TEXTUAL DEVIANTS: WOMEN, MADNESS, AND EMBODIED PERFORMANCE IN LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE AND PHOTOGRAPHY

A dissertation presented

By

Lauren Kuryloski

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Situated at the juncture of literary, gender, and visual culture studies, this dissertation provides a necessary corrective to traditional analyses of gender and madness in feminist thought. Analyzing texts created between the 1960s and the 1990s, by authors such as Sylvia Plath, Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Edwidge Danticat as well as photographers Francesca Woodman and Ana Mendieta, I assert that authors and photographers adopt performance art aesthetics in order to challenge dominant modes of reading and viewing and unsettle artistic and social hierarchies. Depictions of madwomen in female-authored texts have most often been read as representing a form of resistance to patriarchal discourses of power. This project builds on but critically diverges from this interpretation by arguing that far from being an avenue to resistance, the condition of madness only furthers women’s marginalization. In the texts produced during the latter half of the twentieth century, authors demonstrate the way in which women’s madness is characterized by an internalization of frustration, anger, and despair that eventually drives characters to engage in acts of often devastating self-harm. Thus, madness and the embodied deviance it inspires are revealed to be empty forms of protest that do little to dismantle larger systems of inequality. I argue we must shift our focus and attempt to locate resistant potential elsewhere, not in depictions of madness or embodied protest, but rather in the text’s adoption of subversive performance aesthetics. Reading them as part of the larger performance art tradition, the photographs, Memoirs, and novels I discuss enact performances of what I call “textual deviance,” disruptive strategies that trouble traditional generic and formal conventions and force audiences to engage with systems of inequality in new, often productively uncomfortable ways.
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Introduction

Shifting the Focus: (Re)Locating the Resistant Potential in Depictions of Women’s Madness

Situated at the juncture of literary, gender, and visual culture studies, my dissertation, “Textual Deviants: Women, Madness, and Embodied Performance in Late Twentieth-Century American Literature and Photography,” provides a necessary corrective to traditional analyses of gender and madness in feminist thought. Analyzing work created between the 1960s and the 1990s, I assert that authors and photographers adopt embodied performance art aesthetics in order to challenge dominant modes of reading and viewing and unsettle artistic and social hierarchies. Depictions of madwomen in female-authored texts have most often been read as representing a form of resistance to patriarchal discourses of power, focusing on gender as a primary site of oppression. I build on but critically diverge from this interpretation by arguing that far from being an avenue to resistance, going mad only results in women’s further marginalization. In the texts produced during the latter half of the twentieth century, authors demonstrate the way in which women’s madness is characterized by an internalization of frustration and despair that eventually results in characters engaging in acts of often devastating self-harm. Thus, madness and the acts of embodied deviance it inspires are revealed to be empty forms of protest that do little to dismantle larger systems of inequality. I argue, then, that we must shift our focus and attempt to re(locate) resistant potential elsewhere, not in madness or embodied protest, but rather in the text’s adoption of subversive performance aesthetics. Reading photographic and literary texts as part of the larger performance art tradition, the pieces I discuss enact performances of what I call “textual deviance,” disruptive strategies that trouble traditional
generic conventions and force audiences to engage with systems of inequality and oppression in new, often productively uncomfortable ways.

While my work is concerned with literary and photographic work from the second half of the twentieth century, I want to first offer a brief historical aside, an example that I feel illustrates some of the central tenets of this project. From 1863 to 1893, Jean-Martin Charcot was professor of neurology at Paris’s Salpêtrière, a long-standing and famous hospital for the insane.¹ While considered a pioneer in neurology at the time, Charcot is today perhaps best known for his work on hysteria, a nervous disorder most commonly attributed to women of the nineteenth-century bourgeois class and characterized by bouts of lethargy that sent women to their beds as well as intermittent physical fits and spasms. While hysteria is no longer recognized as a disease, and instead understood to be a largely gendered diagnosis that masked a variety of very real physical, mental, and socially-inspired symptoms, in the 1880s Charcot was admitting scores of women to his hospital and diagnosing them as hysterical. What is most relevant to my interests in this project is the way in which Charcot captured a significant number of images of the allegedly hysterical women on film. Instead of focusing on the inner psychological reasons for his patients’ suffering, Charcot took interest in the outer physical manifestations of their illness and used photography to capture the “erotic misbehavior” of his patients in detail. When presented with the criticism that he was over-diagnosing hysteria in his patients, Charcot responded, “But in fact all I am is a photographer. I describe what I see” (Justice-Malloy 134, 137). The good doctor’s insistence on visuality and his role as photographer is striking. According to this logic,

¹ Founded in the seventeenth century, the Salpêtrière was initially a gunpowder factory (salt peter, or potassium nitrate, being one of the primary elements of gunpowder), before serving as a prison for prostitutes, the poor, homeless, and mentally disabled. The building was repurposed as a hospital under the orders of Louis XIV, and was eventually one of the first psychiatric institutions to undergo humanitarian reform in the treatment of the mentally ill (Hustvedt 11).
not only is madness almost entirely embodied and thus discernable through physical actions and abnormalities, but it does not take an expert to recognize it; anyone with a camera and perhaps an artist’s eye for detail can do the job. Counted among Charcot’s many students was Sigmund Freud, who even wrote an obituary for the doctor after his passing. In it Freud said of his teacher, “He was not a reflective man, not a thinker: he had the nature of an artist – he was, as he himself said, a ‘visuel,’ a man who sees” (Gilman 204).

Charcot took countless photographs of his female patients, including many of one of his “star” patients, a young woman named Augustine. In this case, “star” is a disturbingly apt designation given the theatrical nature of his practice. Charcot was famous for his Friday lectures and Tuesday impromptu “interviews” of patients, both of which were open to the public. These events attracted not only medical professionals, but also important members of French artistic society, including writers and visual artists, and a 500-person amphitheater was even built to accommodate the crowds. The theatricality of the hysterical women is evident in Charcot’s many photographs. In many such photographs the usually staid style of portraiture is upended by the image of the sitter’s tormented and screaming visage. In others, the afflicted women are shown in bed (and in their bedclothes), writhing above the mattress and contorting their bodies so that their backs arch and their hips thrust into the air. Medical professionals as well as scholars of history and psychiatry have long debated the truth factor of these images, suggesting that the women, after learning the appropriate “script” of hysteria, were largely acting insane both for Charcot and his camera, and for the members of the public who came to watch them with rapt fascination. Determining whether these women were suffering from actual symptoms of mental illness or whether they were simply performing for the camera is not within the scope of this brief aside. What I find most important for my own purposes is the conflation between women’s
madness and embodied deviance that the Charcot example so perfectly encompasses. These “insane” women are deemed as such not based on neurological diagnoses, but rather on their bodily misbehavior. Breaking any pretense of lady-like decorum and disregarding the rules of femininity, they snarl, twist their bodies into provocative sexualized poses, and essentially enact emotions (rage, passion, etc.) that they would be unable to otherwise. For his part, Charcot accepts this physical acting out as definitive proof of their insanity and uses the titillating allure of unruly women to fuel his own professional and artistic aspirations, earning fame among both the medical establishment as well as the cultural elite.

What the Charcot example draws attention to is a concept at the core of this project – that not only is women’s madness read through the body, but that associated acts of embodied deviance have come to be understood as a viable a means of challenging oppressive norms of feminine behavior. According to such a reading, when women go mad they act out against normative gendered conventions and in so doing protest their social disenfranchisement. I believe, however, that Charcot and his hysterics actually illustrate the limitations of this interpretation. Charcot refused to see his patients as active agents in these alleged performances of madness and deviance, and instead positioned himself as a figure of dual authority, training both his medical gaze and the gaze of the camera on their bodies in order to exhibit them as shocking and deviant madwomen. While the women may receive attention from the doctor and the voyeuristic public, their actions do little to challenge greater systems of inequality that limit women’s full range of expression. They remain the objects of his study and his photographs, but never get to rise to the level of artistic or autonomous subject themselves.

My own work offers an alternative narrative that challenges the status of madness in feminist thought. I do not seek to recuperate madness, or acts of embodied deviance associated
with it, as a form of viable protest against discourses of hegemonic authority. As Charcot’s hysterics demonstrate, madness results in a complete loss of control and social agency – the women remain locked inside the asylum under the authority of the doctor and the psychiatric institution. Instead, I locate resistance in the purposeful performance of deviance by the artist, what I will refer to throughout this dissertation as “textual deviance.” Reading literary and photographic work as participating in the larger move toward performance as a politicized art form from the late 1960s onward, the authors and artists I analyze not only expose madness and embodied deviance as futile gestures, the ultimate capitulation to oppressive discourses of power, but they then shift the site of resistance from the madwoman to the deviant text, strategically employing disruptive performance aesthetics in their work. Ultimately, women’s madness narratives have long been read as a critique of an oppressive culture, and here I do not disagree. I would, however, ask us to shift our interpretive lens and (re)locate resistant potential not in the chaos of madness, but in the subversive performance of deviance, deployed to disrupt hierarchies of gender, race, and literary/artistic authority.

Critical literary discussions of women and madness largely find their genesis in both the anti-psychiatry rhetoric of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and in the emergence of the Women’s Movement and second-wave of feminism. Spearhead by notable figures such as social theorist Michel Foucault, sociologist Erving Goffman, and psychiatrists R.D. Laing and Thomas Szasz, proponents of the anti-psychiatry movement sought to reveal the ways in which a diagnosis of mental illness could be given to those who simply defied social norms, and they vocally criticized methods of confinement and treatment, including electroshock therapy, lobotomy, and over-medicalization. While the initial agitators of the movement exposed how the medical establishment used its scientific clout to enforce normative behavioral codes, they did not
expressly address the roles that gender or race might play in the diagnostic process. It was not until second-wave feminists adopted anti-psychiatry rhetoric and offered a critique not just of society at large, but specifically of patriarchal society, that a fuller picture of women’s treatment by the psychiatric system was fully articulated. In 1972, feminist psychologist Phyllis Chesler published *Women and Madness*, the first book of its kind to examine women’s relationship to the mental health care institution. By analyzing both patient interviews and representations of women’s madness throughout history and cultural mythology, Chesler’s book demonstrates the ways in which ostensibly objective medical rhetoric participates in the project of enforcing normative gender ideology, labeling those women who deviated from the path of traditional femininity as mad, and thus justifying a wide range of often extreme treatments.

The political movements and social upheaval of the late 1960s and early 1970s set the stage for an intervention in feminist literary criticism. Most notably, the decade produced Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s canonical and highly influential study of women and madness, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, first published in 1979. Gilbert and Gubar’s analysis of Victorian women’s literature was groundbreaking, not only for its pioneering exploration of female authors’ depictions of madness and monstrosity, but also for its overtly feminist analytical lens and its tracing of a female literary tradition. In their work, Gilbert and Gubar reveal the recurring theme of “doubling” in women’s literature, in which the virtuous protagonist, often an embodiment of the “angel in the house” stereotype, is presented in opposition to a villainous female character, a mad or monstrous woman. They read this madwoman as “the author’s double, an image of her own anxiety and rage,” going on to say that “from a female point of view the monster woman is simply a woman who seeks the power of self-articulation” (78, 79). Accordingly, the
madwoman’s rage, often defined by inarticulate howling and acts of violence and destruction, was a means for female authors to vent their frustration with a patriarchal system that limited their opportunities for personal and artistic autonomy. This reading established an interpretation of women’s madness that largely defined critical discussions of the subject in the ensuing decades. Their work also participates in a larger feminist conversation taking place at the time, most notably with French feminists such as Hélèn Cixous and Luce Irigaray, who advocated for what Cixous would term *l’écriture féminine* in her 1976 work, “Laugh of the Medusa.” Arguing that men have historically controlled the production of language, proponents of *l’écriture féminine*, or “feminine writing/women’s writing,” championed the turn to a kind of non-representational writing outside of the symbolic order, a language of non-reason that would enact what they perceived to be a particularly feminine approach to meaning-making. This reading worked to further the notion of women’s madness as a site of subversion, in which the madwoman’s turn to silence and bodily misbehavior could be read as a protest against patriarchal discourses of power and language.

The recuperative reading of women’s madness continued into the 1980s, with Patricia Yaeger adopting a slightly altered, but nevertheless resistant image of madness in her 1988 work, *Honey-Mad Women: Emancipatory Strategies in Women’s Writing*. Departing from Gilbert and Gubar’s raging authorial double, Yaeger’s honey-mad woman does not turn away from language, but embraces it as a form of invention and play, “collecting” language and textual strategies like honey (a metaphor she borrows from a South American folktale). In her analysis, Yaeger aims to show how women writers have overcome the same kind of limitations of language discussed by the French feminists by playing with and innovating various literary conventions in order to express a sense of empowerment and pleasure in writing and textual creation. Although Yaeger’s
honey-mad woman is not the monstrous madwoman in the attic, she nevertheless continues to rely on madness as an image for women’s resistance to social and literary authority. The decade also saw the publication of Elaine Showalter’s widely popular, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (1987). In her work, Showalter offers a history of psychiatry, primarily focusing on women’s diagnoses of hysteria, alongside readings of literary texts ranging from Mary Wollstonecraft to Sylvia Plath. Showalter exposes the “dual images of female insanity: madness as one of the wrongs of woman; madness as the essential feminine nature unveiling itself before scientific rationality” (3). Showalter’s analysis exposes how women are constructed as always already teetering on the brink of madness for the way in which traditionally feminine behavior does not adhere to the unmarked norms of mental wellness, which are in reality modeled on masculine attributes such as ambition or aggression. However, when women overtly deviate from traditionally feminine scripts, this is also read as madness in a system that prizes adherence to normative gender ideology. Thus, women remain in a double-bind when it comes to mental health and the diagnostic process. Showalter’s text demonstrates an interest in reading women’s literary depictions of madness in conversation with a historical investigation into practices of psychiatric treatment and confinement, a trend that would come to mark many subsequent critical investigations in the subject. Indeed, it is often hard to separate the literary from the historical, and many successive works offer a comparative reading.

Throughout the 1990s and into the first years of the twenty-first century there were a series of works published that both anthologized women’s madness narratives and worked to situate their production in the context of a historical and sociological framework. Jeffrey Geller and Maxine Harris’s *Women of the Asylum: Voices from Behind the Walls, 1840-1945* (1995) and Rebecca Sannonhouse’s edited collection, *Out of Her Mind: Women Writing on Madness*
(2003), serve primarily as anthologies of women’s writing about madness, with brief historical and biographical sketches. Mary Elene Wood’s *The Writing on the Wall: Women’s Autobiography and the Asylum* (1994) offers a survey of such narratives with Wood’s own critical analysis. All of these books take the asylum and the experience of institutionalization as their primary focus, and work to chart the changes in women’s relationships to the psychiatric establishment over the course of the twentieth century. While earlier writers often demonstrate an appreciation for doctors and methods of treatment, by the second half of the century most writers are critical of the medical establishment and depict asylums as prison-like “snake pits.”

