precarious context in which the civilians are forced to exist. During an excavation job at her first dig site, Anil and her coworker, a local named Sarath, discover four skeletons. They name them “TINKER, TAILOR, SOLDIER, SAILOR” (51). Anil observes that the first three bodies are from the sixth century, but records that the bones of the fourth body, Sailor’s, “were still held together by dried ligaments, partially burned” (50). Anil immediately deduces that Sailor’s death was a recent one. She attempts to persuade

Sarath of her theory by using her geological knowledge:

Listen . . . there are traces of lead all over him. But there is no lead in this cave where we found him, the soil samples show none. . . . This is no ordinary murder or burial. They buried him, then later moved him to an older gravesite (51).

And yet, despite Anil's reasoning, Sarath's responses to the theory are by turns non-committal ("burying a body and then moving it is not necessarily a crime") and evasive ("Do you mean any murder . . . or do you mean political murder?") (51). Anil cannot understand why Sarath is deliberately obtuse and sceptical in the face of clear evidence of the body's relocation. Frustrated, Anil repeats her points "firmly," hoping to elicit Sarath's agreement. "It was buried no more than four to six years ago," she says. "What's it doing here? . . . I have to show you something. . . . *this thing. Listen.*" (52). But Sarath only deflects her questions once more.

Anil's demanding inquiries reveal the way that, as a scientist, she is used to pursuing the truth and drawing factual conclusions, no matter the implications. Indeed, in this context, Anil's detection of the potential injustice of the situation seems only to intensify her determination to discover the truth. However, Anil does not realise the contextual difference between working in the West and working in a country beleaguered by civil war. As such, she cannot understand why Sarath refuses to acknowledge the merit of her logical hypothesis. Instead, Sarath immediately recognises the danger in what they have discovered, and tries to dissuade Anil from drawing conclusions by delaying his answers with subtle digressions, perhaps hoping she will recognise his caution without him having to spell it out. But Anil's repetition of the word "*Listen*" as she tries to persuade Sarath of her theory only highlights her own deafness. It also underlines the fact that *she* is the one not listening to what Sarath is suggesting—not with his words but with his silence and subtle cues. After all, using explicit language to speak to injustice will not work in

the context of this country. Hence, in order to construct stories about the death and pain in this new world, Anil must reconstruct the way she gathers and presents her data. Henceforth, the purpose of Anil's journey will be as much about learning a new language as about discovering the truth of the skeleton's story.

After this episode, Anil's story reaches a turning point, when she is forced to work with a man completely inaccessible to her. As Anil and Sarath endeavour to identify the skeleton's identity, Sarath's former mentor, Palipana, refers them to an artificer who is said to be capable of recreating the unknown figure's face from its skull. Palipana explains that the artificer, Ananda, used to be one of the most renowned professionals in the country, someone who performed the sacred rites of the Nētra Mangala and painted the eyes of several 40-foot-tall Buddha statues. But, much to her disconcertion, Anil discovers that, after "a tragedy in his life," Ananda now "works in the gem pits" and has become such a heavy drinker that "it is not safe to be with him underground" (104). The fact that both Ananda and Anil cannot communicate in the same language adds to her wariness of him. His silence prevents her from using her preferred strategy of communicating—interrogating people about their work methods, as she interrogated Sarath in order to understand what he is trying to accomplish—and leads to her frustration.

Now with two silent mysteries to decode—that of Sailor the skeleton and Ananda—Anil begins to rely on her eyes more than her words to find answers. For the forensic scientist, Sailor proves to be the less complex mystery of the two. She describes her initial examination of the skeleton as "her reading of [his] bones," as though the figure is an "open book" with an easily discernible narrative (173). Her knowledge of the body and its functions gives her a thorough understanding of the causality of damage to the organism: how external activity has clear effects on the body. She recognises that the "agility"

of the skeleton's "pelvis, trunk and legs" indicates a "swivel of a man on a trampoline" (178). And Anil's highly-trained eye is able to both identify how this man's pelvis differs from the norm—it is hypermobile and more agile than usual—and infer the movement that is likely to have shaped his bones in this particular way. As she steps back from her initial, emotion-laden response to the injustice of Sailor's murder and forward into her position as a scientist, Anil establishes the necessary distance to see what Sailor's body, without words, is telling her.

Anil eventually begins to transfer these skills of observation onto the other subject of mystery: Ananda. As she watches the artificer sculpt Sailor's possible face, the narrative style shifts to reflect the scientific and objective manner in which she observes Sailor's bones:

He had marked several pins with red paint to represent the various thickness of the flesh over the bone, and then placed a thin layer of plasticine on the skull, thinning or thickening it according to the marks on the pins. Eventually he would press finer layers of rubber eraser onto the clay to build the face. Collaged this way with various household objects it would look like a five-and-dime monster. . . . When Ananda could go no further with the skull's reconstruction, he took it all apart, breaking up the clay. Strangely. It seemed like a waste of time to her. But early the next morning he would know the precise thickness and texture to return to and could re-create the previous day's work in twenty minutes (163–67).

Using little figurative language, Anil's description reflects the foreignness of Ananda's silent process. She does not compare the partially sculpted face to something human, nor anthropomorphise the face into something it is not. Instead, Anil's only metaphorical gesture is to compare the emerging face to a "five-and-dime monster," which does little to make it more comprehensible (168). Figurative language typically juxtaposes something known with something unknown so that the characteristics of the known provide a lens through which the unknown can be demystified. Yet in this instance, the figurative comparison only succeeds in emphasising the extent to which Ananda's process is unknowable, both to

Anil and the reader. It is far easier to imagine a partially sculpted face with various fragments of plasticine stuck to it than to picture a monster purchased at a bargain store. Thus, this unlikely metaphor suggests Anil's dissociation: in the sculpting process, she witnesses something so foreign that almost nothing in her broader epistemology, her wider frame of reference, can be likened to the scene. And when Anil witnesses this strange, "monstrous" process, she begins to see precisely what it is she does not know.

Anil's first experience of Ananda's silence is the result of the language barrier that divides them. Although their silence is unintentional, then, Anil's mute interaction with Ananda illustrates three key principles for bearing witness to another's traumatic silence in an ethical manner.²¹ First, since Anil and Ananda literally do not speak the same language, Anil must rely on cues rather than words to understand him. It is in this same way that witnesses expand their capacity to "read" a trauma survivor—by paying attention not just to what the survivor says but the manner in which they say it. Non-verbal language is, after all, a critical part of a survivor's narrative, testifying at times to the aspects that he or she struggles to express in words. Second, since Anil has no pre-existing frame of reference with which to conceptualise Ananda's working methods, she must observe his patterns and context carefully to make sense of his actions. The narrative style thus reflects Ananda's resistance to Anil's linguistic organisation of his work—his will that she should not "speak for" his process or impute her meaning into the sculpted head. After all, Anil has no way of knowing what his work is. Although Anil can do no other, her posture of deference to Ananda illustrates the way in which a deferential encounter with the trauma survivor's inner world is a way to meet him on his own terms. Third, without the ability to communicate verbally, Anil cannot urge Ananda to do things according to her schedule—to stop "wasting time," for instance, in

21. See Dori Laub, "Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening," in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (eds.), *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 80–92.

making, breaking up and remaking the face. Instead, she must let him go through the process of creation on his own terms and at his own pace. This illustrates the principle in which witnesses should respect the nature of the process and the time a survivor requires to work through their trauma and not uncritically prescribe a recovery method or restoration schedule. As it happens, Anil's inability to take control of Ananda's work is fortunate, as Ananda is trapped in a circuitous bout of traumatic silence. As Debra Jackson succinctly explains, such a silence may reflect a trap in which the temporal discontinuity of past and present must be resolved:

When a traumatic event occurs, the full realisation of its impact is not immediately accessible. Instead, there is a period of latency between the time of the traumatising event and the full emotional impact of the event. This belatedness . . . traps the survivor in a cycle of repetitions and re-enactments that make the traumatic event contemporaneous with the present.²²

Ananda's sculpting—which consists of compulsive, repetitive acts of making and breaking up the face—testifies to the nature of his traumatic silence, which hides in plain sight. Tasked with collaborating with the artificer, Anil adopts the position of the observant witness, and tries to overcome their language barrier that divides her and Ananda. And it is this very turn of events that affords Ananda the potential to transform his traumatic silence into what may be called a “speaking silence.”

Having taken a step back so that she can make thorough, objective observations of Ananda's conduct, Anil then moves “closer” to the situation by asking questions—questions through which she seeks to “fill in” her missing contextual knowledge. When Ananda finally completes his protracted sculpting process, Anil discovers his achievement: he has created a head so well-crafted that it “was not just how someone possibly looked” but a real and recognisable identity—“a specific person” (180). As Anil reflects, “It revealed a distinct personality, as real as the head of Sarath” (180). Anil identifies an aura of peacefulness in the

22. Debra Jackson, “Answering the Call: Crisis Intervention and Rape Survivor Advocacy as Witnessing Trauma,” in *Critical Trauma Studies: Understanding Violence, Conflict and Memory in Everyday Life*, eds. Monica J. Casper and Eric Wertheimer (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 206–207.

face—“a serenity in the face she did not see too often these days. There was no tension. A face comfortable with itself” (180). It is evident to Anil that Ananda possesses the skill and potential to deliver what her investigation requires: a lifelike representation of Sailor’s face that can be used to identify his body. But Anil lacks knowledge of Ananda’s background, and this ignorance stops her realising what is immediately apparent to Sarath: that the peacefulness of the face is not commendable or helpful but is precisely “the trouble” with it (180). When Sarath objects to the sculpture, Anil reacts with newfound curiosity and assertiveness. In this context, her willingness to ask Sarath “What do you mean?” (180) marks a change; she is no longer the “[closed] down” woman Sarath met at the start of the novel (28). Rather than being uninterested in what Sarath has to say, Anil is now willing to immerse herself in the difficulties of this new space, and is now committed to understanding the nuances of Sri Lankan culture. Sarath obliges to Anil’s request, explaining to her that, in the last few years, the Sri Lankan civilians had “seen so many heads stuck on poles here” that they had become commonplace; nevertheless, families would care for these heads, often taking them home in their arms, “wrapping them in their shirts or just cradling them” (180). As Anil learns, however, Ananda did not have the “privilege” of retrieving the head of his wife, Sirissa; she had “simply disappeared and there was no sighting or evidence of [her] existence or [her] death” (180). After three years, Sarath explains, Ananda “still hasn’t found her. He was not always like this. The head he has made is therefore peaceful” (180). As it turns out, then, the sculpted head is not a reflection of his artificer’s skills; it is, rather, a work that reflects his heart’s deepest needs.