Susan Hubert’s *Questions of Power: The Politics of Women’s Madness Narratives* (2002), offers an in-depth critical analysis of autobiographical texts written by women who experienced the psychiatric asylum, and she reads such works for strategies of resistance to oppressive systems of (primarily) gender ideology. Hubert accurately describes the interdisciplinary nature of such critical investigations into women’s madness, explaining that “autobiographical writings by mental patients have come to be seen as important sources for the history of psychiatry. Similarly, feminist scholars have turned to women’s writing for evidence of gender bias in psychiatric practice and cultural attitudes about women” (15). Indeed, the texts from this time period demonstrate that works of literature are both formed by various institutions of power and (in)form them in return.

The 1990s also saw the emergence of some of the most forceful critiques of the interpretive model established by Gilbert and Gubar. Social theorist Susan Bordo focused her attention on a number of traditionally “feminine” disorders, including hysteria, anorexia, and agoraphobia, calling them acts of “embodied protest,” or physical manifestations, frequently of illness, that come to serve as “unconscious, inchoate, and counterproductive protest without an
effective language, voice, or politics, but protest nonetheless” (175). On one hand, then, Bordo acknowledges the way in which such illnesses might be read as giving voice to women’s frustration with a patriarchal social order. Their disordered symptoms serve as caricatures of idealized feminine behavior and bodies, with the bed-ridden and nervous hysteric serving as an indictment of the demand for feminine passivity. However, Bordo is also reluctant to read these acts of embodied protest as achieving anything beyond a purely theoretical form of resistance. She calls such illnesses, “protest and retreat in the same gesture,” for while they may “enact fantasies of rebellion,” actually living with the disordered body defeats any real attempt at protest (181). A similar stance is taken up and compellingly delivered by literary scholar Marta Caminero-Santangelo, in *The Madwoman Can’t Speak: Or Why Insanity is Not Subversive* (1998). One of the most convincing and often-cited critical piece to diverge from Gilbert and Gubar’s established paradigm, Caminero-Santangelo argues that:

In order to use madness as a metaphor for the liberatory potentials of language, feminist critics must utterly unmoor it from is associations with mental illness as understood and constructed by discourses and practices both medical and popular. But if the connotations carried by the notion of madness must be completely suppressed in order for such a metaphor to work – if the word must be emptied of its meanings and provided with an entirely new set of significations (in fact, an impossibility) – then why use it at all? (2)

She ultimately concludes that the madwoman has remained an enticing figure for feminist literary critics largely for the illusion of power and rebellion she represents. Caminero-Santangelo’s work is central to my own reading of women’s madness and the limitations I perceive in constructing madness as a viable means of resistance to oppressive ideological
systems. If one is already socially marginalized, “going mad” only further participates in this marginalization.

In addition to moving away from reading madness as inherently subversive, many contemporary critical projects have also worked to expand the parameters of the madness narrative genre. Literary analyses have traditionally focused on patriarchal culture as the catalyst for psychic destruction and madness, at the risk of failing to take into consideration the intersectional nature of oppression. Indeed, as Gayatri Spivak has famously observed about Gilbert and Gubar’s analysis of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), Jane gains upward social mobility largely at the expense of the racially ambiguous and mad Bertha Mason, and thus any reading of Jane as a feminist figure must be tempered with an acknowledgment of her implicit act of imperialism (248). In addition, Laura Halperin has characterized the “canon” of madness narratives as being “Eurocentric and Anglocentric…[focusing] on the roles gender and sexuality play in the construction of literary ‘madwomen,’” while ignoring the opportunity for a more intersectional reading that also takes race and national status into consideration (11). The preponderance of writing on women’s experiences in the psychiatric hospital attests to this narrow vision of what actually constitutes the madness narrative genre. Although institutionalized women often constructed the asylum as a prison space, it was also largely a privileged space, and a trip to a private hospital was primarily available to only white, middle to upper-class women, to say nothing of having the time and resources to write about these experiences after being released.

In addition to widening the scope of literary studies of madness to include issues of race and nationality, I would also situate my project in conversation with contemporary scholars who locate resistance not in madness, but in acts deviance and transgression. In her 2004 essay,
“Deviance as Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics,” Cathy Cohen considers the political import of transgressing standards of propriety, seeing as such standards only work to inscribe a white, heteronormative understanding of normalcy. Literary critic Aaliyah Abdur-Rahman takes a similar approach in 2012 book, *Against the Closet: Black Political Longing and the Erotics of Race*, in which she interrogates representations of African-American sexual transgression in literature. Reading particular forms of erotic transgression as in response to different iterations of racial injustice throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, she makes the argument that representing these acts of deviance have been critical in the political and literary self-fashioning of black writers. Similarly, Laura Halperin’s *Intersections of Harm: Narratives of Latina Deviance and Defiance* (2015), looks at the relationship between madness and deviant behavior in literature by Latina women, explaining “The Latina ‘madwoman’s’ portrayal, in fiction as in memoir, emphasizes that individual ascriptions of deviance form part of collective narratives about the residual effects of colonization, imperialism, dictatorship, and/or revolution and the concurrent effects of racism, xenophobia, (hetero)sexism, and classism” (21). In her analysis she reveals the way in which the designation of deviance is both a product of intersecting systems of hegemonic authority, and also the site from which to resist such a totalizing narrative. In these works, scholars locate the artistic and political potential in behaviors and actions that have traditionally be constructed as deviant in a white, (hetero)normative framework, arguing that transgression serves as a refusal to capitulate to hegemonic standards of propriety and normalcy.

This ultimately leads me to my second primary intervention in this project. Throughout my dissertation I analyze representations of both madness and acts of deviance, and I stress that there is a critical difference between the two iterations of abnormality. In the literary texts I
analyze, characters go mad living under systems of oppression and subsequently commit acts of embodied deviance. Internalizing their feelings of frustration and anger, they direct their protest inward, engaging in acts of self-harm that lead only to further suffering. Thus, I read madness as inherently disempowering for the way in which it signals a complete loss of personal control and power. Alternatively, I explore the way in which purposeful performances of deviance intended to subvert standard literary forms and social conventions can serve as a means of resistance to discourses of power. If madness is a total loss of control, a deviant performance stands in opposition as a strategic deployment of aberrant practices meant to shock and unsettle.

Here I stress the interdisciplinary nature of my project by turning toward the visual arts, and specifically the feminist performance art tradition, as a way to deepen the complexity of our readings of women and madness. Participating in the larger turn toward politically motivated feminist performance art in the latter half of the twentieth century, I read the photographers and authors as enacting performances of textual deviance, in which they adopt performance art aesthetics in order to challenge both formal artistic and literary conventions and the viewing and reading practices of the audience. Instead of trying to recuperate the madwoman of the text, I argue that the authors I discuss in this dissertation expose the futility in madness and turn, instead, toward the creative authority of the author and the adoption of deviant performance practices.

Due, in large part, to the intervention of politically motivated feminist artists, the role of the female artist and the possibilities for depicting the body were dramatically reconfigured in the 1960s. Adopting performance art as their primary medium, feminist artists challenged the status quo of not only artistic production, but also the politics of the body more generally. In making their own bodies the focus of their performance pieces, feminist artists are able to
subvert traditional notions of art as purely aesthetic, and constitute themselves as artistic creators and subjects with a political and social agenda. While performance practices can be traced back to various earlier artistic traditions, both Western and non-Western, “performance art” as we largely know and understand it today proliferated during the 1960s and 1970s feminist and avant-garde art scene, and worked to unsettle deeply held beliefs about gender, race, sexuality, and the body. Jayne Wark asserts that the emphasis on the physical body in action revealed “the (male) artist-genius not as universal and transcendent,” but as an embodied subject marked by its own privileges. Similarly, artists’ often shocking live performances worked to dispel the notion that art should be evaluated based on universal and purely aesthetic values, and instead “threw into doubt the supposed disinterestedness of the Modernist critical project and also made it possible for the question of embodied subjectivity to become itself the basis for a newly politicized art practice” (31). The more classical genres of painting or sculpture, for example, were thought to offer themselves up as works to be quietly admired by many and “objectively” critiqued by the properly trained art critic. Feminist performance art, with its emphasis on the often sexualized and almost always shocking or disconcerting live body, undercuts not only traditional viewing “pleasure,” but also the myth of the disinterested critic. In Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece* (1964) and Marina Abramovic’s *Rhythm 0* (1974) the artists invite audience members to interact with their passive and freely offered bodies in whatever way they see fit, while in Carolee Schneeman’s *Interior Scroll* (1975) she unwinds a scroll from her vagina and reads aloud about sexism in the art industry.² These approaches to art re-appropriated the trappings of

² In Ono’s *Cut Piece*, a seminal work of conceptual/performance art, she kneels on stage in a suit with a pair of scissors before her, inviting audience members to approach and cut the clothes from her body. In Abramovic’s *Rhythm 0* she ups the ante, standing next to a table of 72 different objects with a sign informing audience members they can use any of the objects on the artist in
femininity (passivity and vulnerability, in Ono and Abramovic’s cases) and the body itself (as seen in Schneeman) to create an interaction between artist and audience that engages both participants in an exchange about the discourses of gendered violence and power.

Considering the focus of my work in this project is on literature and photography, two static art forms, the shape that performance aesthetics take varies from chapter to chapter and text to text. All of the pieces that I analyze place an emphasis on the often shocking and disturbing representation of the female body, and directly engage with discourses of violence and oppression, an interest at the heart of the performance art tradition. In each chapter, though, I trace the emergence of a variety of other performative tactics with the intention of unsettling both artistic and social convention. With this background in mind, I will now offer a brief overview of my chapters.

In Chapter One, “Co-opting the Camera’s Gaze: The Performative Self-Portraits of Ana Mendieta and Francesca Woodman,” I analyze Mendieta’s Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints) from 1972, and Woodman’s Space2 (Space Squared) photograph series, taken between 1975-1976, collections of photographs that bear remarkable similarities. In each set of images, the artists distort their nude forms against panes of glass: a hand-held piece of glass in Mendieta’s Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints) and a glass museum case in Woodman’s Space2. In so doing, they bring performance art practices, with an emphasis on the shocking and deviant body in motion, into their self-portrait photographs. Situating their bodies as sites of resistance, they critique women’s traditional iconography in art and co-opt the violence of the gaze for their own purposes. Through their photographic performances they also forge a new relationship between whatever way they see fit. In a performance lasting six hours Abramovic’s clothes were removed, her body was cut, and one audience member held a loaded gun to her head.
artist and audience, in which the viewer must take responsibility for their viewing pleasures and practices. I begin my dissertation by looking at their photographic work as a means to both establish the art-historical context for my project, and to illustrate the resistant potential in the performance of embodied deviance. In contrast to Charcot’s hysterics, Mendieta and Woodman demonstrate what happens when the deviant woman is not only in front of the camera, but also behind it, orchestrating the visual exchange.

Chapter Two, “Mind Cures and Behavioral Reform: Sylvia Plath, Susanna Kaysen, and the Psychiatric Institution,” focuses on women’s asylum narratives, reading Sylvia Plath’s loosely autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963), and Susanna Kaysen’s memoir, *Girl, Interrupted* (1993), in order to explore women’s experiences of psychiatric confinement in America in the 1950s and 1960s. In their critique of women’s limited social roles beyond marriage and motherhood, Plath and Kaysen give voice to what Betty Friedan would term the “feminine mystique,” or the dissatisfaction felt by many middle-class women with lives devoted solely to husbands and children. In both works, the young female protagonists attempt suicide, acts of embodied deviance meant to demonstrate their frustration with limited social options and sexual double-standards. However, their suicide attempts only succeed in getting the protagonists institutionalized, where they are then forced to endure the regulating influence of the asylum and its attempts to “cure” their mental strife through treatments that resemble bodily punishments. The asylum and its figures of patriarchal and medical authority work to curb the women’s deviant behaviors and mold them into more socially acceptable, docile beings.

Ultimately, I claim that Plath’s work pre-dates both the artistic and political protest movements of the latter half of the century, and thus her novel does not engage in the same kind of textual deviance as the other literary texts I analyze in this project. Alternatively, Kaysen’s
memoir, written in the 1990s about her experiences in the 1960s, employs a range of performatve strategies, including fragmentation, the inclusion of documentation in the form of her medical records, and the construction of a communal narrative meant to give voice to institutionalized women more generally. Her work demonstrates Sidonie Smith’s concept of an “autobiographical manifesto,” a personal narrative meant to speak with and for marginalized social groups, in this case, women who have experienced mental illness or psychiatric confinement.

Chapter Three, “Perverse Performances of Cleanliness: The Racialized Body and the Colonizing Gaze in the Work of Toni Morrison and Louise Erdrich,” reads Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) alongside Louise Edrich’s *Tracks* (1988). A central claim in this chapter is that race plays an integral role in constructions of both bodily deviance and madness. In Morrison and Erdrich’s fiction, living under conditions of racial and gendered violence results in insanity, and the novels underscore the systemic and often subtle nature of this violence. Characters endeavor to ameliorate feelings of racial self-loathing through a rigid policing of their own bodies, attempting to purify themselves and deny all bodily pleasures or experiences in order to prove their mental, spiritual, and social worth. Their insistence on the beauty and cleanliness of their bodies, and the visual markers of such cleanliness (whiteness and its attendant features), results in an obsession with the body that in actuality perverts any notion of cleanliness or decency.

Instead of trying to recuperate the characters’ embodied performances as subversive, I argue that Morrison and Erdrich more successfully confront the destructive influence of the white gaze by constructing textually deviant novels. Employing the use of performance aesthetics, the novels challenge the dominance of the written text by relying heavily on orality
and the aural qualities of the spoken word, while simultaneously and continually shifting the narrative viewpoint, in effect creating communally authored texts.