Anil’s willingness to include Sarath in her investigation draws her closer to the heart of the story and opens her eyes to “see” something that was not previously apparent to her. Even though the sculpted head is not the “truth”

that Anil looks for—the face of the man who could be Sailor—she sees something in it that is significant: it is a face representing the ones who have disappeared. When Anil learns of Ananda’s story, she is affected deeply: she “could no longer look at the face, [and] saw only Ananda’s wife in every aspect of it,” and before long, she “began weeping” (180). The objective gaze of Anil the scientist is replaced here with a different kind of scopic regime, one defined by a kind of imploring blindness. As Jacques Derrida wrote of this kind of vision in his *Memoirs of the Blind*, to see in this way has always been a part of the eye’s destiny:

Deep down, deep down inside, the eye would be destined not to see but to weep. . . . The blindness that reveals the very truth of the eyes would be the gaze veiled by tears. It neither sees nor does not see: it is indifferent to its blurred vision. It implores: first of all in order to know from where these tears stream down and from whose eyes they come to well up.²³

While Anil’s objective gaze allowed her to apprehend her subjects at a distance and remain an outsider, partly indifferent to the ramifications of the civil war, her tears now signify an emotional response: Anil has allowed the story to touch her. Significantly, when Ananda sees Anil’s tears, he responds in a silent but meaningful way, “creas[ing] away the pain around her eye along with her tears’ wetness [and] knead[ing] the skin of that imploded tension of weeping as if hers too was a face being sculpted” (183). If the cold, impervious gaze of the forensic scientist is seen through eyes that, like those of a sculpture, are, as Derrida writes, “always closed,” “walled up,” or “turned inward, more dead than alive, scared stiff, more than the eyes of masks,” then Anil’s tears represent the instant in which these “dead eyes” crack open and bring her into commune with her humanness.²⁴ The intimacy of Ananda’s touch “sculpts” her into life, alerting her to the life—not the death—before her. In seeing the world beyond her own experience and witnessing the pain of another, Anil finally recognises that “it was not a reconstruction of Sailor’s face they were looking at” but a face of Ananda’s grief (180).

23. Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self Portrait and Other Ruins*, tr. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 126–27.

24. *Ibid.*, 44.

Repetition and Touch: Shaping a Narrative that Speaks

In *Anil's Ghost*, the trope of touch underlines the importance of “seeing” the hidden story not immediately obvious to the gaze. And unlike the gaze, touch requires a certain closeness with the subject. As a forensic scientist, Anil’s discoveries are born of her scopic observations. However, it is not only visual observation that gives Anil new insight into the subjects of her inquiries. When Anil observes Sailor’s heel bones and left leg, which was “broken badly in two places,” she recognises something unforeseen about Sailor, who she had previously considered an active, working man. As she discovers, Sailor’s bone characteristics indicate “an alternate profile completely, a man static and sedentary” (174). Initially, Anil does not have enough contextual knowledge to make sense of this inconsistency—this particular “silence” in Sailor’s story. But, quite by chance, Anil soon notices Ananda squatting while he works. She asks to touch his heel to test her hunch that Sailor may have worked in a similar posture. In response, Ananda tells Sarath that “he got used to squatting in the gem mines” where he worked (175). This is just the piece of information Anil needs, as it allows her to conclude that “under his flesh,” Ananda has the same “strictures on the ankle bones of the skeleton” as Sailor, which in turn indicates that, like Ananda, “Sailor worked in one of the mines” (176). Here, Anil’s precise observations about the effects of crouching on Sailor’s body are guided by the tactile data collected by her hands, unravelling part of the mystery of Sailor. If distant observation allows Anil to identify signifiers with unknown signifieds, then it is the intimacy of touch that narrows the meaning of these signs to only a few logical possibilities. Having thus “filled in the blanks,” Anil tells Sarath “we have a story about him, you see.” He was “a man who was active, an acrobat almost, then he was injured and had to work in a mine” (176). Sailor’s silence

thus “speaks” when Anil’s touch confirms what her eyes have already suspected, allowing her to “hear” an account of his story.

Although Anil decodes Sailor’s silence, when she abandons her own working hypotheses about Ananda’s silence, she shifts the responsibility of listening to him to readers. Thus, the novel deploys a narrative strategy in which it sutures its readers to Anil’s perspective so that we do not see or know anything else but what she allows us to. In this way, readers experience the challenge of piecing together a context from the handful of observations that Anil conveys to us. First, we know that Anil has watched Ananda enough to notice specific repetitions in his behaviour; second, we know that these repetitions have allowed him to produce a beautiful work of art; but third, we know that the very beauty of this artwork has tormented him, leading to his suicide attempt. As discrete narrative points, none of these observations can yield any significant meaning. But as these observations are lined up next to one another, the specific combination of information gives shape to what Ananda cannot say. His silence is no longer an infinite, unexplainable chasm but is sutured together through the links that connect these otherwise disparate observations.

The gathering of information via touch proves to be as crucial for Ananda as for Anil. Unable to comprehend the disappearance of his wife, Ananda remains blinded to the full causality and narrative of his internal chaos. In their research about trauma restoration through clay therapy, Cornelia Elbrecht and Liz R. Antcliff take their cue from psychologists Peter Levine and Maggie Kline, who argue that “it is not the gravity of the event that defines trauma, but the level of experienced helplessness.”²⁵ For Elbrecht and Antcliff, trauma is a situation that renders an individual so helpless that their central nervous system remains in fight-or-flight mode, and is thus “thwarted” from being “switched off.”²⁶ In this context, the traumatised subject’s helplessness is so overwhelming that their body perceives the threat as ongoing. As

25. Cornelia Elbrecht and Liz R. Antcliff, “Being Touched through Touch: Trauma Treatment through Haptic Perception at the Clay Field, A Sensorimotor Art Therapy,” *International Journal of Art Therapy* 19, no. 1 (2014): 21.

26. *Ibid.*

a result, their body locks itself into a perpetual survival mode and experiences “hyper arousal, hyper vigilance, and emotional and somatic numbing”—even more so when triggered by subsequent events that recall this initial helplessness.²⁷ Elbrecht and Antcliff’s research provides a lens through which to analyse Ananda. When tasked with sculpting the face of a murdered man so that his family might be able to identify him—a family that would have endured the same experience of having a loved one disappear—Ananda is triggered to “see” the pain and helplessness of his own loss again. The magnitude of his pain impedes his ability to sculpt objectively, blurring the line between his loss and that of Sailor’s family. Presumably, Ananda too wants the chance to identify her face from a sculpture.

If his commission to sculpt a missing person’s face is a traumatic trigger, the process of sculpting is arguably what brings him closer to his “restoration.” For Elbrecht and Antcliff, trauma restoration is not so much about “remembering what happened” as about enabling the body to find a way to complete the thwarted fight-or-flight impulse.²⁸ As they propose, a successful completion of the fight-or-flight response “resets the structures within the brain,” establishing a process in which “individuals can move from survival to living.”²⁹ Given that, as they write, “hands driven by the innate memory are more concerned with creating and recreating implicit memories rather than the recall of specific trauma events,” Elbrecht and Antcliff conclude that working with clay has the potential to help the traumatised subject “complete unfinished action cycles that were interrupted through dissociation during the traumatic event.”³⁰ Moreover, through actions like sculpting and manipulating clay, traumatised subjects “discover physical impulses and options that they had abandoned for the sake of survival during the trauma.”³¹ In other words, this tactile process allows traumatised subjects to convey what has not been completely expressed during the traumatic

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, 22.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

situation, and “what happened [to them] is *told by the hands* through the present moment experience of touch in the Clay Field, rather than through cognitive recall of memories.”³² For Ananda, who is denied even the ability to “cradle” the beheaded skull of his wife (180), the repeated sculpting of a head becomes his way of “speaking” about the insurmountable difficulty of never discovering her whereabouts. The extent of Ananda’s helplessness manifests itself in the sculpture, which reflects the fact that his wife is always just out of his grasp: in shaping her face, he re-enacts the multiple times in which he appears to be close to finding her; in breaking up the face, he re-enacts the time his hopes have been dashed.

If touch is a way for a witness to see, it is also a way for a trauma survivor to speak. Significantly, each of Ananda’s attempts to sculpt is not a pointless repetition that leaves him stuck in the same place from which he started. He could always “recreate the previous day’s work in twenty minutes,” could proceed onwards from the beginning before destroying his work again (163). Ananda does not engage in merely the blind repetition of *acting out* one’s trauma, where one is, as LaCapra notes, “performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes—scenes in which the past returns and the future is blocked or fatalistically caught up in a melancholic feedback loop.”³³ Rather, Ananda’s repetitions, each with a difference, constitute a process of *working through* his trauma. The process echoes the Freudian “talking cure,” in which, as Hanna Pickard notes, patients are urged to “re-live the trauma in the presence of the therapist, who actively encourages and helps them to put the experience into words” so as to “promote the elaboration and temporal contextualisation of the trauma memory.”³⁴ In every attempt to tell the story, even minor additions and amendments represent an advancement towards the production of something more complete. By externalising the story, Pickard writes, and by “creating a clear, coherent, and temporally ordered narrative of the traumatic event,” patients are thought

32. *Ibid.*
(Emphasis mine.)

33. Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 21.

34. Hanna Pickard, “Stories of Recovery: The Role of Narrative and Hope in Overcoming PTSD and PD,” *The Oxford Handbook of Psychiatric Ethics*, eds. John Z. Sadler, K. W. M. Fulford and Cornelius Werendly van Staden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 5.

to better recognise how their memories may be “integrated into [their] life story.”³⁵ Thus, as Ananda’s hands speak for him, they also form a clearer picture of his loss. In sculpting the face in fits and starts, his hands become like those of someone who cannot see; for, as Derrida writes, the hand of the blind man “feels its way, it gropes, it caresses as much as it inscribes, trusting in the memory of signs and supplementing sight.”³⁶ The haptic sensation of a hand caressing clay, beholding what it touches, “speaks” of the wife whose loss Ananda cannot bear, affording him a way to tenderly apprehend her memory. There is a comfort in this manner of speaking, as the time it takes to sculpt a face also allows Ananda to get used to thinking of her, helping him to honour her memory without turning away in guilt or despair.

Although the practice of sculpting finally steadies Ananda’s emotions, allowing him to confront the significance of his loss, it is notable that trauma survivors often resist working through their grief. As LaCapra writes,

In working through the past in a manner that enables survival or a reengagement in life, one is betraying those who were overwhelmed and consumed by that traumatic past. One’s bond with the dead... may invest trauma with value and makes its reliving a painful but necessary commemoration or memorial to which one remains dedicated or at least bound.³⁷

Although Ananda is bound to relive and commemorate the loss of his wife, his achievement of narrative closure, which occurs when he completes what Elbrecht and Antcliff call the “unfinished action cycles” that are “interrupted through dissociation during the traumatic event,” comes at a considerable cost to him.³⁸ Through crystallising his narrative and thus giving shape to a void, Ananda inevitably also acknowledges that his wife is gone for good. Ananda’s completed sculpture, which recreates the three-dimensional presence of his lost wife, constitutes the closest thing to her real presence—and the process of creating the sculpture constitutes the closest thing to bringing her back into his life. Yet, the

35. Ibid.

36. Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 3.

37. LaCapra, *Writing History*, 21–22.

38. Elbrecht and Antcliff, “Being Touched Through Touch,” 24.

verisimilitude of this artform, which is *almost* lifelike, only reinforces what it is certainly not: the face and body of his wife. Once complete, Ananda's recognition of the sculpture's difference from his lost wife is crushing; it proves too much for him to handle, and leads him to try and take his own life that very evening (191).

Like the anomalous, tell-tale signs on Sailor's bones, which need the eye of a trained forensic scientist to identify their presence and meaning, both Ananda's silent sculpting and his suicide attempt can only be "heard" in the presence of a witness. Anil finds Ananda "trying with what energy he had left to stab himself in the throat" (191)—a haunting image of traumatic silence struggling to cry out. And Anil's presence as Ananda's witness literally saves his life, as she applies pressure to the wound in his neck. As she does so, Anil notices that "his eyes were wide open" and "seemed to be swallowing everything"; as Ananda was not wearing his spectacles, "he couldn't see" (193). She quickly puts them back on his face, allowing his eyes to focus on her, and "suddenly . . . he seemed to be back with her, among the living" (193). Like the therapist who, on listening to a patient's story multiple times, notices recurring patterns and themes that the patient is unable to see, Anil gives Ananda his sight back when she returns his spectacles to his face.³⁹ Portraying Ananda as a trauma survivor who has seen too much pain, the novel suggests that the touch of a witness is what both keeps a survivor grounded in the present and prevents them from being overwhelmed by the past.

* * *

Anil's Ghost exemplifies the way in which contemporary trauma fiction invents and imagines new ways to think and speak about trauma. But the novel also illustrates how literature can be respectful of the deep struggle that is involved in working through one's trauma. In their excavation work, Anil and

39. Pickard, "Stories of Recovery," 5.

Sarath may have named the dead bodies that they found “TINKER, TAILOR, SOLDIER, SAILOR” (51)—generic names from a children’s ditty that are “representative of all the lost voices” (56)—and work hard to discover Sailor’s story in an effort to bring justice to the victims of the civil war. However, these characters (and the novel) omit the other names that follow in the ditty. Thus, the absence, but alluded presence, of the names “rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief” signifies the names that have not yet been given to the bodies that have not yet been found—and the stories that are yet to be told. One cannot claim that the novel proposes a manner in which storytelling can restore the traumatised; after all, by leaving some things just out of the reader’s grasp, the novel prevents one from asserting that they have understood its silence perfectly. Nevertheless, the many depictions of touch that are woven into the novel remind us, as Karen Mackendrick writes, that “touch is language without resolution.”⁴⁰ And, as she continues, “the knowledge given to us by touch is always partial, and passes over, and returns. . . . It always leaves more to be desired.”⁴¹ In the same way, a fictive representation of a traumatic event is just that—fictive; it too always leaves us desiring more of the knowledge it gives to us. And yet, trauma fiction does offers us something: a brush with, or glimpse of, an emotional world we will never fully comprehend. As such, it is a world that calls for our continual attention.

40. Karmen Mackendrick, *Word Made Skin: Figuring Language at the Surface of Flesh* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 65.

41. *Ibid.*, 52.

“SHUT UP OR I’LL SHUT YOU UP”: FAMILY VIOLENCE IN CHRISTINA STEAD’S *THE MAN WHO LOVED CHILDREN*

SAMANTHA LEWIS

Introduction

IN AN ESSAY for *The New York Times* titled “Rereading *The Man Who Loved Children*,” author Jonathan Franzen writes the following of Christina Stead’s famous 1940 novel: it “operates at a pitch of psychological violence that makes *Revolutionary Road* look like *Everybody Loves Raymond*.” The novel, Franzen further suggests, is “so retrograde as to accept what we would call ‘abuse’ as a natural feature of the familial landscape” and intrudes “on our better-regulated world like a bad dream from the grandparental past.”¹ *The Man Who Loved Children* follows the experiences of the dysfunctional Pollit family, which consists of Samuel (“Sam”) Pollit, Sam’s second wife Henny Collyer, and their six children. It chronicles the family’s attempt to navigate the destabilised political and cultural landscape of Washington, DC, in the 1930s and during the Great

1. Jonathan Franzen, “Rereading *The Man Who Loved Children*,” *New York Times*, June 3, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/06/books/review/Franzen-t.html>.

Depression.² Despite the novel's pleasant-sounding (and ironic) title, even the most cursory reading of the book reveals the shocking scope and volume of abuse and violence between its covers—violence ranging from verbal insults and threats through to physical assault, gaslighting, surveillance, rape, murder, and suicide. While the novel's violence is primarily perpetrated by Sam and directed towards Henny and their children, some violence is also perpetrated by Henny and directed towards Sam and the children. Despite the novel's shocking depictions of abuse, Franzen characterises the violence as “a potentially comic feature”—extreme to the point of absurdity. Indeed, for those not familiar with the complexities and realities of family violence, the language and behaviours of the novel's characters may at first appear unbelievable, even melodramatic. But a reading of the novel that takes the characters' violence seriously—particularly in light of Hazel Rowley's claim that that the novel constitutes a recount of Stead's traumatic childhood “exactly word for word”³—suggests not only that the *The Man Who Loved Children* is a believable violence narrative, but one that is consistent with several theories of family violence expounded in the social sciences over the last two decades. In this article, I propose to reread Stead's novel in light of these contemporary sociological theories of violence, and to demonstrate that family violence has changed very little in the 70 years since the novel's publication. Indeed, as I will argue, *The Man Who Loved Children* contains one of the most nuanced and insightful explorations of family violence in twentieth-century Australian fiction.

2. The novel was originally set in Sydney in the early 1910s, but both its setting and time period were allegedly changed by Stead's American publisher, Simon & Schuster, in the hope that the novel would appeal to a wider readership. See Hazel Rowley, *Christina Stead: A Biography* (Melbourne: Heinemann, 1993), 260–61.

3. *Ibid.*, 499.