Finally, in Chapter Four, “Breaking the Silence: The Power of Voice in Maxine Hong Kingston and Edwidge Danticat’s Intergenerational Madness Narratives,” I read Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) in order to analyze the way in which madness can be harbored within families and passed down through multiple generations. Both works position systems of gender and racial oppression as the catalyst for psychic destruction, and suggest that an unwillingness to address past trauma results in passing madness from one generation to the next. In their texts, Kingston and Danticat use the relationship between mothers and daughters to illustrate the intergenerational reach of madness, and to show young women attempting to counter these destructive legacies through the creation of new narratives of selfhood and identity. As I have demonstrated in the previous chapters of this dissertation, writers in the latter half of the twentieth century repeatedly show how characters that go mad ultimately direct their frustration and rage inward, resulting in acts of self-destructive embodied deviance. Kingston and Danticat’s work also participates in this project of deconstructing any romanticized readings of madness. Young Kingston affects a limp, remains bed-ridden for over a year, and, most importantly, loses her voice in a psychosomatic protest over what she believes to be her inferior positioning in her family and community. In Danticat’s novel, protagonist Sophie Caco injures her reproductive organs in a violent act of self-harm and develops an eating disorder in her attempt to cope with intertwined legacies of political and familial violence. These acts of embodied deviance ultimately prove futile, and demonstrate that forms of resistance that include the violation of one’s physical form may hold revolutionary potential in theory, but far more often work in conjunction with systemic forms of oppression.
In order to counter inherited legacies of violence and madness, the daughters in each text turn toward narration and the careful honing of one’s own voice as a viable avenue of self-preservation. By making use of confession, talk therapy, and the writing of their own life stories, the younger generation’s willingness and ability to give voice to trauma their mothers found unspeakable holds the potential to rewrite familial scripts. I would stress that their turn toward narration demonstrates their “attempt” at successful resistance, and neither Kingston nor Danticat’s texts can be read as resolutely triumphant, instead offering purposefully ambiguous conclusions. Here I return to my central claim in this project, suggesting that resistance is to be found not in the madwoman, but in the form of the deviant narrative. The disruption of the memoir genre and the inclusion of non-Western/non-US folklore allows Kingston and Danticat’s texts to enact their own deviant performances. Perhaps most importantly, their refusal to offer any simple solutions or moments of narrative resolution achieves the most poignant commentary on the work still to be done in terms of challenging and overcoming gendered discourses of power.
Chapter 1

Co-opting the Camera’s Gaze: The Performative Self-Portraits of Ana Mendieta and Francesca Woodman

In this dissertation I analyze representations of women, madness, and what I call textual deviance in late twentieth-century photography and literature. Given my literary training, the bulk of my analysis focuses on prose produced between the 1960s and the 1990s. However, I begin this project with a chapter that considers the photographic work of Ana Mendieta and Francesca Woodman, visual artists who produced fairly prodigious bodies of work throughout the 1970s and, in Mendieta’s case, into the first years of the 1980s. In opening with Mendieta and Woodman I hope to accomplish two significant goals. First, their work, which was largely produced in the early-to-mid 1970s, establishes a critical historical and artistic context for this project. Pointing to the myriad and overlapping social and political efforts of the time period, including the Civil Rights Movement, the Women’s Movement, and various anti-colonial struggles, Griselda Pollock explains that these political critiques “gave new impetus to the study of ideological practices and cultural forms as being both privileged sites of ideological oppression and the place from which to mount cultural resistance” (4). In confluence with these movements, women and artists of color began to use their artistic mediums to participate in social and political protest like never before. Coming of age and emerging as working artists during this time, Woodman and Mendieta’s body-centric performance inspired photographs demonstrate the way in which political activism and artistic production were often intimately intertwined and mutually constitutive. My second goal in beginning with visual artists is pragmatic, as I hope to use their images as concrete examples of the subversive potential in performances of deviance. In this dissertation I interrogate the way in which artists, both visual
and literary, adopt performance art aesthetics in order to upend traditional generic boundaries and artistic conventions in the service of social and political intervention.

Although I am interested in exploring representations of women’s madness throughout the project, the photographs I’ve selected for analysis in this chapter share little in the way of imagery we might commonly associate with madness. There are no looming asylums, constricting straight-jackets, or depictions of the tortured and raving insane. Moreover, while both Woodman and Mendieta had short lives that ended in personal tragedy, my goal here is decidedly not to read their images solely through the lens of personal struggle or mental illness, thereby imposing the “troubled artist” narrative upon their work. Instead of forcing Woodman and Mendieta’s artwork to fit the “madness narrative” format, I instead offer my reading of their work as a means to establish the subversive potential in female artists’ purposeful and strategic performances of deviance, a core tenet of my larger argument.

More specifically, in this opening chapter I analyze Mendieta’s Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints) from 1972, and Woodman’s Space2 (Space Squared) photograph series, taken between

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3 Shortly after the publication of her first and only artist’s book, Some Disordered Interior Geometries, Woodman committed suicide on January 19th, 1981 at the age of twenty-two. This tragic final act tends to loom large in the writing on her work. Marian Bleeke reads her death as a kind of commentary on gendered oppression and suggests, “linking Woodman’s photographs with her suicide does not pathologize her work but gives meaning to her death by allowing it to be seen as part of that larger struggle” (45). Peggy Phelan goes so far as to offer the controversial interpretation of Woodman’s suicide not as tragedy, but as “artistic gift” (984). Mendieta’s life was also cut short when she died in 1985 under what remains mysterious circumstances. Her husband, artist Carl Andre, was accused of pushing his wife out of their New York City apartment window during a fight. Claiming his wife “went out the window,” although he did not know how, Andre was eventually acquitted of the crime. The slogan “Where is Ana Mendieta?” emerged during a 1992 protest outside the opening of the Guggenheim Museum where Andre’s work was to be featured, and reemerged again in 2010 when a symposium of the same title was organized at New York University on the twenty-fifth anniversary of her death (Munoz 192, Move 169).
1975-1976, collections of photographs that bear remarkable similarities. In each set of images, the artists distort their nude forms against panes of glass: a hand-held piece of glass in Mendieta’s *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints)* and a glass museum case in Woodman’s *Space2*. Their artistic choices align them with feminist avant-garde art of the 1970s, and they infuse performance art, with its emphasis on the shocking and deviant body in motion, into their self-portrait photographs. Situating their bodies as sites of resistance, they critique women’s traditional iconography in art and co-opt the violence of the gaze for their own purposes. In so doing, they also forge a new relationship between artist and audience, in which the viewer must take responsibility for their viewing pleasures and practices.

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Before delving into Mendieta and Woodman’s work, it is first useful to briefly address the historical interpretation of the body, particularly as it relates to Western (art) history. In the traditional Cartesian model, there is a division between the rational, thinking, and transcendent powers of the (implicitly male) mind, and the burdensome, bestial, (implicitly female) body, ruled as it is by natural functions and desires. In addition, Gail Weiss has pointed to the attendant problems in referring to “the body” for the way in which “the use of the definite article suggests that the body and the body image are themselves neutral phenomena, unaffected by the gender, race, age, and changing abilities of the body” (1). Unsurprisingly, then, while we might talk about “the body” as if it were a kind of universal socially unmarked form, in reality this has established a model for discriminatory systems of social classification. Men (and here whiteness is implied, to say nothing of class, sexuality, etc.) have been associated with of the mind, complete with its accompanying properties of rationality and intellectual endeavor. Conversely, women and people of color, characterized as being ruled by emotions and sensual appetites, have
long been affiliated with the body. Because the body is thought to be representative of the allegedly more bestial aspects of human existence, this association constructs women and people of color as always already teetering on the brink of deviance. This social division along the mind/body binary has historically allowed white men to ostensibly remove themselves from the realm of the body while capitalizing on the hyper-embodiedness of others and the labor, both physical and sexual, those bodies perform.

However, the social construction of women’s bodies is one clearly marked by paradox. On one hand, women’s bodies, and the intellectual and creative inferiority they have been thought to represent, largely kept them barred from entering the art establishment in any significant way over time. In Linda Nochlin’s canonical exploration of women’s absence in established art history, she explains that from the Renaissance until nearly the end of the nineteenth century, study of the nude form was considered a critical and essential element of a young artist’s training that also happened to be thought entirely inappropriate for women (158). In addition, professional academies and competitions routinely prohibited women from entering, making it nearly impossible for female artists to either enter or advance in the field. Running parallel to this history of women’s exclusion from the art establishment is the long-standing tradition of featuring women, and the nude female body in particular, as the quintessential

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4 In her 1971 essay, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” Nochlin also notes that “as late as 1893, ‘lady’ students were not admitted to Life Drawing at the Royal Academy in London, and even when they were, after that date, the model had to be ‘partially draped’” (159). A forerunner to Nochlin’s piece might be found in Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own (1929), an extended meditation on women in the arts that features the essay, “Shakespeare’s Sister.” In this piece Woolf imagines that the Bard had a sister named Judith who holds all of the same intellectual talents, but, by virtue of being born a woman, is denied access to education and forced into marriage instead. Judith eventually kills herself while her brother, given the tools needed to both hone and share his talent, goes on to great success.
subject material of artistic works. Thus, the female body is able to shed its animal connection to bodily functions and appetites only when it takes the shape of the idealized body (typically nude, lithe, and white) of the artistic muse or as subject matter for the male artist.

While there have, of course, been exceptions to these rules over time, the role of the female artist and the possibilities for depicting the body were dramatically reconfigured in the 1960s, thanks to the intervention of politically motivated feminist artists. Feminists argued for an understanding of the body as a “politically inscribed entity, its physiology and morphology shaped by histories and practices of containment and control” (Bordo 21). This reimagining confronts the fact that the corporeal form cannot, for the vast majority of individuals, be simply reduced to metaphor. Rather, one’s physical form is connected to and shaped by political and social ideology, and it is exactly this relationship that female artists and artists of color began to confront in their work. Amelia Jones has suggested that the relationship between feminist activism and artistic production is mutually constitutive, claiming “visual culture is informed by feminist theory, and feminism has long acknowledged that visuality (the conditions of how we see and make meaning of what we see) is one of the key modes by which gender is culturally inscribed in Western culture” (1). Adopting performance art as their primary medium, feminist artists challenged the status quo of not only artistic production, but also the politics of the body more generally. By insisting that they are qualified to produce art they inherently challenge notions of women’s capabilities, while their often avant-garde practices trouble the boundaries of deviance and normalcy.

Although a complete overview of mid-century feminist art initiatives is beyond the scope of this chapter, I want to briefly address the emergence of feminist performance art. The pieces from Woodman and Mendieta I discuss in this chapter are works of photography, and indeed it
was really Woodman’s only medium, yet the dynamic quality of live performance resonates in their static images. While performance practices can be traced back to various earlier artistic traditions, both Western and non-Western, “performance art” as we largely know and understand it today proliferated during the 1960s and 1970s feminist and avant-garde art scene, and worked to unsettle deeply held beliefs about gender, race, sexuality, and the body. Jayne Wark asserts that the emphasis on the physical body in action revealed “the (male) artist-genius not as universal and transcendent,” but as an embodied subject marked by its own privileges. Similarly, artists’ often shocking live performances worked to dispel the notion that art should be evaluated based on universal and purely aesthetic values, and instead “threw into doubt the supposed disinterestedness of the Modernist critical project and also made it possible for the question of embodied subjectivity to become itself the basis for a newly politicized art practice” (31). Throughout this chapter I will refer to both “performance art” and “body art,” relying on Jones’s definition of body art, which demonstrates the inherent connection between the two artistic approaches. Jones argues that “works that involve the artist’s enactment of her/his body in all of its sexual, racial, and other particularities and overtly solicit spectatorial desires unhinge the very deep structures and assumptions embedded in the formalist model of art evaluation” (5). In making their own bodies the focus of their performance pieces, feminist artists are able to subvert traditional notions of art as purely aesthetic, and constitute themselves as artistic creators and subjects with a political and social agenda. With an emphasis on the gendered, raced, and otherwise “non-normative” body, and here I use this designation to describe the way in which any body that does not fit the default white male body is automatically constructed as outside the unmarked norm, performance art challenges objective notions of art criticism, highlights the previous lack of such bodies/individuals in the art world, and critiques gender and racial
violence. Instead of presenting the body in its idealized form, a move that erases the body’s cultural specificity and political signification, these embodied performances thrust forward the often messy and complicated reality of human existence in order to force viewers to confront their ingrained beliefs and biases.

I want to turn more specifically to the way in which Mendieta and Woodman employ tactics of deviance to challenge women’s representation in art. First, both artists adopt and reconfigure the photographic medium and the self-portrait genre, as both have traditionally been seen as denigrated forms in a hierarchal art system. Historically, the self-portrait has always been the more experimental, perhaps even slightly deviant, twin to the more established genre of portraiture. Throughout the vast majority of (Western) art history, portraiture has been reserved for those who occupy a position of prominence within a society, such as members of the government or the church, and thus there was typically a significant difference in status between the artist and their sitter (West 9). Conversely, self-portraiture was undertaken as a means of self-enjoyment, a way to experiment with new styles, or, if the artist was a woman, as a way of attempting to make a career in art at all. Self-portraiture was more accessible to female artists, in part, because of its questionable positioning within the hierarchy of artistic genres. Because many considered portraiture in general to be a mimetic art, simply recreating a likeness as opposed to offering a work of true originality, it was thought that portraits and self-portraits were more in line with women’s capabilities (West 145). Similarly, photography has also long been thought of as inferior in relation to other, more classical art forms. Unlike painting or sculpture, the camera has a utilitarian history, being put to use to document people and events, a feature that often positioned it as a tool more than as an artistic medium. Moreover, the camera’s widespread accessibility and ease of use made it available to the average citizen, and
consequently, as Sontag suggests, “like every mass art form, photography is not practiced by most people as art” (8). Thus, Mendieta and Woodman’s photographic self-portraits are themselves acts of artistic deviance. They stake a claim for the validity of self-portraiture and the right to construct themselves as legitimate artistic subjects. In addition, their choice of the photographic medium troubles the high/low boundaries of classic art traditions, and allows them to more fully engage with the concept of the gaze and its ideological implications.

Second, in describing work like Mendieta and Woodman’s, Jones has referred to it as “photographic self-performance,” suggesting that “postmodern photographic practices establish an exaggerated mode of performative self-imaging that opens up an entirely new way of thinking about photography and the racially, sexually, and gender-identified subject” (948). By enacting performances of bodily deviance, their images challenge the camera’s gaze, and by extension, the viewer’s, resulting in self-portraits that disrupt the traditional interpretation of women’s representation in art. They refuse to allow themselves to be seen as passive objects of beauty, and instead offer a performance of the body that is both disturbed and disturbing. By constructing photographic self-portraits that borrow from the performance tradition, Mendieta and Woodman compile the layers of deviance in their images. In effect, they create acts of textual deviance, in which their work defies formal conventions and artistic hierarchies. In so doing, the viewer becomes complicit in the violence of the gaze, and thus is made to bear responsibility for their own visual pleasures and practices.

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Ana Mendieta was born in Havana, Cuba in 1948 to Catholic parents prominent in local social and political life. At the age of twelve she left Cuba with her older sister, Raquelin, as part of the mass exodus of Cuban children under an effort known as Operation Pedro Pan. Organized
by Catholic charities, between 1960 and 1962 it arranged for large numbers of unaccompanied Cuban children to come to the US in order to escape from the perceived threat of Marxist-Leninist indoctrination by the newly instated Castro Regime. Young Mendieta’s arrival in the United States was jarring, as the sisters were relocated to Iowa, bounced between a number of foster homes, and would not be reunited with their parents until several years later (Roulet 21). In addition, the experience racialized Mendieta in a way she had not previously known. In Cuba her affluent and light-skinned family had essentially been considered “white,” however in the United States, Mendieta and her sister were suddenly marked by their Otherness and faced racial discrimination from their peers, as they were “measured against other racialized bodies that were beginning to threaten the hierarchized order of the 1960s United States” (Alvarado 68). These experiences would shape Mendieta’s eventual artistic practices, as much of her work interrogates issues of Otherness, place, and belonging.