Family Violence and the Control Context

Since the early 1990s, family violence researchers have separated family violence into different types. This classification was in response to the problematic methodologies previously developed by sociologists in large-scale social surveys, which tended to lump qualitatively distinct violence together while

ignoring key aspects in each case, such as the associated context, relationship history, fear, and the extent of the injuries inflicted by the abuser.⁴ Among a new breed of scholars of violence from the 1990s, the sociologist Michael P. Johnson constructed a control-based typology of family violence that offers a more thorough understanding of the context within which different types of family violence could occur. For Johnson, several types of violence may be “distinguished from each other by the control context within which they are embedded.”⁵ By “control,” Johnson refers to power; that is, his analysis focuses on who holds power over whom in the relationship, and how that power is constructed and maintained. As such, Johnson also classifies intimate partner violence into four “types,” namely: intimate terrorism, violent resistance, situational couple violence, and mutual violent control. As Johnson writes,

In intimate terrorism, the perpetrator uses violence in the service of general control over his or her partner; the partner does not. In violent resistance, the partner is violent and controlling—an intimate terrorist—and the resister’s violence arises in reaction to that attempt to exert general control. In mutual violent control, both members of the couple use violence in attempts to gain general control over their partner . . . In the fourth type of intimate partner violence, situation couple violence, the perpetrator is violent (and his or her partner may be as well); however, neither of them uses violence to attempt to exert general control.⁶

While short-term control is often the goal of violent actors in non-family contexts, such as in instances of common assault or robbery, the control sought by violent actors within the family or intimate partner context—particularly by an “intimate terrorist”—is a form of long-term control.⁷ Forms of long-term control are complex and totalising, generally reaching beyond physical forms of control and extending into other aspects of an affected person’s life, including their social networks, financial independence,

4. Michael P. Johnson and Kathleen Ferraro, “Research on Domestic Violence in the 1990s: Making Distinctions,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 62, no. 4 (2000): 948–63.

5. Michael P. Johnson, “Domestic Violence: It’s Not about Gender: Or Is It?,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67, no. 5 (2005): 1126–30.

6. Michael P. Johnson, *A Typology of Domestic Violence* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2008), 5.

7. *Ibid.* 37–38.



Figure 1. The Power and Control Wheel.⁹

and self-esteem. As Johnson claims, each act of violence, be it a verbal threat or physical assault, “is embedded in a larger pattern of power and control that permeates the relationship.”⁸ In this context, analysing isolated incidents of violence, as many traditional quantitative surveys have done, amounts to an incomplete method of measuring family violence. Instead, studies of violence, Johnson suggests, must consider each incident within the wider history and context of the family or intimate relationship. In what follows, I will take up Johnson’s first two types of intimate partner violence—“intimate terrorism” and “violent resistance”—to interrogate the nature of the violence depicted in Stead’s *The Man Who Loved Children*.

8. Ibid., 18 (figure 1.1).

9. Ibid. 6.

Intimate Terrorism

In order to explain the relationship between violent and non-violent tactics of control, it is necessary to distinguish these categories of coercion. Johnson refers to a model developed by social workers Ellen Pence and Michael Paymar in 1993, which they call “The Power and Control Wheel” (figure 1).⁹ As the wheel indicates, various non-violent control tactics are “held together” by the credible threat and/or history of violence perpetrated by an intimate terrorist. Like Johnson, Catherine Kirkwood describes this general structure or system of control as a “web of abuse”—a system wherein each tactic is mutually supportive of the others, so that if one strand fails another always remains intact, ensuring the perpetrator maintains their control.¹⁰ Among these tactics, a perpetrator’s non-violent tactics may include economic control and forced financial dependency, the use of gender norms and stereotypes to justify superiority or inferiority, or the exploitation and abuse of children. Other similarly non-violent tactics may include surveillance, forced isolation from social networks, denials of responsibility, victim blaming through gaslighting or the manipulation of reality, and other emotionally violent actions including insults, bullying, and threats. Cumulative and insidious, these threats often begin to affect victims long before they have the ability to realise what is occurring. Through the use of credible threats, which increase the likelihood of immediately damaging physical and sexual violence, perpetrators use these non-violent tactics to render their control even more threatening.

Violent Resistance

Violent resistance refers to the actions taken by victims of violence in response to threats by their abusers, which is often a means of self-protection or self-preservation. Victims may use violent resistance to guard against a threat posed against

10. Ellen Pence and Michael Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter: The Duluth Model* (New York: Springer, 1993), 7.

11. Catherine Kirkwood, *Leaving Abusive Partners: From the Scars of Survival to the Wisdom for Change* (California: Sage, 1993), 58–61.

them personally or against their children or loved ones. More broadly, violent resistance may be “expressive of the frustration generated by abuse borne over a long period of time.”¹² In *Typology of Violence*, Johnson cites an “important study” by Angela Browne from her book *When Battered Women Kill*.¹³ As Johnson writes, Browne’s study finds that women who kill their male partners are “more likely to have experienced frequent attacks, severe injuries, sexual abuse, and death threats against themselves or others” than other victims.¹⁴ The women in Browne’s study were, Johnson writes, “caught in *a web of abuse* that seemed to be out of control.”¹⁵ The vast majority of homicides carried out by these women took place either just before or during an attack at the hands of their partner—a fact that suggests their actions belong to the “violent resistance” category and that their abusers’ actions to the “intimate terrorist” category. Johnson’s analysis and Browne’s study highlight the key distinction between the violence of intimate terrorists and of violent resisters. While intimate terrorists ordinarily use violence to *maintain* control, violent resisters use violence because they *lack* control. Acknowledging the usefulness of this distinction, this article will bring this typology to bear on the characters of Sam and Henny in *The Man Who Loved Children*. These two categories are not only useful for exploring Sam and Henny, however; they may be used to explore an aspect of the violent ecosystem that Johnson’s book does not address in detail: the meaning and effect of these kinds of violence for and on children.

12. Johnson, *Typology*, 52–53.

13. Angela Browne, *When Battered Women Kill* (New York: Free Press, 1987).

14. Johnson, *Typology*, 55.

15. *Ibid.* My italics.

16. See, for “narcissistic” and “egotistical,” Teresa Holtby, “Hurts so Good: Masochism in Christina Stead’s *The Man Who Loved Children*,” *JASAL: Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 14, no. 5 (2014): 2; for a “fascist,” Diana Brydon, *Christina Stead* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1987), 11.

Samuel Pollit, Intimate Terrorist

Sam is the Pollit family patriarch and the man of the novel’s ironic title. Various described by critics as “narcissistic,” “egotistical,” a “fascist,” “sadistic,” and a “despot,” Sam is the quintessential model of Johnson’s intimate terrorist.¹⁶ He works hard to maintain his position at the centre of the Pollit family universe, and constantly invents stories, songs, games,

and household tasks to keep his children focused on him and him alone. Physically, Sam even resembles the sun, with his “golden-white” arms and “yellow-red hair” seeming to render him a star around which his children revolve, just as the planets revolve around the sun.¹⁷ The plot follows Sam’s increasingly desperate attempts to maintain his position of authority in the family while he loses his job and social standing, and as his children grow up and begin to rebel against him.

Sam is a naturalist by trade and philosophy, a fact that, as Michael Ackland argues, explains his “scientific treatment of the world” and his “drive to order, name and create everything in his life” that links him “with either Darwin or despotic czarism.”¹⁸ For Sam, the two are interchangeable: his belief in social Darwinism informs his running of the Pollit household, and extends to a czarist vision of an ideal society:

“If I were autocrat of all nations,” with “supreme power, the lives of all, the life of the world in my hands,” he told [the children] what he would do. For example, he might arrange the killing off of nine tenths of mankind in order to make room for the fit. “This would be done by gas attacks on people living ignorant of their fate in selected areas, a type of eugenic concentration-camp; they would never know, but be hurled painlessly into eternity, or they would pass into the lethal chamber of time and never feel a pang.” (392)

Violence fundamentally structures Sam’s worldview; he sees violence as a tool wielded by the strong against the weak for the betterment of society. Relatedly, he is also a misogynist. He believes women are naturally inferior to men and uses this belief to maintain the strict gender hierarchy of the household. As Elleke Boehmer writes, while Sam “seeks to mould his sons in his image”—something pristinely clear in his decision to name one of his sons “Little-Sam”—“he imposes culturally subservient roles upon his daughters and subjects his wife to relentless verbal and financial persecution.”¹⁹ The women must cook and clean, but when the food is served, it is “thick for the lads, thin for the girls” (58).

17. Christina Stead, *The Man who Loved Children* [1940] (London: Apollo, 2016), 50. All subsequent references to the novel in this article are given in parentheses and are to this edition of the text.

18. Michael Ackland, “Breeding ‘Reptiles of the Mind’: Blake’s Dialectics of Vision and Stead’s Critique of Polity in *The Man Who Loved Children*,” *Studies in the Novel* 38, no. 2 (2006): 236.

19. Elleke Boehmer, “Daughters of the House: The Adolescent Girl and the Nation,” in *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester University Press, 2005), 112.

Women do not deserve the vote because “they is crazy” (117), their single destiny is marriage and children, and they are only valuable if they are physically attractive. The parallels between Sam and an autocratic dictator are clear: as Boehmer notes, “To Sam, the world, like the home, is an arena in which to actualise his authoritarian, eugenicist beliefs: there is little in his view to distinguish the two spheres.”²⁰

One striking example of Sam’s use of violence as a tool of social Darwinism occurs when he empties a bucket of fish offal over the head of his son, Little-Sam. Having been forced to clean up his father’s fish oil experiment, Little-Sam becomes nauseous and spills a bucket of offcuts on the ground. Sam forces his son to continue shovelling fish parts to teach him and the other children a lesson in the “[t]riumph of mind over matter” (515). Predictably, Little-Sam’s nausea gets worse and, after “look[ing] mutinously up at his father,” he “turned from the family, and disgraced himself.” As the other children protest Sam’s treatment of Little-Sam, Sam decides to “finish this” himself, filling the bucket with offal and “flinging the liquid all over [Little-Sam], drenching him” (517). He then proselytises,

“Kids, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest!²¹ Little-Sam could and did get over his abhorrence, you see! And if I didn’t have a lot of interfering, miserable beasts,” he gave a kind of malicious smile at the two little girls, “I’d have you all right in no time.” (517–18)

For Sam, violence and humiliation are character-building; they teach his children the same resilience and strength he sees in himself. The irony of the novel’s title is clear.