Mendieta’s artistic repertoire consisted of an array of mediums, including painting, live performance, earth work, and video installation in addition to photography. Although scholars debate the extent of her affiliation with both feminist and race-centered political movements, most agree that she was undeniably part of the 1970s art avant-garde and that her work engages in critical commentary on gender and race. Mendieta was a co-curator of the “Dialectics of Isolation” exhibit at the A.I.R Gallery, then in SoHo, whose mission it was to both reflect on and critique the liberal feminist movement and offer a collaborative alternative that allowed for a

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5 More information about what is now acknowledged to be the largest exodus of unaccompanied minors in the Western hemisphere can be found at the following: http://www.pedropan.org/category/history
greater inclusion of issues of race, class, and colonization (Alvarado 65). However, Laura Roulet has suggested that Mendieta “grew leery of being narrowly pigeonholed as a feminist, or merely as a Latina artist,” (22) and thus distanced herself from more overt political affiliation, while Gloria Moure maintains her political conscience was “intense but absolutely private” (13). Although her work has by now been largely incorporated in the feminist artistic canon it is not my intention to make a claim for Mendieta’s political affiliations. However, it is through a critical feminist lens that I wish to view her imagery.

In this chapter, I focus on her photographic series, Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints) from 1972. The entire series is made up of thirty-six color slides, thirteen of which Mendieta also had printed in black and white. The photographs represent both an act of performance and its documentation, and, as Kelly Baum suggests, they show the artist using the camera as more than a “neutral witness,” with each image designed to literalize the effect of the camera’s violent gaze (81). Her work challenges gendered and racialized representations of women in art, and demonstrates the transgressive potential in embodied performances of deviance.

The first set of images immediately speak to the violence inherent in the process of image making. The six photographs at first appear more like portraits done of Mendieta by a second party. Her hands are barely visible and the composition of the images adheres to the portrait genre in what is in one way a fairly traditional sense, as they take the classic approach of making the sitter’s head and upper torso the focus of the piece. The images range from Mendieta looking straight ahead at the camera, giving a three-quarter profile, and a full profile, all poses found in

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6 Established in 1972, A.I.R. Gallery (Artists in Residence, Inc.) was the first not-for-profit, artist-directed and maintained gallery for women artists in the United States (airgallery.org). The gallery has since re-located to Brooklyn, New York.
classic portraiture. However, while the images harken back to a style of portraiture popular since the Renaissance, Mendieta then adds her own alteration by pressing her face against a pane of glass, distorting its features. While the series of shots bear resemblance to portraiture in their composition, they are nevertheless still self-portraits. As several of the images make clear, she is in fact holding the glass and purposefully creating the disfiguring collision with her face. In this way, she does not present herself as the passive victim of representational violence, but rather she performs her disfigurement purposefully.

In a series of unsettling images, Mendieta uses the self-portrait genre to comment on the violence done to women’s bodies when they are made into “things” through visual representation. Charles Merewether has suggested that for Mendieta, “the body as the subject of violence, eroticism and death was the body as woman” (83). In her series of images, she conjures these concepts in order to highlight not only the camera’s connection to voyeuristic renderings of women’s bodies, but also to reveal the violence in such a rendering. Indeed, there are several “layers” of representation to unpack in the images. The pane of glass she incorporates into the photographs replicates and makes visible the confines of the self-portrait itself. Her use of the glass is performative, and does not allow us to view her portrait as purely aesthetic art object, but rather emphasizes the embodied nature of the subject of the image. That is to say, her use of the glass reminds us that when we view (self) portraits, we are not looking at an object unaffected by social discourse or convention, but rather that the subject of the image is always imbricated in systems of hegemonic power and representation. Moreover, the glass might also be read as representing the lens of the camera with her crushed features speaking to what many, perhaps most notably Sontag, consider to be the inherent violence of the photographic medium. Alvarado has suggested that “the clear pane and its positioning of the viewing subject makes the audience
recipients of the moment of collision, making spectatorship an act between material and representational violence” (71). In these images, Mendieta’s performance of the disfigured body literalizes the metaphorical violence that has long been enacted on women’s bodies in artistic representation.

Mendieta puts further tension on the violence of the gaze in a second set of images from the *Untitled* series, which make her body the primary focus of the self-portraits. James Hall has suggested that by the twentieth century, self-portraits largely “shift[ed] in focus away from the face to the body, which is harder to individualize and memorize: full-length self-portraits, often naked, and self-portraits featuring fragments of the artist’s body have proliferated” (231). While the first image in this second collection of photographs shows Mendieta’s face as she presses the pane of glass to her chest, the rest of the images focus solely on her body, and more specifically on body parts typically associated with erotic appeal. Her approach of creating multiple self-portraits of various disconnected body parts mimics the way in which women’s bodies are frequently disembodied and compartmentalized in art, advertising, and popular media. However, instead of having the effect of hyper-sexualizing these body parts, Mendieta uses the glass to distort her features once again, interrupting the erotic charge of the images. Instead of offering a visual image that is pleasing to the eye, a kind of complacent artistic end in itself, she instead renders the image disturbing in order to thus disturb the viewer. In a kind of play on the relationship between image and word, she uses the pane of glass in order to inflict physical pain on the body. Before the gaze of the viewer can do any violence to her form, she has beaten them to it. In this way her self-portraits confound the viewer’s expectations for the nude female form, asking them to take part in the process of both inflicting and feeling pain or discomfort through the visual exchange. Her images unsettle, in part because they make us imagine our own
discomfort, and in part because they hold us accountable for our viewing practices and the way we typically interpret women’s bodies visually.

The final image I would like to consider from Mendieta’s *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints)* is a black and white close-up of the artist’s face, and perhaps the most jarring of the photographs discussed thus far. The way in which Mendieta is able to manipulate her features almost appears unreal, as though it should not be physically possible. While her nose is folded over, it is really her mouth and lips that are focal of the image, as she seemingly wraps the entirety of her mouth around one side of her face, making it almost difficult to recognize her countenance as a face. As the mouth is the locus of erotic and sensual pleasures, her complete obliteration of this bodily feature by her own hand renders the portrait an act of defiant protest. Historically, (self) portraits have been thought to serve two primary functions. They “represent something about the body and face, on the one hand, and the soul, character, or virtues of the sitter, on the other” (West 21). In her self-portrait, Mendieta refuses to capitulate to the generic conventions, disfiguring her face nearly beyond recognition. However, this performance of deviance does work to reveal something beyond the superficial characteristics of her outward appearance. In keeping with the performance art tradition, she uses her body as sculptural material and resists the viewer’s gaze by reconfiguring her own body in an act of protest against scopic norms of feminine presentation. While the images may not show us what she truly looks like, they do announce an artistic and political agenda.

While her distorted face is the most eye-grabbing aspect of the image, in the photograph Mendieta’s hand is clearly in the foreground, revealing the way she pushes the glass against her face. If the purpose of the artist’s self-portrait is, in part, to establish their credibility and talent *as an artist*, then Mendieta plays on this trope by both showing herself at work creating an image,
but, notably, a grotesque image. Here, her work as an artist is not to create beauty in any traditional sense, but rather to actively perform embodied deviance. Discussing the body, Grosz claims “the body must be seen as a series of processes of becoming, rather than as a fixed state of being. The body is both active and productive, although not originary; it is affected by other bodies” (12). Here Mendieta shows the violence that often accompanies such a process of becoming when fixed under the camera and viewer’s gaze. At the same time, however, seeing her hand in action attests to her active role in this act of becoming, so that she is not only affected by other bodies, but constitutes herself as subject as well. Her choice of self-portraiture thus becomes a defiant act of claiming the right to represent herself as she sees fit, despite the way in which it subverts gendered conventions.

A number of scholars have also suggested that Mendieta’s work makes a decidedly racial commentary as well. Playing on the trope of the “non-white female body as ‘Other,’” Baum reads Mendieta’s close-up photographs as “appropriating the stereotypes that adhere to woman of color and exaggerating them to the point of absurdity” (86). If the non-white woman’s body is always already read as deviant, in its hyper-embodied relationship to the non-corporeal white male body, then Mendieta’s performance of bodily abjection and grotesque presentation challenge racist discourses by taking racist logic to its absurd extreme. Alvarado argues that, “ambiguous in their identitarian performance, Mendieta’s vignettes represent women who are only recognizable as Other. They avoid knowable combinations of visual markers of racial identity, instead mixing and combining elements and destabilizing the entire coherence of a visual racial apparatus” (75). Here she builds on the work of Butler, who has argued that to claim a particular identity is to simultaneously conceal the way in which such a category is naturalized and dependent on that which it excludes. In her photographic work, Mendieta
constructs a series of images that actually disclaim any easily identifiable markers of gender or race, instead emphasizing the deviant body that is in some instances almost distorted beyond recognition. In so doing, she demonstrates the resistant potential in adopting performance art aesthetics and tactics of embodied deviance, as they allow her to unsettle the hegemonic gaze and constitute herself as artistic subject.

Mendieta’s shocking self-portraits show the artist working to literalize the violence of not only the camera’s gaze, but also of gendered and racialized practices of looking that would construct women as passive visual objects. Her images refute this designation through her performance of embodied deviance and her creation of photographic self-portraits that call attention to the medium’s own role in such violence. Merewether argues “Mendieta’s work is characterized by a refusal of aesthetic resolution. Her commitment to site, to materials and process was a way of bearing witness to a life made of a sequence of nows, of a lived intensity that always entailed a risk, an exception to the rule, a condition of exclusion, an unaccommodated being in the world” (120). Ultimately, her disturbing self-presentations ask viewers to look at her image not as a two-dimensional object of viewing pleasure, but rather as a real woman in the process of interrogating the gaze and practices of visual representation. It is only through disfiguring her body and the processes of visual signification that she can shock the viewer into interrogating their own practices of looking.

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Francesca Woodman produced a prodigious body of work over what would ultimately be a short career. Born in Boulder, Colorado in 1958 to George and Betty Woodman, themselves working artists, Woodman began taking photographs at a young age, and her earliest collected works can be traced back to when she was only thirteen years old. In 1975 she enrolled at the
renowned Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), before spending time traveling and working in Rome, and eventually moving to New York City before her death in 1981 at the age of twenty-two. Largely recognized as a prodigy by teachers and classmates while at RISD, her work was never given a solo show in America until 1986, five years after her death (Phelan 984). In the ensuing decades her work has continued to gain in recognition, and although her relationship with the feminist movement is undocumented, she has been a frequent figure of interest for feminist art critics for her use of the female body in her work. Abigail Solomon-Godeau readily admits that “Woodman’s work neither announces a manifestly political agenda nor a specifically feminist orientation,” and yet argues “the nature of Woodman’s photography, its thematic preoccupations, its troubling iconography, the subject/object relations it explores – all coalesce to encourage to support a feminist reading” (14). I stake a similar claim in my own work, for while I’m not interested Woodman’s designation as a feminist artist, I would argue for the relevance of her work to analyses of feminist art produced during the time period. Woodman was coming of age during the formation of the National Organization for Women in 1966, the founding of Ms. Magazine in 1972, and the 1973 Roe Vs Wade Supreme Court decision, to name only a few of the defining moments of the resurgent feminist moment (Heartney, et. al. 10). Her body of work speaks to at least an interest in, if not complete affiliation with, the political sentiment at the time.  

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7 While studying and working in Rome Woodman had her only one-person show not affiliated with a school gallery. Her work was displayed at the Libreria Maldoror, an avant-garde Surrealist bookshop she frequented (Gabhart 55).

8 In her own attempt to navigate Woodman’s relationship to feminism Ann Gabhart has noted: “At school she read Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein. She was devoted to Guy de Maupassant and talked frequently of Simone de Beauvoir. In New York she discovered Jean Rhys. Thus, even though Woodman had no active connection with the feminist movement, she had found her way to most of the writers who are its literary heroines” (55).
In terms of Woodman’s work, many scholars have suggested that her primary themes are that of the body in space, and Ann Daly characterizes her artistic vision as “if space were something palpable – something capable of exerting physical pressure on the permeability of the body” (63). For Woodman, space is rarely conceived of in terms of expanse or wide open space, but rather space as defined by confinement. The majority of her work takes place in enclosed spaces, most frequently the barren and crumbling room that constitutes her studio. In this way, Woodman also makes her own contribution to revising the self-portrait genre. Her photographs, almost exclusively taken of herself, meet the definitional requirement for self-portraits, and yet they also expand that definition – focusing on her body more than her face, and emphasizing that body’s relationship to the enclosed space around her. The selection of images I am most interested in here are from her Space2 series, taken between 1975 and 1976. In these photographs, Woodman is once again in her familiar studio room, but this time she’s also ensconced within a glass display cabinet. Mendieta’s use of the glass pane mimicked the frame of the traditional self-portrait, and Woodman’s display cabinet works in similar ways. However, even though Mendieta’s images confront the viewer with a scene of collision, the images remain static, the moment of impact frozen in time. By contrast, Woodman manipulates the photographic medium in order to infuse movement within the still images, showing her moving within the confines of the enclosed space she finds herself in. In this series of self-portraits, she uses the display case as a means to not only reveal the way in which women have traditionally been cast as objects of display for the male/hegemonic gaze, but also to manipulate her own body in order to pervert the idealized beauty of the displayed object. Her distorted self-presentation does not allow her to be constructed as passive object of viewing pleasure, and her
refusal to remain still for the camera enables a performance of deviance that situates her as active subject.

The first image from the *Space2* series I would like to discuss places Woodman in line with contemporaneous feminist critiques of objectification under the scrutiny of the male gaze. The most striking feature of Woodman’s photograph is undoubtedly the glass display cabinet that encases the artist as her hunched over form peers out at the viewer. Here she uses the case to signify on the long history of women’s depiction in art. As John Berger famously claimed, when it comes to artistic representation, “men act and woman appear.” Indeed, the notion that a woman’s body is the quintessential object for visual display and pleasure is so ingrained within our visual culture as to be unremarkable. The fact that Woodman in many ways mirrors the typical idealized female body is also worth noting; she is young, nude, and white. She both plays into and subverts this long history of representation with her inclusion of the display case, a cabinet made for the purpose of containing and displaying beautiful or interesting objects. By enshrining herself within the case, Woodman draws a connection between the way in which expensive jewels, *object d’art*, and women’s bodies are all essentially collected and flaunted as objects of value (as long as they adhere to normative standards of beauty).