SURVEILLANCE

As Pence and Paymar’s model demonstrates, power and control are at the heart of an intimate terrorist’s thoughts and behaviours. As I have already claimed, there is a stark parallel between Sam’s image of an ideal society and the ways in

20. *Ibid.*, 112.

21. This line is a direct quote from *The Book of Common Prayer*, reflecting Sam’s belief that his own words are akin to holy scripture and must be respected and obeyed as such. See Rev. Rowley Hill, *Sunday School Lessons; Explaining and Illustrating the Subject of the Collects* (London: James Nisbet and Co., 1866), 4.

which he controls his family. Sam's desire for control is particularly evident when the narrator, focalising the narrative through Sam, describes the metaphorical nature of vision:

He favoured a bureaucratic state socialism with the widest possible powers and a permanent staff, a bureaucracy intricately engineered, which would gradually engulf all the powers great and small. . . . In his mind's eye he saw internations within internations; and overnations over nations . . . rising to one crest of supreme judgement, sitting in a room; all glass, no doubt, with windows on the world. (332)

This description of a surveillance state foreshadows the world of George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; and it even evokes Michel Foucault's metaphorical panopticon in *Discipline and Punish*,²² wherein the architectural structure controls "prisoners" through the threat of constant observation by those in power—people who are themselves undetectable and unobservable. The Pollit household is thus Sam's ideal surveillance state in microcosm, and his tendency to spy on his children—and particularly his eldest daughter Louie—both reflects and structures his desire for power. For example, Sam constantly checks that Louie is reading the "correct" books (22, 398), and searches through her bedroom when she is absent:

He poked and pried into her life, always with a scientific moral purpose, stealing into her room when she was absent, noting her mottoes on the wall, and investigating her linen, shivering with shame when suggestive words came into her mouth. . . . He would be her constant companion: they would communicate thoughts, and she would be drawn to his side. With mental lip-licking, he followed her into her most secret moments. (347)²³

22. Michael Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* [1975] (Pantheon Books, 1977).

23. For discussion of incest between Sam and his daughters, see Ackland, "Breeding 'Reptiles of the Mind,'" 245; and Boone, "Of Fathers," 523–525.

As Louie's rebellion against her overbearing father reaches its climax toward the end of the novel, so too does Sam's desire to observe and control Louie reach its zenith. Sam threatens to take her out of school—her last remaining external support network—in order to monitor her. "You are coming home to me," he insists, "and I am going to watch every book you read, every

thought you have.” (579) Having realised that Sam is reading her secret diaries, Louie invents her own coded language that only she can understand, which affords her some semblance of security and privacy from the all-encompassing superintendence of her father.²⁴

LANGUAGE

Sam’s desire for power and control also manifests in his use of language. Not only does Sam use language to insult his wife and children (with terms such as “gutter rat,” “great fat lump,” and “piggish”); he also uses language to manipulate their perceptions of reality through “gaslighting.” Psychiatrist Theodore Dorpat describes gaslighting as a type of “brainwashing” used to “undermine [the] victim’s belief system and replace it with another.” It operates, he writes, “by causing the victim to question [their] own abilities for thinking, perceiving, and reality testing.”²⁵ More broadly, gaslighting is commonly used in totalitarian regimes, and has recently been identified as operative in the United States under the Trump administration.²⁶

Sam’s excessive “baby talk,” which Franzen describes as “an endlessly inventive cascade of alliteration, nonsensical rhymes, puns, running jokes, clashing diction levels, and private references” is his primary gaslighting tool.²⁷ As Heather Stewart argues, Sam uses this language to “keep his children perpetually young or, like puppets, always in his control.”²⁸ Sam’s domination of the household’s linguistic system, and the indoctrination of his children into that system from birth, means that he is able to control what and how his children can think and speak. He also uses this language to position himself as “one of the kids,” gaining their trust, and portraying himself, in Duffy’s words, as an “ineffectual innocent, of apparently denying his own adult ego,” and escaping blame and consequences for his actions.²⁹ Having cultivated his children’s trust through their shared language, Sam is able to gaslight them further, convincing them that their

24. Stead, *Ibid.*, 377.

25. Theodore L. Dorpat, *Gaslighting, the Double Whammy, Interrogation, and Other Methods of Covert Control in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis* (London: Jason Aronson, 1996), 33–34.

26. See Andrea Chalupa and Sarah Kenzior, *Gaslit Nation*, MP3 audio, <https://www.patreon.com/gaslit>.

27. Franzen, “Re-reading,” 59.

28. Heather Stewart, “Feminism and Male Chauvinism in the Writings of Christina Stead (1902–1983),” *Hecate* 29, no. 2 (2003): 116.

29. Julia Duffy, “The Grain of the Voice in Christina Stead’s *The Man Who Loved Children*,” *Antipodes* 4, no. 1 (1990): 48.

mother Henny is the true villain of the household. Sam regularly refers to her as the “devil” and takes “each of his children aside . . . and [tells them], in simple language, the true story of his disillusionment”: “Oh, the hell, where there should have been heaven!” (35), he exclaims. In other words, Sam uses language to deny, deflect, and minimise his own involvement in the suffering of others, while convincing the children that he is the real victim of their mother’s hatred. In cases where the father is an intimate terrorist, language, Johnson notes, plays a key role in their repertoire. Just as Sam deceives his children through his words, the intimate terrorist uses language to convince his children that “he *should* be in charge, that he does know what is best (father knows best), and that [the children’s mother] is incompetent or stupid or immoral.”³⁰

Stead allows the reader to experience this form of linguistic dominance through the narrative’s shifting focalisation. In an essay on *The Man Who Loved Children*, Joseph A. Boone observes that Sam’s “overbearing textual presence threatens to undo the reader’s autonomy, forcing our submission and straining our patience to breaking point.”³¹ The reader’s perturbation with Sam intensifies as his perspective dominates the first half of the novel; however, this tension is later partially released as other perspectives are introduced. For example, when Louie begins to challenge Sam’s authority through the adoption of the language of classical poetry, both she and the reader begin to realise—more than halfway through the novel—that the family has unknowingly been sliding into poverty:

Now Louie noticed, *for the first time*, that they had only one glass for water. . . . It dawned upon her that they had had no glasses for a long time; and then she called to mind a slow dwindling in goods, over years. She remembered that once they had had dozens of engraved water glasses . . . which had been with them for years, and then had come plain glasses got at the ten-cent stores, and then gift glasses got with packets of tea, until now they had only one in the world. (431; italics mine.)

30. Johnson, *Typology*, 8.

31. Boone, “Of Fathers,” 515.

As Joan Lidoff notes, when Louie “discovers the power of language, she is able to reshape the family perception of reality.”³² Similarly, when Louie’s school teacher Miss Aiden comes to visit the Pollit household, her outsider perspective on the family’s circumstances shatters the illusion that Sam’s language system has created, both for the family and the reader:

The Pollits lived in a poverty that to her was actually incredible. They lacked everything. She was shown the bathroom, and found herself in a shanty with wooden walls and a roughly cemented floor. . . . Instead of toilet paper, they used cut-up newspaper; there was no bathmat but a sodden crisscross of slats. ‘I had no idea,’ thought Miss Aiden, ‘that there was a place as primitive in the whole world’; and she began to wonder how they lived at all. (440)

When Louie runs away from home at the novel’s conclusion, she makes a striking observation as she turns back to face the house: “Things certainly *looked* different: they were no longer part of herself but objects that she could freely consider without prejudice” (551; italics mine). These fresh realisations demonstrate the power of language to shape reality. In this case, not only is the “reality” experienced by the novel’s characters (the children) destabilised when Sam’s language is no longer there to shape it, but so too is the reader’s reality transformed, which has until now been shaped by Sam’s focalised perspective. As Lidoff notes, “the power of language to shape vision is one of Stead’s central subjects.”³³

PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

The power of language to shape vision also extends to Stead’s graphic representations of physical and sexual violence in the novel. Although not witnessed directly by the children or the reader, several instances of violence are implied through the presentation of onomatopoeic sounds, such as crashes and bangs, or portrayed through descriptions of indecipherable yelling from another room. Although the violence is diegetically “invisible” in the text, its echoes permeate the house—as well

33. Lidoff, “Domestic Gothic,” 202.

32. Joan Lidoff, “Domestic Gothic: The Imagery of Anger in Christina Stead’s ‘Man Who Loved Children’” in *Studies in the Novel* 11, no. 2 (1979): 204.

as in the children's consciousness; and it pervades the text to the point that, as William Lane argues, Louie's bedtime stories become deliberate allegories to help the family cope with their collective trauma wrought by the violence.³⁴ Additionally, the children's powerlessness in the context of the family hierarchy is further emphasised through Stead's repetition of meteorological metaphors to describe the parents' conflicts, such as storms and winds—metaphors that suggest that this violence is so all-encompassing as to be a part of nature itself.