Woodman’s position as object, and object within a confined space that limits her mobility, courts the viewer’s gaze in familiar ways. Nancy Davenport has questioned the subversive quality of Woodman’s work, arguing “many of her works seem less like a critical articulation of a problematic femininity and more like a repetition of the problem…enacting the myths and signs of femininity and calling it a critique” (61). Here Davenport criticizes Woodman’s offering of her nude form to the viewer’s gaze as simply perpetuating the objectification of the female body instead of challenging it. I would argue, however, that
Woodman simultaneously calls upon and calls out this tradition by performing the role of art object. Butler describes performance not as a theatrical display that is meant to conceal some inner “true” identity, but rather as the routine performance of commonplace actions that we eventually come to consider “natural” simply by virtue of their ubiquity and repetition (Butler 2). However, when we overtly perform these actions, particularly in some exaggerated form, their performative and socially constructed nature is revealed. Because we are so inured to women “appearing” for our visual pleasure, it takes Woodman’s overt performance of display, her “acting” instead of “appearing,” to return to Berger’s claim, to remind us of how this repeated imagery is not only socially constructed, but also participates in the further construction of normative gender ideology. In her Space2 series this is the only photograph in which we are able to see her face as her gaze meets our own. In one way, then, she seems to refuse to be consumed as a passive object devoid of subjectivity, and yet, despite this fact, she nevertheless remains trapped within the claustrophobic space of the cabinet. In so doing, though, she forces the viewer to come literally face-to-face with an object that can stare back at them, implicating them in the power structure of the visual exchange.

While Woodman uses the cabinet to overtly performs her “on-displayed-ness,” it is her performance of embodied deviance I am interested in pursuing further and it is here that I make my own intervention into the analysis of her work. Looking at two additional photographs from her Space2 series, I explore Woodman’s deviant performances, acts that manipulate the photographic form and upend gender conventions in the process. Indeed, the display case functions on multiple symbolic registers, and while such curio-cabinets might be most commonly used to present beautiful objects, they often serve as a means of holding and displaying oddities as well. While Woodman might adhere to the conventional imagery of female
beauty on display for the (male) gaze, she resists this too easy categorization by first taking creative ownership over her own representation through her manipulation of the photographic medium (as can be seen in the second Space2 image), and second by performing a kind of embodied deviance, distorting her figure within the case and revising the purpose of the traditional self-portrait (as can be seen in the third Space2 image).

A recurrent, if not the dominant, reading of photography tends to focus on the innate violence of the photographic event. Sontag has claimed “to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and therefore, like power” (4). Essentially, when shooting a subject (a phrase itself imbued with violence) the photographer has the power to capture another’s image forever, perhaps against their will, and subsequently present the image in whatever context they choose, regardless of the feelings or desires of the photographic subject. Woodman troubles the camera’s violating gaze by co-opting it for her own purposes. If, as Sontag has claimed, to photograph something is to take ownership of it, then by virtue of being both the object and object-maker in her self-portrait photography, Woodman takes ownership over her own representation as object by literalizing the violence of the gaze. Solomon-Godeau argues that “in selecting the camera as her medium, Woodman was choosing a technology that is itself inseparable from those operations of fetishism and objectification that Woodman consistently worked to dissect. Thus, the tension between photography’s own structural norms and limitations, and the intensity of Woodman’s efforts to make it do something else, is what

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9 In addition, all photographs serve as memento mori, or reminders of humankind’s mortality. When a photograph captures an image of an individual the image remains frozen in time while the subject continues the inevitable progression toward to their eventual end. Barthes has suggested portrait photography thus creates a “rehearsal for death” (92).
provides edge in her work” (18). Not only does Woodman use the tool of festishization for her own purposes, but she also uses the camera in an innovative way to faithfully preserve an element of performance that would normally be lost after the moment of action. Although many performance artists documented their work through photography, the resulting photograph was but a recreation of the main event. In her work, Woodman does not use the camera as a tool simply to document the “real” live performance, but rather captures movement in action, in essence creating a performative photograph.

In this second Space2 image Woodman remains in the display case and maintains a similar pose as in the first photograph. In this image, however, her face and seemingly her entire head are removed from the frame. While in the first photograph she was visibly recognizable as an individualized woman, in this image she is entirely cast in shadow and her features become nondescript. At a quick glance or with no prior knowledge of the image, it would be difficult to determine the sex of the figure in the case, as the hazy shadows reduce the body to a generalized human form. Grosz has remarked that “the body is a most peculiar ‘thing,’ for it is never quite reducible to being merely a thing; nor does it ever quite manage to rise above the status of thing” (xi). Woodman engages with the concept of the body as object by exploring the liminal space between the body as thing and yet more than thing. By blurring her features and refusing her face to the camera she performs her “thingness,” or her objectification in a way that makes this metaphorical dehumanizing violence of photography literal.

And yet, while Woodman’s humanoid image reminds us of photography’s inherent violence, its ability to render flesh and blood people as static two-dimensional objects, she also challenges such a reading by forcefully reminding the viewer of her own participation in the creation of the image. Both Woodman’s artistic diaries and friends, such as fellow RISD student
and occasional model Sloan Rankin, attest to the photographer’s exacting artistic process, claiming “that the photographs ‘were frequently preconceived and later executed with excruciating care’” (Sherlock 380). Thus, while the figure in the case is blurred beyond easy recognition, it is not due to sloppy work or inexperience with the photographic process, but rather reflects Woodman’s desire to force the still art of photography to capture a sense of movement. While she might be unrecognizable and barely human, she is still active within the case, purposefully moving about to demonstrate her physical autonomy. Perhaps most poignantly, some of the only bodily features we can see with any clarity are a foot and one of her hands. While her foot is suggestive of mobility and highlights her capacity to move about the confines of her encasement, if not outside it, it is her hand, clearly outlined pressing again the glass, that holds the greatest resonance for the image. While her positioning in the first image was hesitant, showing her seemingly testing the boundaries of her confines, in the second image she is most definitely pushing back against the glass walls that contain her. Moreover, the hands are perhaps an artist’s most significant tool. By offering the bold imprint of her hand in the foreground of the image she reminds us whose creative hand is really at work here. Although she problematizes the concept of the camera’s objectifying gaze, she never lets us forget that she is ultimately the one controlling that very same camera. She thus co-opts its violence in the service of her own self-orchestrated deviant performance.

I turn now to the third and final image I would like to discuss from Woodman’s Space2 series. The image finds her again in the case, but instead of a vague and shadowy figure it is now clear that we are looking at a young woman’s body inside the museum cabinet, as she presses her nude form against the side of the cabinet. In this photograph, Woodman continues her act of subversion by creating a disconcerting and deviant self-portrait in order to further challenge the
way we view female bodies. In this photograph Woodman works to destroy the concept of the female body as idealized art object by performing herself as a purposefully distorted curiosity within the display case. Unlike the nondescript body of the previous image, in this photograph it is clear that the subject is female bodied, as demonstrated by her breasts pressing against the glass of the case. Sherlock argues for the haptic, or material, quality of the image and claims “in Woodman’s photos, the haptic nude (and all nudes are haptic, to varying degrees) hovers indeterminately between the sensuous proximity of the flesh and the elevated formal ideal…The tactile apprehension of the image, based in the sensation of a moment of contact, configures a relation of intimacy between the spectator and the object” (387). I would agree that the image engages the spectator in a “relation of intimacy,” offering her almost tangible flesh to the camera, and by extension the viewing audience. I would question, however, exactly what kind of intimacy this creates. In this photograph she performs a kind of embodied deviance by emphasizing the fleshiness of her corporeal being. In both classic and modern representations of women, from art to advertising, the idealized female body is the one that most distances itself from the corporeal reality of the actual body. The ideal body is one disconnected from all biological functions or “animal” appetites. For women in particular the idealized body is often the small body, quite literally placing a premium on having as little flesh and bone as possible. Here, Woodman refuses this romanticized notion of embodiment and instead offers up a decidedly corporeal form, an act that is itself a form of deviance.

By pressing herself against the glass Woodman simultaneously highlights the expectation we have for seeing nude female flesh, while also distorting that very same flesh, making it disconcerting and strange instead of idealized or erotic in any traditional sense. Although her naked breasts are on display for the viewer, Woodman ensures that they appear deformed, her
face unrecognizable, and her body twisted into a crouch as she balances on the spare beams of the display case bottom. She takes this familiar form and “through strategies of defamiliarization and disruption – excess, displacement, dis-ordering – Woodman exposes the overdetermination of the body as signifier, thereby significantly altering the spectator’s relation to it” (Solomon-Godeau 21). If the traditional self-portrait has been understood as offering a true physical likeness of a person in order to make a larger comment about the sitter’s interiority, or “soul,” here Woodman gives an un-individualized deviant body, refusing to offer a window “inside” and instead deflecting the gaze back the viewer. Her representation does not allow for the typical viewer/art object relationship, where the image is passively and pleasurably consumed, but rather her body is rendered as confrontational, making the viewer account for their viewing practices. Jones calls such a maneuver the “productive tension of self portrait photography,” in which “the embodied subject is exposed as being a mask or a screen, a site of projection and identification…and in this way, the subject ‘poses as an object in order to be subject’” (959). It is by usurping the camera’s violence and bringing it to bear on her own self portrait that she can productively challenge representations of the female body.

It is also critical that in this third image, where her flesh is most distorted, Woodman also shows signs of breaking free from the confines of her cage. As she presses her body into the side of the case her arm moves around from the back of the cabinet to rest on its outer corner. While in the previous two images her blurred, shadowy form was entirely confined within the cabinet, it is when she most actively performs her embodied deviance that she also shows signs of breaking free of her entrapment.\textsuperscript{10} The imagery here not only works as another visual reminder

\textsuperscript{10} As mentioned earlier, Woodman’s work attests to her preoccupation with space and confinement. Additional photographs not discussed in this chapter depict Woodman in her sparse studio room, often partially concealed behind the peeling wallpaper. Whether intentional or not,
of the artist’s hand at work, but speaks to the transgressive potential of performing embodied deviance. It is only by performing her deviance, and essentially unmooring her body from any idealized notions of femininity, that she is able to begin to escape the box. As such cabinets are made primarily to contain beautiful objects, once she ceases to be beautiful there is less a justification to keep her confined. Ultimately, Woodman’s performative self-portraits demonstrate her ability to both constitute herself as artistic subject and disrupt photographic convention.

Woodman’s influence has only continued to grow since her brief career ended with her suicide at age twenty-two in 1981. In a roundtable discussion of Woodman’s work, Margaret Sundell laments the way in which Solomon-Godeau’s designation of Woodman as feminist artist, most clearly defined in her essay “Just Like a Woman,” which accompanied the 1986 solo exhibit at Wellesley College, has come to define her work, thereby limiting alternative interpretations. By contrast, Laura Larson suggests a feminist reading of Woodman is useful, in part, because it moves beyond a straightforward critique of the objectifying gaze, stating “Woodman’s work is useful for feminism precisely because it breaks the male gaze stranglehold by articulating a different set of terms…[her] work offered a way to begin other discussions of such images call to mind Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s seminal short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), about an unnamed woman undergoing the “rest cure” for hysteria. Trapped in a room with yellow wallpaper by the man who is both her husband and doctor, the woman’s sanity unravels over the course of her confinement. Although I’m not arguing that Woodman’s work should be read as a commentary on Gilman’s text, her treatment of confinement and the female body serves as a useful visual complement. See Jui Chi’i Liu’s article “Woodman’s Self-Images: Transforming Bodies in the Space of Femininity,” for two competing readings of Woodman’s photography in relation to Gilman’s short story. While Liu provides a psychoanalytic reading of Woodman’s imagery that sees her longing to merge with the physical structure of the room, she also cites Helaine Posner’s interpretation, which argues that Woodman is being devoured by the home, essentially “abandoned in the space of femininity” (26).
representation and subjectivity” (59, 55). In this chapter, I not only engage with Woodman’s troubling of the gaze, but also point to the way in which she was able to innovate the concept of photographic self-performance, demonstrating the expansive possibilities for both performance and photographic practices. Her investigation into deviant bodily performance as a means of transgressing traditional notions of appropriate femininity certainly speaks to the larger context of the 1970s feminist art scene. Through her manipulation of the self-portrait genre, and her insistence on creating photographs that defied formal conventions of stillness in favor of impassioned movement, Woodman’s work suggests the power that lies in bodily transgression. She disallows, or at the very least complicates, the practice of casting a voyeuristic gaze on the female body, and by purposefully deforming her body she deflects such gazing.

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In this chapter I argue that Woodman and Mendieta, situated in the political milieu of the 1970s artistic and political avant-garde, infuse photographic self-portraits with elements of performative body art in order to not only critique long-standing and one-dimensional representations of women in art, but also to demonstrate the resistant potential in performances of deviance, a move that fosters a renegotiation of the relationship between participants in the visual exchange. By actively performing embodied deviance, distorting their figures and the traditional trappings of feminine beauty/sexuality, they point to the potential power that lies in the ability to transgress. Such performances aim to revise discourses of gendered ideology, both artistically and socially. In making visible the typically invisible systems of power that dictate processes of representation, their defiant performances force witnesses into considering their role in the visual relationship. Through their use of photographic self-portraiture, they are able to disrupt artistic conventions and shock viewers into new modes of viewing and thinking. In so
doing, Woodman and Mendieta’s shocking self-presentations ask viewers to look at them not as two-dimensional objects of viewing pleasure, but rather as real women, actively engaged in the creation of their own subjectivities.

As a means of bookending this chapter, I want to once again turn to a brief discussion of my use of visual images as the introductory material for a literary dissertation on madness and the body. As I’ve stated earlier, Woodman and Mendieta’s performative self-portraits do not in any ostensible way depict “madness.” And yet, there are certainly qualities in their photographs that speak to the collective visual imaginary we share for representations of madness. The claustrophobic confines of Woodman’s display case or Mendieta’s encroaching pane of glass are reminiscent of the imagery we have of mental asylums, in which the patient is not only confined (sometimes literally by means of straightjacket), but also on display for the more authoritative gaze of medical professionals. More importantly, though, their images speak to a sense of losing one’s humanity. Once the mind is gone the body, already the perceived inferior entity in the binary, is simply flesh, a burdensome and grotesque husk left behind. Woodman and Mendieta’s images force viewers to consider what it means to be reduced to the status of “thing.”

During a 2010 symposium commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the death of her personal friend, Ana Mendieta, performance artist Carolee Schneeman reminded the audience: “We have forgotten the danger, the dangers of depicting the explicit sensuous female body, we have forgotten how much hatred and resistance that inspired – rage, envy, domination” (185). Schneeman’s comments were intended, in part, to remind the twenty-first century audience of just how innovative and threatening (to mainstream sensibilities) some of the performance strategies of the 1960s and 1970s feminist artists were in their respective moments. Although we have, by now, perhaps grown more accustomed to seeing explicit depictions of the
body as artistic subject matter, I believe that Mendieta and Woodman’s performances of embodied deviance still hold a very real potential to shock the viewer out of their complacent practices of looking. When deviance is performed strategically, it holds the potential to achieve what madness cannot. A deviant performance can rewrite artistic conventions, forcing audiences to engage with naturalized discourses of power, thus offering liberatory potential.
Chapter 2

Mind Cures and Behavioral Reform: Sylvia Plath, Susanna Kaysen, and the Psychiatric Institution

In the first chapter of this dissertation I discussed the photographic work of Francesca Woodman and Ana Mendieta, using their images to illustrate the way in which static art forms can employ strategies of resistance traditionally associated with embodied performance art. Their representation of the distorted, or deviant, female form disrupts the generic conventions of the self-portrait and destabilizes traditional practices of gazing at the female body in art. Pointedly, I did not read their work as representing “madness,” because I argue that their purposeful performance of deviance stands in opposition to the loss of personal, social, and creative control that madness entails. With this chapter, I shift into a discussion of literary texts, both fiction and nonfiction, that offer depictions of madwomen and mental illness. Throughout the remainder of this project, I show the way in which authors demonstrate the futility in constructing madness as a form of protest, and instead employ performance strategies in their written work to offer the textually deviant narrative as a more viable form of resistance to oppressive discourses of power.