There are several other inferable moments of physical violence in the novel, many of them couched in colloquial language that minimises their gravity: "a mild kick in the pants," "boxed her ears," "a flip on the head", and "a bear cuff" are among the descriptions the narrator deploys to normalise the violent acts. Notably, the novel never explores how harmful these incidents are to the children, which perhaps suggests how normal these apparently minor acts of violence towards children—sometimes reframed as merely disciplinary acts—were considered among mid-twentieth-century families. Of course, depicting this violence as normal does not mean that these acts were acceptable to Stead, as Franzen asserts. Instead, Stead's depiction of violence against women and children may be understood, in the context of the narrative, as an attempt to characterise it as a symptom of the broader cultural ideology infecting the institution and Western model of the family: namely, that of patriarchy. One of the novel's most notable examples of violence as a symptom of patriarchy occurs when Louie overhears noises coming from Henny's bedroom. As the narrator describes,

[Louie] got up and stole to the head of the stairs; there was, in fact, a sort of scuffling, and Louie listened, in sacred terror, leaning on the stairhead: would they do for each other at last, would she come down and find them in pools of blood? . . . Henny gave a fretful hysterical laugh, 'Oh, leave me alone, you make me sick,' and there was again a violent

34. William Lane, "Repetition and Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children*," *Australian Literary Studies* 31, no. 6 (2016): 7.

struggle, and then she heard Sam groan. That was it! . . . Louie stood at the door of Henny's room for a while with her heart beating fast, and heard Henny weeping, but she did not dare go in and find out if and how murder had been done. (458)

This episode of violence occurs after Sam has accused Henny of infidelity, an accusation that brings into question the paternity of their most recent child. While Stead's scholarly readership has referred to this scene as an instance of "make-up sex" that "is intense and fruitful," we can alternatively infer, with reference to the wider context of control in Sam and Henny's relationship, that this scene is a depiction of rape—a violent assault through which Sam attempts to reassert his masculinity and reinforce his paternal authority.³⁵ In support of this interpretation, it is notable that Henny earlier describes herself as Sam's "body servant" (151) and that, at this point of the novel, Sam's entry into Henny's bedroom, a place from which he has previously been banned, signifies Sam's invasion of and entitlement to Henny's "private" space. Consistent with this analysis, Boone argues that, "in a profound sense, Sam's rape of Henny is one final aggrandizing imposition of ego calculated to secure the interest of the father's house and with it the legitimacy of his authority."³⁶ Nonetheless, the focalisation of this scene through Louie's perspective means that the rape and its violence are kept both literally and figuratively "behind closed doors," perhaps suggesting that depictions of marital rape remained taboo in the mid-twentieth century, even for a novel as modern as *The Man Who Loved Children*.

Henny, the Violent Resistor

Stead's veiled representations of violence, established through implication and suggestion, have the cumulative effect of creating a broad atmosphere of fear, anxiety, and tension within which the novel's more explicit violence occurs. While sexual violence may have been an unspeakable or unrepresentable extreme for Stead's purposes, the novel contains many blatant depictions of physical violence within the family. Early in

35. Michael Schmidt, "Introduction" in Christina Stead, *The Man Who Loved Children* [1940] (London: Apollo, 2016), ix.

36. Boone, "Of Fathers," 520.

the novel, for instance, Sam and Henny argue about the need for a nanny, which escalates into an argument about Louie, before giving way to accusations of infidelity. The tension of the scene builds until it explodes into a physical assault:

He flushed and rushed to her, taking her by the shoulder and shaking her hard. She turned her face awkwardly to look up at him, "You know you're lying!" He struck her hard on the shoulder, saying, "You are tempting me to do it!" She at once let out a loud cry, "Don't you hit me, you devil; don't you dare strike your wife; I'll let everyone know!" . . . she felt Sam's hand over her mouth. She spat and pushed it away, cried feebly, "Help, help! Murder!" (133)

The tension escalates again when Henny threatens to divorce Sam and take the children, a threat to which Sam responds with a counter-threat: "'Shut up,' shouted Sam, 'shut up or I'll shut you up.'" As though directly answering Sam's threat to silence her, Henny initiates one of her frequent verbal diatribes, challenging the façade of innocence Sam often uses to manipulate both his family and the reader:

"You took me and maltreated me and starved me half to death because you couldn't make a living and sponged off my father and used his influence, hoisting yourself up on all my aches and miseries," Henny began chanting with fury, "boasting and blowing about your success when all the time it was me, my poor body that was what you took your success out of. You were breaking my bones and spirit forcing your beastly love on me: a brute, a savage, a wild Indian wouldn't do what you did, slobbering round me and calling it love and filling me with children month after month and year after year while I hated and detested you and screamed in your ears to get away from me, but you wouldn't let me go."

...

Sam hit her, with his open hand, across the mouth. (148)

The juxtaposition, here, between Henny's polysyndetic dialogue, full of heavy plosives and grotesque imagery, and the concise, third-person description of Sam's violent act crystallises the power dynamic within their relationship. As Henny's emotional truth-telling threatens to upend Sam's control over the family narrative, Sam turns to physical violence to reassert his power

and authority. Sam's violence, aimed at Henny's mouth, indicates not only the role that language plays in challenging authority but how silencing another's language is the ultimate tool of control within the patriarchal family system. Unable to use her words but refusing to concede defeat, Henny grabs a kitchen knife and began

slashing him backwards and forwards across the arm and shoulder, and began slashing at his face before he had the presence of mind to knock it out of her hand and push it away. She stumbled and fell to the floor, where she lay exhausted and trembling. (149)

While both Henny and Sam enact physical violence in this scene, their actions may be understood differently in accordance with Johnson's context of control. Henny's verbal outburst exposes Sam's hypocrisy and challenges his "natural" moral authority by highlighting the way in which Sam exploits her body and misappropriates her family's wealth and reputation. This outburst poses a threat to Sam's masculinity, which is founded on self-sufficiency, and compels him to restore not just his masculine identity but the patriarchal hierarchy of the family through physical violence. Henny's attack on Sam with the knife, however, is both a self-protective response to the immediate physical threat Sam poses, as well as a retaliation to the more general existential threat he represents—a threat encapsulated in her outburst. Henny, in short, is what Johnson calls the "violent resistor."

Mothers' Violence towards their Children

As we have seen, Sam's violence towards his children stems from a desire to control and manipulate the family in order to maintain his position as the patriarch. The motivations behind Henny's use of violence toward her children, however, are not so clear. Scholars working in the social sciences and social work, including Sophie Namey, Catherine Carlson, and Kathleen O'Hara, have developed a framework for understanding mothers' violence against their children, theorising a category

of maternal violence that Johnson's system does not identify. These scholars argue that "women's use of violence against their children cannot be extracted from the dynamics of oppression inevitable for women living under patriarchal values and institutions."³⁷ In other words, Henny's violence cannot be isolated from her oppression but must instead be read as an expression of her powerlessness and a symptom of her own psychological collapse within the patriarchal family system. In the novel's opening pages, Henny's descriptions of the Pollit house bring into view her feelings about herself and her life:

She had the calm of frequentation; she belonged to this house and it to her. Though she was a prisoner in it, she possessed it. She and it were her marriage. She was indwelling in every board and stone of it: every fold in the curtains had a meaning (perhaps they were so folded to hide a darn or stain); every room was a phial of revelation to be poured out some feverish night in the secret laboratories of her decisions, full of living cancers of insult, leprosies of disillusion, abscesses of grudge, gangrene of nevermore, quintan fevers of divorce, and all the proliferating miseries, the running sores and thick scabs, for which (and not for its heavenly joys) the flesh of marriage is so heavily veiled and conventually interned. (5–6)

Through the deployment of images of corruption and decay, Henny illustrates what Lidoff describes as "the fantasies of [her] subterranean psychic world" and uses these images as a means of expressing "an anger frequently intensified into hostility by its long repression."³⁸ Though these images are, as Lidoff further notes, "an extension of personal feelings of fragmentation, pain, and internalized denigration," they also reflect the psychological and spiritual trauma Henny experiences while living within this violent patriarchal family system.³⁹

Lidoff's psychoanalytic reading of the images envisioned by Henny can also be applied to the violence that Henny enacts. Throughout the novel, Henny engages in various acts of violence against her children, but none more violent than those aimed at her stepdaughter Louie. Henny's violence

37. Sophie Namy, Catherine Carlson, Kathleen O'Hara, et al., "Towards a Feminist Understanding of Intersecting Violence Against Women and Children in the Family," *Social Science & Medicine* 184 (2017): 41.

38. Lidoff, "Domestic Gothic," 201–203.

39. *Ibid.*, 205.

is directed primarily at Louie's non-conforming body, which she variously insults as fat, dirty, clumsy, sweaty, pink, and overtly sexual. But although Henny condemns them, these same traits are those that Henny has been told her own body lacks (in contrast to Louie, Henny is thin, pale, and desexualised); and they are also traits that Henny has been taught to hate about female bodies in general. Henny's violence towards Louie in the form of verbal and physical assaults thus plays out as an externalisation of her own internalised hatred of womanhood, which she sees as the core reason for her own suffering. As Brydon argues, "Henny sees in the child another woman destined to entrapment through her sex and so lashes out against her own fate in lashing out against Louisa."⁴⁰ However, in contrast to Sam's violence, which Louie "will never understand and never forgive" (37), Louie begins to sympathise with Henny over the course of the novel, even as her violence becomes more severe.