More specifically, in this chapter I focus on women’s asylum narratives, reading Sylvia Plath’s loosely autobiographical novel The Bell Jar (1963) and Susanna Kaysen’s memoir, Girl, Interrupted (1993) in order to explore women’s experiences of psychiatric confinement in America in the 1950s and 1960s. I begin the discussion of literary texts in the dissertation with these works for several reasons. First, stories of the asylum and institutionalization occupy a primary space in the cultural imaginary in terms of women’s accounts of madness. Not only has the asylum been represented repeatedly in popular culture and film, but there are numerous
anthologies dedicated to compiling asylum narratives throughout the twentieth century, and women continue to write, at length, of their experiences with mental illness and the psychiatric institution well into the twenty-first century. In this way, such texts most often serve as representative examples of women’s literary explorations of madness. The second impetus for situating these texts early in my project is due to the way their works serve as useful bookends to my time period of focus, and demonstrate the dramatic shift in narrative possibility over the course of the latter half of the twentieth century. Plath’s novel is the earliest work in this project, while Kaysen’s is nearly the latest (Edwidge Danticat’s Breath, Eyes, Memory, part of the focus of my final chapter, was published one year later in 1994). In this chapter I will demonstrate the way in which both authors grapple with normative codes of gender in the era before second-wave feminism and other social protest movements, and how they indict the psychiatric institution as participating in women’s disenfranchisement. While the asylum offered cures for women’s very real feelings of frustration and discontent, such treatments often aimed to reform the misbehaving woman and secure socially acceptable feminine behavior. However, while Plath’s novel is unable to write beyond this particular social milieu or imagine alternatives for women’s subjecthood and self-fulfillment, Kaysen’s memoir, written nearly thirty years after her institutionalization, allows for a critical reflection on the changing cultural landscape and the interwoven relationship between gendered notions of deviance, psychiatric treatment, and mental illness.

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11 A number of useful collections have both anthologized and analyzed women’s asylum narratives over the past several decades. See Jeffrey Geller & Maxine Harris’s Women of the Asylum: Voices from Behind the Walls, 1840-1945 (1994), Mary Elene Wood’s The Writing on the Wall: Women’s Autobiography and the Asylum (1994), Susan Hubert’s Questions of Power: The Politics of Women’s Madness Narratives (2002), and Rebecca Shannonhouse’s Out of Her Mind: Women Writing on Madness (2003).
Plath and Kaysen’s texts respond to a particular set of circumstances that worked to disenfranchise many (white, middle-class) women during the 1950s and 1960s. In part a response to Cold War paranoia and a move to construct women as consummate consumers and bastions of national family values, there was a renewed emphasis on returning women to the domestic sphere in mid-century America. The period is often described as a culture of containment, and Wini Breines suggests “American politics and culture were structured by a defense of masculinity and whiteness; the changes that accompanied the formation of an advanced capitalist society were perceived and experienced as threats from those outside American borders and from those who had been excluded within those borders, women, and blacks, and homosexuals” (10). In their critique of women’s limited social roles beyond marriage and motherhood, Plath and Kaysen give voice to what Betty Friedan would term the “feminine mystique,” or the dissatisfaction felt by many middle-class women with lives devoted solely to husbands and children.\(^{12}\) During this period a declining number of women pursued college educations and advanced degrees, and of those who did, two out of three dropped out before graduation. As Breines further explains, for women of the era, “dependency on finding a husband without a courtship system that guaranteed success and no preparation for meaningful work reveals their doubled position…they were caught between two worlds, a vanguard of postwar gender transformation” (50, 107). Such a system prepared women for domesticity, positioning it as their utmost social duty, while stifling any opportunity to seek professional and intellectual fulfillment elsewhere.

\(^{12}\) Like Plath, Betty Friedan was a graduate of Smith College, and *The Feminine Mystique* was published in 1963, the very same year as *The Bell Jar*. 
The maintenance of clearly divided gender roles was enforced by a variety of social institutions, including the asylum system. Indeed, the ostensibly objective and scientific rhetoric of the psychiatric institution worked to maintain normative gender codes, demonstrating the imbricated nature of patriarchal social discourse and medical treatment. Women who erred from the path of traditional femininity were viewed as mentally ill, and the asylum worked to cure them by returning to the home as complacent wife and mother. Although the treatment of the mentally has changed significantly over time, in practice it is has long been associated with maintaining social order. Early, pre-medical treatments for the insane largely included confinement and isolation at home, and public asylums didn’t come into prominence in Europe until the eighteenth century, where, according to Roy Porter’s historical survey, “the asylum was not instituted for the practice of psychiatry; psychiatry rather was the practiced developed to manage its inmates” (100). Early asylums functioned more like holding pens or prisons for the disruptively insane rather than actual treatment facilities. Real reform to the system was initiated toward the end of the eighteenth century by figures such as French psychiatrist Philippe Pinel, who advocated for using the asylum not simply as a warehouse for the insane, but rather as a space designed for medical and behavioral treatment. Similar institutional reforms eventually took place in the United States in the nineteenth century, and the following century ushered in many of the psychiatric practices we are still largely familiar with today. Psychoanalysis and the concept of “talk therapy” dominated asylums and private practices for the first half the century, and although still in use, by the 1950s a strictly psychoanalytic approach to treating mental illness began to wane, replaced by a turn to a medical/biological understanding of mental illness.

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13 Pinel’s contribution to psychiatry has been memorialized in Tony-Robert Fleury’s painting, Pinel Freeing the Insane (1876), which features the physician striking the chains from female patients at Paris’s Salpêtrière asylum in 1800.
In this approach, treatments were more often located in psychosurgeries and pharmaceuticals than through extended therapy sessions with an analyst. Although this shift to looking at mental illness as an organic disease suggested a scientifically objective approach to the diagnostic process, social constructions of gender played an integral role in determining who was mad and thus in need of (often extreme) treatment.

Foucault’s work, in particular, has been formative in the ways we think about the asylum, and the role institutions of power play in the production and maintenance of social norms. A foundational tenet of his work suggests that those who occupy marginalized positions in the societal matrix have long fallen under the regulatory influences of institutions of power that would seek to classify dissenting behavior and bodies as deviant in order to justify confinement and control. When discussing the treatment of those determined to be mentally ill, he explains, “there was an operation, or rather a series of operations, which silently organized the world of the asylum, the methods of cure, and at the same time the concrete experience of madness” (243). These “silent” operations work at the level of discourse, enforcing normative social values while masquerading as undeniably objective scientific practice. While most sources suggest that, in actuality, roughly similar numbers of women and men suffer from mental illness, this has not necessarily been represented in the diagnostic process, in which women have historically been over-represented in terms of institutionalization and treatment. In the latter half of the century, clinical medical psychiatric discourse often worked to tether women to madness, and with new advances in the ability to both diagnose and treat mental ailments, psychiatrists and psychologists were able to address a wider array of symptoms and potential patients. Addressing this tradition of linking “feminine” behavior to mental illness Jane Ussher explains:
Women who conform to the female role model, as well as those who reject it, are likely to be labeled psychiatrically ill... The description of a healthy adult, either male or female, conformed to the masculine stereotype, whilst the female stereotype, of passivity, conformity, less aggression, lower achievement motivation, etc., where seen as psychologically unhealthy. (168)

Thus, when presenting as traditionally feminine, women are perceived as exhibiting symptoms of madness because they veer from the unmarked default male behavioral patterns. However, women who outwardly exhibit “masculine” behaviors, such as aggression or ambition, are also labeled as deviant and potentially mad for displaying behavior deemed inappropriate for their gender. Although presented in psychiatric rhetoric, and thus offering a false veneer of objectivity, such diagnoses are clearly informed by social discourses surrounding normative gendered behavior.

Psychiatry’s complicity in the policing of normative behavior eventually came under sustained critique, first by those in the anti-psychiatry movement, and later by feminist activists who asserted that the asylum system worked to maintain women’s marginalization. Coinciding with the birth of the counterculture and coming to the fore in the 1960s and 1970s, the anti-psychiatry movement was championed by notable figures such as Foucault, sociologist Erving Goffman, and psychiatrists R.D. Laing and Thomas Szasz. Those of the so-called anti-psychiatry movement “not only rejected the medical model of mental illness, but also questioned the whole notion of mental illness,” with Laing issuing the now famous claim that “madness is a sane response to an insane society” (Hubert 20). The proponents of the movement sought to reveal the ways in which a diagnosis of mental illness could be given to those who simply defied social norms, and they vocally criticized methods of confinement and treatment, including electroshock
therapy, lobotomy, and over-medicalization, among others. While the initial agitators of the anti-psychiatry movement criticized the way in which the medical establishment was using its scientific clout to curb what it perceived as deviant behaviors, they did not expressly address the roles that gender or race might play in the diagnostic process. It was not until the 1970s when second-wave feminists adopted anti-psychiatry rhetoric and offered a critique not of just society at large, but specifically of patriarchal society.

Given these circumstances, it is perhaps unsurprising that female-authored asylum narratives proliferated throughout the twentieth century, and particularly in the latter decades. Indeed, tales of psychiatric confinement become an almost entirely feminine genre during this time. Not only have women been more likely to be institutionalized for breaking with gender conventions, but to be confined in the asylum is also to be feminized. A curtailing of personal mobility and the restriction of autonomous movement, treatment methods that render one passive and dependent on the support of others, and being positioned as always on display to the clinical gaze of those with more authority are but a few of the standard elements of psychiatric confinement that mirror women’s experiences more generally. Such reasons might explain, in part, the lack of male-authored madness narratives in comparison to the preponderance of testimonies written by women. One of the few notable examples of such texts is Ken Kesey’s fictional *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962), in which rogueish anti-hero Randle McMurphy lands himself in a psychiatric ward after feigning mental illness to get out of work detail in prison. Illustrating the feminizing effect of the asylum, over the course of the novel Kesey goes to great lengths to show that McMurphy’s violent nature and sexual proclivities (he goes to jail initially due to accusations of statutory rape) are not madness at all, but rather an individual’s perfectly natural tendencies and behaviors that are being slowly repressed under the
emasculating forces of societal pressure and conformity, as epitomized by the notably female Nurse Ratched. Although Kesey offers an insightful critique of the asylum system, his novel is also a kind of patriarchal fantasy in which the “Big Nurse” is able to assume a position of authority over the entire male-dominated system, and enacts her punishments by often sexually humiliating and emasculating her male patients. By contrast, most narratives written by women reveal the asylum to be a patriarchal system, presided over by predominantly male doctors and working to reinforce traditional gender roles.

I have selected Plath and Kaysen’s texts as representative asylum narratives as both works reveal the psychiatric institution’s role in policing women’s bodies and behavior. Coming of age in the 1950s and 1960s, respectively, they write about living in a society that curtails their personal autonomy in favor of restoring and maintaining separate gendered spheres, precipitating their mental collapse. In both works, the young female protagonists engage in acts of embodied deviance meant to protest their treatment and limited social options. In The Bell Jar and Girl, Interrupted embodied deviance takes the form of suicide and attempted suicide. While their suicide attempts are undoubtedly acts of protest meant to demonstrate their frustration with social and sexual double-standards, I argue that such actions do little to dismantle larger systems of inequality. In fact, their suicide attempts only succeed in getting the protagonists institutionalized, where they are then forced to endure the regulating influence of the asylum and its attempts to “cure” their mental strife through treatments that resemble bodily punishments. The asylum and its figures of patriarchal and medical authority work to curb the women’s deviant behaviors and mold them into more socially acceptable, docile beings.

Plath and Kaysen’s texts share a remarkable number of similarities, and throughout this chapter I will trace the way they both construct caustic critiques of the medical and psychiatric
establishment. However, I am equally invested in exploring the critical differences between both works, as such an analysis allows for a more nuanced discussion of the possibilities and limitations in what I have been calling textual deviance. As mentioned, Plath’s semi-autobiographical novel is the earliest work in this dissertation, and demonstrates a marked difference from the other texts I discuss throughout the project. Set in 1953 and published ten years later in 1963, the novel pre-dates the political and artistic protest movements of the latter half of the century. Although clearly driven by protagonist Esther Greenwood’s frustration with women’s limited social roles and the complicity of the medical establishment in maintaining gender inequality, Plath’s novel does not succeed in creating a sustained critique of these systems, nor does it fully engage in a performance of textual deviance. Although frequently scathing in her commentary, Plath lacks a certain vocabulary with which to link Esther’s personal frustration to larger discourses of oppression. Friedan’s notion of the feminine mystique was often referred to as “the problem that has no name,” and Plath’s novel demonstrates the lack of a critical feminist framework and her inability to imagine alternative models for women’s fulfillment.

Alternatively, writing her memoir in 1993 about her time spent in a psychiatric hospital in the late 1960s, Kaysen has enough critical distance from her time in the asylum to clearly articulate the relationship between her personal experience and her socio-political context, as 1950s Cold War anxieties began to give way to a changing cultural landscape that included the Civil Rights Movement, the Women’s Movement, and protests over the Vietnam War, among countless other issues of civil unrest. The result is that Kaysen’s memoir is able to more fully engage in a performance of textual deviance, overtly setting out to challenge patriarchal and psychiatric discourses not only through sustained criticism, but also via the very construction of
her narrative. Relying on strategies of fragmentation, unreliable narration, and the inclusion of documentary files from her hospitalization, Kaysen challenges the reader to determine their allegiances – to either her version of events or the hospital’s – and in so doing undermines the authority of both the medical and literary establishment. I suggest Kaysen is working in the tradition of what Sidonie Smith terms an “autobiographical manifesto,” or a “self-consciously political autobiographical act” that works to create “an arena in which the revolutionary subject can insist on identity in service to an emancipatory politics” (157). Her memoir is thus not only her personal story of madness and treatment, but an overtly resistant text meant to challenge normative discourses of power, both social and literary.