Together, Louie and Henny form what Lidoff calls a "coalition of the oppressed" as they begin to recognise their shared suffering within the patriarchal family.⁴¹ In Louie's eyes, Henny transforms from a "half-mad tyrant [and] degenerate society girl" into "a creature of flesh and blood, nearer to Louisa because, like the little girl, she was guilty, rebellious, and got chastised." (36) As such, Louie begins to see Henny's violence as an expression of her long-suppressed feelings of anger and despair, feelings that shape and motivate almost all of her behaviour towards others. Unable to take her anger out on the true source of her suffering—Sam, and by extension, the patriarchal culture that normalises Sam's mistreatment of her—Henny takes out her anger on her children, who are constant reminders of the realities of her life as a woman. As Namy and her co-authors assert in their essay "Towards a Feminist Understanding of Intersecting Violence against Women and Children in the Family," such "maternal violence must be situated within the broader context of the patriarchal family, which

40. Brydon, *Christina Stead*, 76.

41. Lidoff, "Domestic Gothic," 202, 212.

systematically disempowers women in many domains of their lives while granting them relative power vis-à-vis their children.”⁴²

A Culture of Complicity

The violence of the Pollit household, while extreme and pervasive, is not a rarity in the Pollit neighbourhood. Indeed, the same dynamics that govern violence in the Pollit home appear in other homes and families in the novel. When Louie visits her neighbour, Angela Kidd, the narrator indicates the omnipresence of violence:

Everyone knew of her and John. They sought no friends amongst the neighbours, despising them all. But everyone knew . . . that this same John beat her, starved her, and insulted her and that she was abandoned by all her family, though old and frail, because John had systematically alienated them. The Walkers, on one side, Middenway, the grocer, on the other, had heard her cries and his storming late at night or in the peace of some holiday. (80)

Despite the whole neighbourhood “knowing” of John Kidd’s violence, nobody has ever intervened. That John’s actions have caused Angela serious psychological harm becomes even clearer when Angela asks Louie to kill their pet cat to prevent John from inflicting further beatings on her. As Deborah Horvitz argues, “silence is not a neutral act; rather, it is a politically regressive one that passively permits the continuation of violence.”⁴³ Thus, the fact that neither neighbours, community members, nor the police have ever appeared to intervene in or stop these conflicts suggests a wider culture of silence and permissiveness concerning family violence, and particularly men’s violence against women and children, which amounts to a politically regressive culture of acceptance.

The novel’s subplot, which details the Pollit family’s financial collapse, illustrates the role that wider patriarchal norms play in normalising family violence. Henny’s feelings of anger and entrapment are only exacerbated by Sam’s exclusive control

42. Namy, “Towards a Feminist Understanding,” 41.

43. Deborah Horvitz, *Literary Trauma: Sadism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in American Women’s Fiction* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 30.

of the family's finances. As Johnson notes of "intimate terrorists" such as Sam, these figures "often also work to restrict access to the resources needed for effective resistance."⁴⁴ Sam's position as the sole breadwinner of the family is consistent with the diegetic context of the novel; set in Washington, DC, in the early twentieth century, the novel captures a place and time in which fathers in middle-class families like the Pollits were expected to work while mothers were expected to take care of the children and tend to domestic matters. Having been raised in an upper-class home in the South, Henny has never been expected to work, and has never learned any of the skills that would enable her to establish financial independence. Having also lost her father's inheritance, Henny is financially dependent on Sam: she must ask him for money to buy essentials like food and clothing regularly; but she also steals money from her children, and, ultimately, she is forced to sell her most treasured possessions to keep the family afloat after Sam loses his job. Lacking financial independence, Henny is unable to divorce Sam and support herself, meaning she has no choice but to return to the house and its violence even after she has spent some time away. This cycle of leaving and returning constitutes the novel's central structure, confirming Lane's argument that the novel is driven by repetition.⁴⁵ Although Henny "resets" when spending time away, when she returns home the tension rebuilds, resulting in another violent conflict that drives Henny away again.

This "cycle of violence" creates its own narrative tension and eventually results in Henny's death.⁴⁶ Somewhat surprisingly, however, Henny's death occurs not at the hands of Sam but those of her stepdaughter Louie. Having recognised the damage being caused by their inability to resolve their conflicts, Louie decides to poison both Sam and Henny:

Only one thing was certain: it must be done, to save the children. "Who cares for them but me?" she thought coldly. "Those two selfish, passionate people, terrible as gods in their eternal married

44. Johnson, *Typology*, 28.

45. Lane, "Repetition," 1–13.

46. On such "cycles of violence," see Kirkwood, *Leaving Abusive Partners*, 17–19.

hate, do not care for them; Mother herself threatened to kill them. Perhaps she would: at any rate, their life will be a ruin even if they are allowed to go on living. There is no question of it: I have the will, I must have the firmness to get rid of the two parents." She no longer thought of Sam as her father: she had not thought of him as anything but a mouthy jailer for months; as for Henny, she did not see how her fate would be better if she went on living. (528)

Duffy argues that Louie's desire to poison her parents is a symptom of her "megalomaniacal, dictatorial tendencies" and an "aggression" that was instilled in her by her father.⁴⁷ However, to understand Louie's violence in this way is to read it in isolation, and to ignore the wider control context of the novel. Louie's guiltlessness—her lack of remorse—stems not from a patriarchal mindset but instead from her belief that her acts will put an end to Sam's abuse and liberate Henny from her suffering—a belief that is evident in Louie's rationalisation on the night before she acts (527–28). Indeed, Louie's ability to use violence to prevent suffering is foreshadowed in an earlier episode in the novel: when Louie kills a cat at the request of her battered neighbour Angela. Despite feeling "a sort of sickness" while drowning the cat, Louie justifies her actions as beneficent, believing "that the little woman loved her and that there was [now] peace in her foul cottage" (80–83).

In contrast to Sam, Louie uses violence to protect the weak from the strong. Louie may thus be understood as another violent resistor—a characterisation supported by Louie's repeated references to freedom and liberation as justifications for the poisonings. As the narrator notes, Louie "never once doubted that the right thing to do was to use cyanide tomorrow morning, or that she must liberate the children: it fell to her, no one else would do it or understand the causes as she did. Then she would at once be free herself" (528–29). And yet, Johnson's category of the violent resistor does not account for violence committed by victims against other victims, as is the case with Louie—a victim who acts out violence against a fellow victim in Henny. Nor does Johnson's model fully account for the use

47. Duffy, "The Grain of the Voice," 49–50.

of violence against the self, which might arguably describe the circumstances in which Henny, knowing that the tea Louie sets out is poisoned, drinks it anyway in an act of knowing self-harm. Tellingly, the resistance demonstrated both by Henny and Louie is ultimately ineffectual; it only results in Henny's death and Louie's abandonment of the home. By contrast, Sam remains unfazed and unpunished in a situation emblematic of the wider patriarchal culture: Sam's authority is left untouched; indeed, his authority (and actions) is no less than reaffirmed when he is offered a job as the host of an educational radio program that allows him access to his children without interference. Acts of violent resistance may grant short-term feelings of control to victims; however, these acts rarely destabilise the broader control context of a violent home environment or effectively challenge the broader cultural norms and values that allow family violence to occur.

Conclusion

Family violence is not a new phenomenon in society; nor is the exploration of family violence a new phenomenon in Australian literary fiction. However, it is only in recent decades that family violence has become a serious subject of scholarly attention, with new frameworks and discourses being developed to identify and examine family violence in instances where it might once have remained invisible, minimised, normalised, or dismissed. As this analysis has shown, not only does contemporary family violence theory allow us to revise and reconsider previous understandings of violence as they are represented in Stead's most famous novel; it also demonstrates the ways in which Stead's novel identifies the causes, contexts, and manifestations of family violence—factors that have changed very little in the seventy odd years since Stead wrote *The Man Who Loved Children*. This article has also shown how, through sociological models such as Johnson's typology of control, readers of Stead's fiction may recognise and

appreciate the prescience of *The Man Who Loved Children* in elaborating the role that gender and class play in the perpetration and normalisation of family violence in Western society. Indeed, Stead's novel represents one of the most insightful explorations of family violence in twentieth-century Australian fiction, providing a vivid, engaging, and at-times shocking portrait of its everyday reality and long-term consequences.

DASHIELL MOORE

TO BE REVISED

she said that words come from a divine source
tap a cloud, wave a flag, divert their course.
she said words come easily, she'd inquire within
like a guest would exorcise a pallid skin.
she said, and I could see her eyes straining
through bumblebee sunglasses,
I wrote because I had time for that
awful thing, I had six years for ink
to impress itself, and ten more for a press,
eleven to be read, and twelve to be known, and after—

after, she said, her eyes visible under dark glass
there won't be enough time or silence
in all the world, your course will be set
and your last word will be a signature.

She shook her head
and her dreadlocks frolicked
for absent freedoms
to produce a truth in the making
to say what it is,
or what it wasn't,

what for me
could be five years or twenty, but for her is
distilled in future tense—why she
wears sunglasses on such dull days, not for the weather.

an afterlife ill fits the novelist
whose life cannot end.
with a name on some lists, doors open, and
fellow beds become bedfellows, and
you'll hate these cages.

WHAT IT IS TO BE A GOD

The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh
The pale yellow of a flowers life
A like with its death.

How brief
And how inadequate
The fluttered body
Come unto and out of itself
Its interim being
The merest of winds
That possess a sail.

How cruel that a body
Decomposes faster
Than memories of it
Unlike songs or great works—
We're laden with our contraries.

Those that know this
Are gods, sage purveyors
Of seconds.

A fellow I know
Did so, befriended
His seconds.
We could imagine his aisling
A night across a ceiling,
Wonder at what a week might mean
Without the means of dying,

He tells me how he'd do it
With a relish unbecoming
Back off a short pier—
Gives me a look
And I don't know if he means
He wants me to do it.

For Prometheus I wonder
If it was not the falcon that did him in
But the time that it took to come.
For Tantalus,
His starving was a postcard
Of a larger lie—that here was time.
He'd be satisfied to die.

For my friend, the God,
We may look and wonder
What it is to be disabled, or to be shod
Of life, but we must ask on—
What it is to be a god.