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The opening lines of Sylvia Plath’s novel, *The Bell Jar*, read, “It was a queer sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn’t know what I was doing in New York. I’m stupid about electrocutions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick” (1). The year alluded to was 1953, and Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were being sentenced to death for treason, the only Americans to be executed for such a crime during the entire duration of the Cold War. The trial and execution were media spectacles, attesting to the public’s fascination with those who would dare to transgress the bounds of morality and citizenship, while simultaneously highlighting the very real consequences of doing so. Ethel Rosenberg, in particular, was a figure of public scorn for not only being a traitor to her country, but also for betraying her womanly obligations as wife and mother to two young sons (Philipson). Plath seamlessly shifts from the discussing the Rosenbergs to introducing the reader to her protagonist,
college student Esther Greenwood.\textsuperscript{14} Esther acknowledges the trial, and then in the very same sentence connects it to her own sense of personal alienation and confusion being in New York, where she is residing for a summer internship at the \textit{Ladies’ Day} women’s magazine. Immediately, Plath establishes a connection between the political and social turmoil of the historical moment and a young woman’s personal feelings of discontent. As Esther contemplates the Rosenbergs’ death by electric chair her commentary reflects a mixture of fear and fascination. While claiming that the thought of electrocutions makes her “sick,” she simultaneously admits to being “stupid about” them, suggesting an inherent fascination, perhaps even obsession with the violent act. Her use of the Rosenbergs as a frame for her own narrative foreshadows her eventual encounter with electricity in the form of electroshock therapy, a procedure that she will undergo at the hands of more than one physician during multiple periods of psychiatric confinement. She will view this treatment as alternately punishment for her misdeeds and as a potential “cure” for her madness. From the very outset of the novel, then, Plath forces the reader to consider their personal allegiances and interpretation of the given narrative. Are the Rosenberg’s traitors to their country and corrupting agents deserving of their severe punishment, or are they misunderstood and misaligned, victims of a moment of increased anxiety about threats to the American way of life? Just as importantly, Plath seems to suggest, one might ask the very same questions about Esther Greenwood and other young women of her generation.

\textsuperscript{14} Deborah Nelson suggests “Plath does more than frame the novel with the execution. ‘Esther Greenwood’, which looks like a derivation of ‘Esther Ethel Greenglass Rosenberg’ – Ethel Rosenberg’s full name – seems to name the heroine after a woman whom many Americans, Plath included, believed to have suffered a terrible injustice” (25). Alternatively, Deborah Gentry points to a more familial connection, noting “Greenwood was the maiden name of Plath’s maternal grandmother who raised her for whom she had great affection” (51).
Plath’s novel begins in the summer of 1953, and immediately addresses the expectations for young womanhood at the time. Esther Greenwood is an academically talented college student from Boston, who, despite her many scholastic achievements, finds herself feeling increasingly despondent. She states, “I was only purely happy until I was nine years old…I had never been really happy again” (75). While choosing not to expand on this announcement, Esther’s remark addresses the fact that her happiness essentially ends with her childhood, and that her depression is concomitant with her transition into adult womanhood. Deborah Gentry explains that, historically, adult sexuality has functioned as a kind prison for women, in that marriage and motherhood were the only socially acceptable avenues for sexual expression. In this way, “the only time in her life in which a woman enjoys some autonomy and freedom of choice is during her childhood” (17). As a college student, Esther finds herself in the final liminal stage between her childhood, marked as it is by her intellectual achievement and relative autonomy, and the life of a sexually mature woman, in which the desire to establish romantic partnerships also necessitates marriage and the conclusion of other potential life avenues. While many of her fellow female classmates are working on their proverbial “MRS” degrees, Esther views college as the final safe haven for her real ambitions. Claiming she’s not good at “cooking” or “shorthand,” traditionally gendered tasks, she wistfully acknowledges that she excels at “winning scholarships and prizes, and that era was coming to an end” (75, 77). The actual numbers on marriage and motherhood during the time period bear out Plath’s depiction, and Breines lists a series of staggering statistics:

At the close of the 1950s, seventy percent of all women were married by the age of twenty-four; the average age of marriage in 1955 was twenty-two years for men and twenty years for women…nearly one-third of all American women had their first children
before they reached their twentieth birthday…almost one-half of all women married while they were still teenagers…A declining proportion of college women prepared for professions or pursued advanced degrees. (50)

While Esther’s ambition is rooted in her commitment to her writing and intellectual achievement, there is also a clear social expectation to prepare herself for what has been determined as her eventual domestic future.

Significantly, Esther’s primary frustration in the novel is not simply the expectation that she enter marriage and motherhood, but that this is viewed as her only option, and that her future choices are limited by virtue of her sex. Using the image of a multi-branched fig tree as a metaphor for her future, Esther muses, “from the tip of every branch, like fat purple figs, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor…” (77). The tree’s endless branches all represent different expressions of Esther’s desires, and it is worth acknowledging that the first “wonderful future” she mentions is with a husband and “happy” home, suggesting that a domestic arrangement is not inherently unappealing to her. The most alluring feature of the tree is the many future options it provides, not forcing her to choose only one avenue toward fulfillment. Her inability to imagine a future that combines these possible avenues sends her “into a depressive spiral in which none of the alternatives available to educated women seems satisfactory” (Showalter 216). Yearning for a robust intellectual life as well as bodily autonomy and romantic possibility while constantly being presented with marriage and motherhood as her only option is what truly frustrates Esther throughout the novel. As I will discuss later in my analysis, while she views housewives as downtrodden and servile, she also views the “career woman,” or one who pursues her professional ambition at the expense of
marriage and children, as equally unappealing, even freakish. At one point Esther is told by an
older woman that, “What a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place
the arrow shoots off from” (72). This double-standard, in which a man is launched into a future
of seemingly endless possibility while his female counterpart remains a stationary launching
point, serves as an apt symbol for her discontent.

Within the novel, Esther’s frustration with the double-standard of patriarchal society is
frequently embodied in the form of Buddy Willard, her sometimes boyfriend and full time source
of agitation. Buddy is Esther’s first serious boyfriend and a doctor in training, thus representing
both her potential future domestication and the medical establishment. Although initially
attracted to Esther because of her intelligence, throughout the novel Buddy repeatedly works to
undercut her professional ambition. In one example of such an interaction he ridicules her desire
to write poems, saying, “Do you know what a poem is Esther? A piece of dust.” His comment
gets to the heart of the classic mind/body dualism and its gendered implications. In the traditional
Cartesian model, there is a division between the rational, thinking, and transcendent powers of
the (implicitly male) mind, and the burdensome, bestial, (implicitly female) body. In their
exchange, Buddy, the man of science, criticizes Esther for her interest in the pursuit of poetry,
which is at once deemed a trivial pastime (“bits of dust”), and simultaneously too lofty an
ambition for a woman. Eventually, Buddy will go so far as to tell her, in a “sinister way,” that
“after I had children I would feel differently. I wouldn’t want to write poems anymore” (85). In
his role as future doctor and potential husband, Buddy claims a kind of objective scientific
mastery over the corporeal form, relegating Esther to the status of purely reproductive body and
attempting to curb her desire for mental stimulation and creativity. Experiencing the insufferable condition of being unable to think of a crushing response in the moment, later Esther composes a retort and imagines the confrontation: “Then just as he was smiling and starting to look proud, I would say, ‘So are the cadavers you cut up. So are the people you think you’re curing. They’re dust as dust as dust. I reckon a good poem lasts a whole lot longer than a hundred of those people put together’” (56). In her imagined response Esther subverts the traditional interpretation of the mind/body binary. Making a poetic allusion to Gertrude Stein (dust as dust as dust echoing a rose is a rose is a rose), she claims that a good poem, possibly one of her very own, might outlast her physical body and the bodies of those around her. Indeed, she suggests that Buddy, despite (or perhaps because of) his medical knowledge, is not actually transcending the lowly status of the body, but rather spending his time mired in bodies, and cadavers at that – the body stripped of any of the animating power of the mind.

In another manifestation of the gender double-standard, Esther is forced to bear the brunt of anxieties over sexual propriety in a way that Buddy is not, largely due to women’s reproductive capacities. The threat of pregnancy has represented a very real obstacle to women’s sexual agency throughout time, and particularly in Esther’s world of the 1950s. While the growth of the “youth culture” resulted in an increasingly sexualized popular culture, this nevertheless

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15 This moment also serves as an allusion to another famous madwoman, the unnamed female protagonist of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), who gradually loses her mind under the restrictive care of her husband and doctor, John. Both John and Buddy represent a kind of doubled patriarchal power, exercising their authority not only in the domestic space as husband, but also in the public/medical sphere as physician. Gilman was inspired to write *The Yellow Wallpaper* after her experience with the renowned doctor S. Weir Mitchell who treated her for symptoms of hysteria. Mitchell proscribed his patented “rest cure,” and instructed Gilman to, “Live as domestic a life as possible…and never touch pen, brush, or pencil as long as you live” (Bordo 158).
“unfolded amid prudish families and narrow, even cruel, sexual norms,” in which “girls were encouraged to pursue the sexual cues that assailed them but were threatened with the loss of respectability (and acceptable futures) if they did so” (Breines 87). In addition to the social consequences of sexual experimentation, women did not have reliable access to contraception. The birth control pill was first approved by the FDA and marketed to married women in 1960, but not made available to married women in all fifty states until Griswold v. Connecticut in 1965, and unmarried women until Eisenstadt v. Baird in 1972 (Eig, Ferreter 124). Esther’s conundrum is encapsulated in a magazine clipping she receives from her mother: “there was no one hundred percent sure way not to have a baby, it said in an article my mother cut out of the Reader’s Digest and mailed to me at college. The article was written by a married woman lawyer with children and called ‘In Defense of Chastity’” (80-81). Without a way to prevent pregnancy, the mark of a “good” woman was one who remained chaste and curbed her sexual desires until entering the confines of marriage. Unless one was willing to risk becoming pregnant out of wedlock, and the social ostracism associated with such a “condition,” young women had few reliable options to exercise bodily autonomy while also adhering to normative standards of decency. As Esther notes after reading the piece, “the one thing this article didn’t seem to me to consider was how a girl felt” (81).

Her most caustic critique of the sexual double standard and the unequal expectations for women at the time is both epitomized by and reserved for Buddy Willard. She labels him an

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16 While a student at Smith College, Plath’s mother sent her a similar tract in the mail, Margaret Culkin Banning’s book, The Case for Chastity. According to Luke Ferretter, “Plath received her mother’s advice on the double-standard, along with her gift of Banning’s book, as a life-denying experience. In her therapy notes, she listed her mother’s giving her the book and her advice on virginity as two of the reasons for which she hated her” (121, 123)
irredeemable hypocrite, a thought she expresses often and with vehemence. When on a trip to visit Buddy at Yale, he takes Esther back to his dormitory where he asks her if she has ever “seen a man,” and subsequently undresses in front of her. While this is taking place Esther ruminates, “All I’d heard about, really, was how fine and clean Buddy was and how he was the kind of person a girl should stay fine and clean for” (68). Inspired by this encounter she asks him “Have you ever had an affair with anyone, Buddy?” (69). Feeling certain that his response will be in in the negative, Esther is shocked when Buddy admits that he was “seduced” by an older waitress while working a summer job. This information enrages Esther, and she fumes: “It wasn’t the idea of Buddy sleeping with somebody that bothered me...What I couldn’t stand was Buddy’s pretending I was so sexy and he was so pure, when all the time he’d been having an affair with that tarty waitress and must have felt like laughing in my face” (71). In this moment Buddy reveals more than he initially intended, as his admission forces Esther to realize she has been living her life according to unequal standards of bodily comportment and sexual agency. She has been taught that keeping herself “pure” is of the utmost importance, and subsequently believes that Buddy, her male counterpart, would naturally be doing them same. After the afternoon at the hospital and Buddy’s confession, however, she gets a decidedly different picture of what it means to operate as a young woman in the world. While Buddy is largely free to experiment sexually, while still remaining a “catch” that she should stay chaste for, she is not afforded the same opportunities. Moreover, the consequences for stepping beyond the confines of “purity” are the very real possibilities of both pregnancy and social ostracization.

While Esther’s most frequent commentary in the novel is in relation to her discontent with what she perceives to be the limiting role of wife and mother, she is equally displeased with the alternative – the life of a “career woman.” While at her New York internship she works for
the *Ladies’ Day* magazine editor Jay Cee, an intelligent and driven woman whom Esther
describes as “plug-ugly” (6). After seeing her potential as a writer, Jay Cee attempts to bring
Esther under her wing, and despite her passion for writing and literature she largely resists taking
advantage of Jay Cee’s mentorship. She explains, “Jay Cee wanted to teach me something, all
the old ladies I ever knew wanted to teach me something, but I suddenly didn’t think they had
anything to teach me” (6). Aligning Jay Cee with her female college professors, she views the
professional woman as essentially sexless and bland, an option that is also unappealing to her.
For Esther, neither pole of wife/mother or intellectual/career woman is sufficient, and yet she is
unable to imagine anything else.

Ultimately, while men like Buddy Willard are set up to thrive, Esther finds herself
withering under a system that curtails her options and denies full expression of her humanity, a
situation that initiates her mental breakdown. As the pressure to conform to ideals of middle-
class domesticity mounts, Esther’s sanity begins to crumble and she engages in a series of
increasingly drastic acts of embodied deviance, a turning away from normative standards of
behavior. She begins by purposefully casting off the outward signs of femininity, disregarding
conventions about dress and hygiene. While these are small scale actions, they set in motion
increasingly extreme practices of bodily punishment, culminating in her attempted suicide. If, by
virtue of being a woman, Esther is tethered to the body, she thus sets out to destroy that very
same body in attempt to secure a kind of freedom for discursive systems of oppression.
However, her actions are symptoms of her breakdown, and instead of serving as a real protest
against prevailing discourses of power, they will only succeed in further trapping her within
these same systems.
The moment when Esther’s feelings of discontent take a dramatic turn toward full breakdown occurs on the last night of her New York internship, on the same evening she meets a “woman-hater.” She is set up on a date with a man named Marco who almost immediately reveals himself to be aggressive and domineering, even bruising Esther’s arms in his attempts to physically control her movements throughout the night and force her to dance with him. Largely submissive to his commands, Esther thinks, “I began to see why woman-haters could make such fools of women. Woman-haters were like gods: invulnerable and chock-full of power” (107). Esther describes the masculine authority Marco and other “woman-haters” have as godlike, in that their power is enacted without question and allowed to go unchallenged by any who might disagree. Eventually, Marco attempts to rape Esther, but she manages to fight him off, bloodying his nose in the process. Before he leaves her for the night he wipes his blood across her cheeks, marking her from the encounter. Subsequently, she returns to her apartment where she climbs to the roof, and piece by piece, tosses her newly acquired and stylish New York wardrobe off the top of the building. Thus, one of her first acts after coming out of the encounter with Marco is to literally shed visual markers of her femininity by tossing the stylish clothes. An even more startling rebellion, however, is the fact that she leaves her face smeared with Marco’s blood, not even bothering to wash it off during her train ride back to Boston the following day. She claims the bloody marks seemed “rather spectacular,” and “if I smiled or moved my face much, the blood would flake away in no time, so I kept my face immobile, and when I had to speak I spoke through my teeth, without disturbing my lips” (113). Her refusal to wash the blood from her face, coupled with the act of speaking (nearly snarling) through gritted teeth, results in a disturbing visage that makes her fellow passengers noticeably uncomfortable. It’s possible to read Esther’s action as demonstrating a kind of symbolic victory over Marco, displaying the blood of her
vanquished enemy and illustrating her ability to challenge his “godlike” authority. However, it soon becomes apparent that her acts of bodily rebellion do little to empower her, and instead serve as symptoms of her escalating breakdown.