ON TIMOTHY MORTON'S *DARK ECOLOGY: FOR A LOGIC OF FUTURE COEXISTENCE*

NANDA JAROSZ

TIMOTHY MORTON'S 2016 book of ecocriticism, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, destroys the notion of foregone conclusions and challenges its reader to rethink existence in the age of the Anthropocene.¹ As evidence of Morton's desire to confuse and disrupt, the book appears neither to end nor begin at any definable point. Its first section, fittingly titled "Beginning After the End," introduces Morton's methodology as one that twists, binds, and loops a series of concepts together to provide commentary on the dangerous state of affairs that has led to our climate crisis in the twenty-first century. Morton's book challenges its reader to reexamine humanity's relationship within nature, urging them to question the traditions and institutions that have facilitated the ongoing destruction of natural environments for millennia. Apropos this strategy of inversion, the final section of the book expresses its argument in the following terms: "*Dark Ecology* shall argue that there are layers of attunement to ecological reality more accurate than what is habitual in the media, in the academy, and in society at large" (160). Morton aims to subvert the way we discuss and understand human agency and responsibility for, the natural environment by describing alternative methods

1. Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016). All subsequent references will appear in the text of this review and refer to this edition.

of communicating with (and about) nature. At its core, *Dark Ecology* is a work of discourse theory that critiques the language and reasoning that have led to belligerent forms of environmental consciousness—the modes of discourse that have led to the planet’s ailing state and ecological decline at the global level.

Starting with the very concept of the Anthropocene, Morton asks his readers to question their basic level of understanding about human beings and the way in which they function with regard to the natural environment. From the outset, Morton disputes the modern conception of the Anthropocene as naming “two levels we usually think are distinct: geology and humanity” (7). The fundamental premise of *Dark Ecology* is precisely the idea that this distinction is merely the continuation of a culture of distancing between the human being and their natural environment. As a result, by establishing the flawed mentality of this dualism, Morton aims to illustrate the reciprocal structure of the “natural” and “human” elements in broader narratives of the planet. To this end, Morton reframes the term Anthropocene to signify an attitude that states, “I am a person [but] I’m also part of an entity that is now a *geophysical force on a planetary scale*” (9; emphasis in original). For Morton, human beings are at once culpable for destroying the planet and the witnesses to its destruction; and, as such, the causes and effects of climate disaster are, in his thesis, intrinsically linked.

Published as the fourth book in Morton’s ecological series, *Dark Ecology* follows Morton’s 2014 Wellek Lectures at the University of California, and establishes a half-serious directive of play in the pursuit of a new ecological politics. As Morton contends, it is only by loosening the bonds of institutional control, which shape the rules and regulations designed to maintain human “progress” at all costs, that we can hope to reshape structures in society as more ecopositive. Formulated in response to an approach to environmental disaster termed “dark

ecology”—a deeply intimate confrontation with the impending doom of ecological collapse—Morton’s emphasis on play brings a much-needed sense of levity to ecocriticism. Morton cites the need for a “playful” resolution to what he terms the “objectified depression” of our current political approach to climate change (113). He calls for a “politics that includes what appears least political—laughter, the playful, even the silly”—to reestablish ties to nonhuman beings that connect humans (113). He urges the creation of “toylike” political systems “that connect humans and nonhumans with one another” (113); and play is proposed as a means of revising the multiple approaches to and interactions with social structures that currently form and restrict our relationship with nature. Morton advises we treat political formations and economic structures as toys in order to confront their controls over daily life. Institutions cannot be seen as all governing and determining forces; they must be made tangible and in turn become malleable to the needs of the planet. Only engagement at the level of this playful interaction, he suggests, can unbalance the dangerous structures that beleaguer our present environmental approaches to biodiversity.

This approach is possible within Morton’s framework, which conceives of an object-orientated ontology (OOO) as a positive philosophical movement for ecological scholarship and culture. First proposed by Graham Harman, OOO may be used, Morton suggests, to reinterpret modern Kantian correlationism whereby things exist only as directly mediated by one’s own experience.² OOO is thus presented as a means of initiating a metaphorical engagement with the aesthetics of environmental experience. Morton argues that it is precisely because objects outside of one’s immediate experience are unknowable, yet do actually have an effect on other objects, that a revised understanding of subjectivity is required to improve our ecological future—one in which

2. See Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Peru, IL: Open Court, 2002).

subjectivity is central to all beings on this planet. By opening up correlationism so that it encompasses a reciprocal understanding of objects as “beings in the world,” Morton introduces his central claim: “OOO believes that reality is *mysterious* and *magical*, because beings withdraw and because beings influence each other aesthetically, which is to say at a distance” (17). Morton’s emphasis on the perception of distance between things is presented as an opportunity to let go of human assumptions about power and supremacy. The notion that nature is outside of us also means that nature is beyond our control, and this sense of the tangible otherness of nature is in fact at the heart of what Morton means by the terms “mysterious and magical,” which underline the importance of humility as well as the joys of a quasi-noncognitive metaphysical engagement with environmental aesthetics.³

Dark Ecology is fundamentally concerned with responsibility, and seeks to impose on the reader a sense that the consequences of their actions spread further than just their immediate field of reference. In “The First Thread,” Morton introduces what he calls “hyperobjects,” which he defines as those concepts that must be thought of at the scale of Earth rather than of the individual. Morton seeks to show how human actions have planetary implications and how computational power has opened our frame of reference to include “the task of thinking at temporal and spatial scales that are unfamiliar, even monstrously gigantic” (25). Examples of hyperobjects include databergs, which are overwhelmingly large computations of data and statistics, solar winds, which “interact with Earth’s magnetic shield and produce auroras,” as well as “the mass of terrestrial weather events” (24). All of these hyperobjects are beyond our perceptibility and require figurative illustration to be made comprehensible. As a consequence, ecological culture and politics cannot remain merely at the level of the human but must advance towards species at Earth’s magnitude. Human beings

3. For a succinct account of the various approaches to the field of environmental aesthetics, see Allen Carson, *Nature and Landscape: An Introduction to Environmental Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

are at once the collective perpetrators of their own demise and individuals grappling with a desire to understand the rapid rates of rise and decline in all aspects of their daily lives. There is an overwhelming sense of expansion throughout Morton's book, as though he asks his reader to pass through immense chasms in space and time to reevaluate their existence in the present moment. This is a formidable request, which often results in multiple unresolved or unexplained associations. Arguably, Morton's metaphysical approach to ecocriticism renders it too ephemeral to lead to any objective and universal results, much less to work as an effective call to action.

Another metaphor of human destruction appears in the first section when Morton introduces the term "agrilogistics" to give a face to the type of age we live in and how it may be responsible for the scale of global catastrophe we face. Morton uses this term throughout the remainder of the book as evidence of where humanity has failed. Agrilogistics is defined a series of processes that emerged at the end of the last massive climate shift in the Ice Age—a period that saw a move away from hunter-gather traditions and towards the establishment of agricultural farming, which could ensure the continued availability of food. Although the looping methodology of *Dark Ecology* does not lend itself to rendering clear genesis narratives, Morton places a great deal of weight on the agricultural program humans have developed over the last twelve thousand years. For Morton, agrilogistics looms as the largest evil in this tale of ecocatastrophe; it is one that, he writes, was "toxic from the beginning to humans and other lifeforms," operating "blindly like a computer program" (42). It is arguable that all of Morton's "playful" strategies are merely foils for the necessary disruption of that very vector that has made human survival possible for the last twelve thousand years. Thus, blaming agrilogistics for the current plight of Earth is akin to criticising humanity's need for survival.

Although Morton does much to emphasise the complexity of the network of interrelations and unobservable consequences relating to this historical shift towards subsistence farming, Morton's attribution of blame to agrilogistics for causing the present state of affairs is often too simplistic to be entirely satisfying.

The next two threads of Morton's book are concerned with how to remove ourselves from this catastrophe of human agency (agrilogistics)—that is, “to avoid the consequences of the last global warming, humans devised a logistics that has resulted in global warming” (54). This statement is paradigmatic of Morton's tendency towards loop-like metaphors: in order to exit a contemporaneous catastrophe—the Ice Age—we created a system that shaped the very system of consequences we now wish to exit—global warming. True to form, Morton does not advocate an exit from this loop but merely for a cognition or understanding of this loop as grounding our existence. This looping reciprocity forms the heart of what Morton calls “ecognosis,” and helps to establish his claim that we need to reevaluate approaches to the nonhuman environment. For, as he goes on to write, “contemporary science allows us to think species not as absolutely non-existent, but as floating, spectral entities that are not directly, constantly present” (18). As such, our existence as part of a species necessitates a relational understanding of our existence in the age of the Anthropocene. This awareness brings with it a type of metaphysical questioning that forms much of the discussion in “Thread Two” and “Thread Three” of Morton's text. The problem—how we as humans may initiate a discursive shift in our approach to the natural world—is not so much resolved as reproblematised in the final chapters. Humans must learn to think of themselves *as humans*—not as removed cognitive beings that have control over all natural environments. In the end, ecognosis is a process of thinking of ourselves as a species; and it is, Morton asserts, the necessary discursive shift that will force humanity to take account of its actions, which occur within a web of interconnected natures.

If there is one key message to be gleaned from *Deep Ecology* it is that “a human is made up of nonhuman components and is directly related to nonhumans” (18). Humans need to reposition the idea of themselves as central to the natural landscape, and to think about the world from an ecological rather than anthropocentric perspective. The natural world is not merely the condition of our existence but, as Morton notes,

a mess of lungs and bacterial microbiomes and nonhuman ancestors and so on—along with their agents such as cows and factories and thoughts, agents that can't be reduced to their merely human use or exchange value. (21)

Morton's book poses a challenge in which humanity as it currently exists must remove itself from the equation to ensure the continuation of a healthy planet. The world is made up of so much more than can be imagined by our human minds, and a deeper understanding of its mystery may lead to a more positive engagement with that world.

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