Once she returns to Boston, Esther’s mental health continues to unravel, as she receives a devastating blow to her professional ambition. Her mother informs her that she has not been accepted to a creative writing summer course at Harvard University, and, for Esther, this rejection symbolizes the loss of one of her potential “figs,” or an option for a creative and fulfilling future. The news sends her into a tailspin where her depression begins to seem like a physical force, causing her to feel like she’s “sitting under a glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air” (185). Her mental decline largely manifests itself through the presentation of her physical body. She begins to give up not only on her standard beauty routine, but also basic human needs, claiming, “I hadn’t washed my hair for three weeks…I hadn’t slept for seven nights,” continually upping the ante until she claims she has not slept for seven, fourteen, and then finally twenty-one nights (127, 147). Her loss of her control over her body “mirrors her feelings of social and economic powerlessness,” and while her actions may serve as a kind of embodied protest against what she perceives to be her limited social and professional options, they do little to empower her (Dowbnya 582). Her actions might best be described using Susan Bordo’s concept of embodied protest, in which individuals (frequently women) enact a rebellion against oppressive social conditions through their bodies. Pointing to historically “feminine disorders,” such as hysteria, agoraphobia, and anorexia, Bordo demonstrates that while the existence of these conditions often works to indict systems of gender oppression by offering a grotesque caricature of idealized feminine behavior, they are also “protest and retreat in the same gesture,” as “potential resistance is not merely undercut, but utilized in the maintenance and
reproduction of existing power relations” (175, 167). While Esther’s descent into madness might call attention to the role of feminine bodily presentation in determining sanity and insanity, her despair drives her to a dangerous lack of sleep and ongoing misery. Moreover, while her disregard for feminine presentation is a relatively small-scale protest, it is enough to cause her mother to seek professional help, and ultimately leads Esther her encounter with the psychiatric establishment and a form of treatment she likens to punishment.

Esther’s concerned mother arranges for her daughter to meet with her first psychiatrist, the handsome but inattentive Dr. Gordon. Their first meeting goes poorly, and Esther is put off by the doctor’s lack of insight into her feelings of frustration. When he instructs her, “suppose you try and tell me what you think is wrong,” Esther fumes, “that made it sound as if nothing was really wrong, I only thought it was wrong” (130). The implication that Dr. Gordon isn’t really interested in getting to the root of Esther’s problem is furthered when, after absentmindedly listening to her talk he shifts the conversation to a time when he visited her college, remarking “My, there were a bunch of pretty girls” (131). Their interaction demonstrates the doctor’s inability or unwillingness to engage with Esther as a complex individual responding to the repressive social condition thrust upon her, and instead takes her outward displays of unfeminine presentation as reliable proof of her mental illness. This is not particularly surprising, given the fact that beauty, grooming, and dress have long been taken as signs of women’s mental health, or, lack thereof (Ferreter 132).

Dr. Gordon’s brief assessment of Esther leads him to prescribe electroshock therapy, a treatment Esther likens to corporal punishment. In their work on deviant bodies, Urla and Terry discuss many institutions of power, including schools, prisons, hospitals, etc., and note that within such institutions “scopic regimes enact oppressive gender dynamics. More often than not,
they involve men looking at women’s bodies, and thus, through the penetrating clinical gaze, scopic techniques become tools for gaining scientific mastery over troublesome women” (11). While their actual verbal interaction is incredibly limited, Dr. Gordon assesses Esther primarily on the basis of his visual assessment, bolstered by the power of his clinical gaze, and her decidedly unfeminine presentation qualifies her for the harsh treatment. Her description of the experience echoes her earlier commentary on the Rosenberg’s execution. After being strapped onto a table she explains: “Something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, though an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant. I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done” (143). It is quite possible that Esther’s fear that her “bones would break” is not simply a moment of poetic license. Showalter notes “in the early days of ECT, before the advent of muscle-relaxant drugs, the spasms produced by the current were so powerful that nurses had to hold the patient down, and fractures of the spine, arms, pelvis, or leg were not uncommon” (206). Esther interprets the experience of shock as a kind of punishment akin to electrocution, and she is perhaps justified in this reading, for while the treatment is designed to cure her perceived mental deficiency, it is also imbricated in the policing and punishment of her physical being and a painful reminder of her misbehavior. Esther’s mother even inadvertently confirms the punitive nature of the treatment on their return home from the hospital. While Esther claims she will never see Dr. Gordon again, implying it is because of her profoundly negative experience, her mother misinterprets her statement, responding, “I knew you’d decide to be all right again” (146). She sees her daughter’s actions as a willful disregard of normal behavior, and consequently the shock treatment is rendered as a
sufficient incentive (or punishment) to convince her to return to behaving in the appropriate manner.

Far from curing her mental strife, Esther’s experience with shock therapy drives her further into despair and, in an act of greater defiance, she determines the only way to break free of her oppressive condition is to completely destroy her body. Thus, she begins to plot her suicide, an act Esther considers and rehearses at great length. She first contemplates slitting her wrist, but is stopped by a thought: “the skin of my wrist looked so white and defenseless that I couldn’t do it. It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn’t under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at” (147). It is, in fact, the pervasive nature of patriarchal discourse and the lack of alternative models for a fulfilling existence that cause Esther’s pain. Thus, while she has a sense that the real root of her problems is social in nature, she still accepts the notion that her body is the cause of her suffering. Although she hesitates to inflict harm on her “defenseless” wrist, she nevertheless targets the body as her only site of rebellion.

Scholars and researchers have long been interested in how suicide might be understood not just as the act of a distressed individual, but also as a response to his or her social conditions. French scholar Émile Durkheim, whom many credit with the founding of sociology as a distinct field of study, was one of the earliest proponents of taking social factors into consideration when looking at suicide. In this 1897 work, he suggested that instead of viewing suicide as specifically related to “extra-social factors, such as mental alienation, the characteristics of race as studied by anthropology, heredity, climate, temperature, etc.,” in reality “the suicide-rate is…a distinct phenomenon in its own right” and related to “social concomitants” (Durkheim 13, 14). Building on this concept in light of Foucault’s work, Ian Marsh has interrogated the suicidal act for its
ability to respond to and potentially resist oppressive social systems. While individuals are formed within certain discourses, or “regimes of truth,” he suggests, “In relation to the suicidal subject this can mean an act of suicide could be read as both a consequence of certain modes of subjection (the formation of a pathological or suicidal identity) and resistance to being so subjected” (193). According to such a reading, suicide is not simply as an inherent flaw within an individual, but rather the result of social subjection – those deemed deviant in some way internalize such feelings and feel propelled towards self-destructive acts. Simultaneously, however, the suicidal act might also be interpreted as an attempt at resisting this construction, for it offers a means for the subject to refuse to participate in further subjection. While this argument is compelling, and one that Plath entertains in the novel, ultimately I hope to demonstrate the futility in such self-destructive actions.

Over a large stretch of the novel Esther experiments with different methods of killing herself, acting out what might be considered a series of near-death performances. However, each option she either contemplates or attempts to enact is foiled at every turn. When she entertains the idea of shooting herself, she complains, “It was just like a man to do it with a gun. A fat chance I had of laying my hands on a gun. And even if I did, I wouldn’t have a clue as to what part to shoot” (156). Even her methods for suicide are circumscribed by her gendered position and her lack of access to a firearm. She makes a series of half-hearted attempts at other methods of ending her life, several times trying to drown herself in the sea, but either the water proves too cold, “My flesh winced, in cowardice, from such a death,” or she simply bobs back to the surface any time she tries to stay submerged (153, 161). No luck with drowning, she decides to hang herself with the silk cord from her mother’s bathrobe, until she realizes she has trouble tying knots and can’t find a place from which to properly hang (159). Esther’s many suicide attempts
are illustrative of her personal frustration and increasing madness, but the half-hearted nature of her approach also suggests her unwillingness to really go through with the act. Swimming back to shore after an aborted mission to drown herself she feels her heart, continuing to pound in her chest, and imagines it repeating “I am I am I am,” her body making a claim for its existence and value (158).

Eventually, however, Esther comes very close to accomplishing her grim goal after taking an overdose of sleeping pills, crawling into a narrow space below the family home, and covering the entrance with leftover fireplace logs (169). Ultimately, this act does not result in her death, and she is eventually discovered and rushed to the hospital, resulting in an extended period of institutionalization. In these multiple failed attempts at suicide leading up to her eventual asylum stay, Esther experiments with extreme bodily deviance. Her suicide attempt is not a singular incident that can be easily written off as a momentary lapse in judgment, but rather a series of deviant actions that indict a system of gender oppression. In his reading of suicide, Marsh suggests that because it is often an act of a mentally ill person, observers typically feel as though “we always remain somehow outside it, implicated only incidentally, that we must look away and leave to experts the jobs of interpretation, observation, assessment, containment.” However, he then offers “the idea of a ‘public’ suicide, of a relational act, one witnessed not just by a direct ‘seeing’ but also a witnessing that suggests a recognizing of a shared experience, one that has cultural meaning beyond the designation of the suicide as merely ‘mentally unwell’” (212). However, while Esther’s suicide is undoubtedly a condemnation of the systems working to oppress her, it ultimately accomplishes very little. Not only does she not “succeed” in escaping her condition, but her act does not create the kind of shared recognition that Marsh suggests is possible. Esther’s own actions are not read by anyone around her, or even by herself,
as a noble protest against the sexual double-standard or the limitations placed on women’s autonomy, but rather the disturbing actions of an increasingly mad girl.

Esther’s embodied deviance does not successfully subvert hegemonic systems of power, but rather results in her confinement within the psychiatric institution and treatments that work to maintain her docility. After being discovered clinging to life in the family basement, she is moved to a private hospital for extended residential care, a move financed by a wealthy benefactress named Philomena Guinea, herself a writer who once spent time in an asylum at the peak of her career. As previously mentioned, the asylum space was one that largely worked towards the “feminization” of patients through confinement and curative measures that were meant to maintain control over an individual’s physical body and behavior as much as they sought to cure the ostensibly diseased mind. Upon arriving, Esther begins a regimen of insulin therapy, which consists of three insulin injections per day, a treatment meant to induce “restorative” insulin comas. Refuting the therapeutic powers of the daily shots she claims, “I never seemed to get any reaction. I just grew fatter and fatter,” as the treatment was noted for causing excessive weight gain and lethargy in patients. While the shots keep her in a passive state, their effect is mild compared to what she observes in a fellow patient named Valerie, who one day offers to let Esther see her lobotomy scars.\(^\text{17}\) Marveling at not only the visible scars on

\(^{17}\) The pre-frontal lobotomy, which would leave visible scars, was first pioneered in the 1930s by neurologist Egas Moniz, who eventually won the Nobel Prize for his contribution to medicine in 1949. In the United States the psychosurgery was spearheaded by Dr. Walter Freeman who perfected the trans-orbital lobotomy, in which an ice pick like device could be inserted into the eye socket and subsequently into the brain, doing away with the need for surgery on the skull. Freeman became a showman of sorts, going on the road and performing nearly 3,600 lobotomies across the country for crowds of onlookers. See Roy Porter’s *A Brief History of Madness* (2002), Elliot Valestein’s *Great and Desperate Cures: The Rise and Decline of Psychosurgery and other Radical Treatments for Mental Illness* (2010), and Jack El-Hai’s *The Lobotomist: A Maverick Medical Genius and His Quest to Rid the World of Mental Illness* (2007).
the sides of her forehead, but also at her “perpetual marble calm,” Esther asks Valerie about how she feels, with Valerie explaining, “Fine. I’m not angry any more. Before, I was always angry” (192). Valerie’s lobotomy epitomizes a long history of treating mental illness in ways that focused less on attending to existing symptoms or causes of suffering, and more on rendering the patient passive and, ultimately, manageable. The way in which these procedures were prescribed was often filtered through a gendered lens, as alluded to by Valerie’s commentary on her anger. Women who were dissatisfied with their lives, perhaps suffering from depression, anxiety, or other mood disorders, were often subject to lobotomies as a way to eliminate the pesky realities of their discontent. In Showalter’s historical recounting of the procedure’s history, she describes the way in which psychosurgeons “consider that [lobotomy] is potentially more effective with women because it is easier for them to assume or resume the role of a housewife” (210). Instead of curing the root of Valerie’s anger or addressing what inspires such feelings, she has been lobotomized, rendering her largely incapable of experiencing intense feelings of any kind.

While avoiding the extreme procedure of lobotomy herself, Esther’s lack of improvement with the insulin shots results in a second experience with electroshock therapy. Her new physician, the notably female Dr. Nolan, extolls the virtues of shock treatment and goes so far as to claim “If it’s done properly…it’s like going to sleep” (189). This response is, of course, telling in the way that it presents the desired outcome of the treatment as the passivity of sleep. However, while Esther approaches the procedure with horror and trepidation, “like a person coolly resigned to execution,” her experience is markedly different than her first session. Instead

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18 In *The Female Malady* Showalter relates a particularly disturbing anecdote from a 1972 English psychiatric textbook, which recommends that for a depressed woman with a “psychopathic husband…a lobotomy will enable the woman to cope with her marriage” if divorce is not an option (210).
of being violently jolted by the electric current and fearing for bodily harm, she is immediately rendered unconscious, and upon waking observes, “All the heat and fear had purged itself. I felt surprisingly at peace. The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air” (215). No longer interpreted as punishment, shock instead offers a sense of physical cleansing, however tentative, with the metaphorical bell jar of her madness still hanging above her head, but no longer enveloping her. However, in a narrative that has previously linked shock treatment to death by electrocution and demonstrated the ways in which such curative measures work to render patients passive and dependent on caretakers, can shock treatment truly hold the key to curing Esther? After composing what is largely a critique of the limitations imposed on women and how the asylum system further marginalizes and attempts to maintain control over female bodies, the second course of treatment results in the lifting of the bell jar. Before leaving the asylum, after many subsequent shock treatments, she even muses, “There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice – patched, retreaded and approved for the road” (244). Although under the careful watch of Dr. Gordon the shock is administered correctly, in sharp contrast to the botched procedure by the indifferent Dr. Gordon, her “cure” comes not from finding a solution to her limited life options, but rather through the psychiatric institution. Indeed, her rebirth is one that is almost entirely devoid of connection to the female body, as the masculine medical institution gets to claim responsibility for her new beginning.

Eventually the time comes for Esther to appear before hospital doctors for her exit interview, where they will determine if she is well enough to resume life on the outside. As she approaches the interview room she observes: “My stocking seams were straight, my black shoes cracked, but polished, and my red wool suit flamboyant as my plans. Something old, something new…But I wasn’t getting married” (244). In a novel that has repeatedly criticized the demand
for women to conform to traditional notions of femininity, Esther’s preparation for the exit interview offers grounds for conflicting interpretations. She places an emphasis on her clothes, once again a reminder of the fact that women’s sanity necessarily included adhering to rules of dress and presentation. However, wearing a “flamboyant red suit,” she does not cut the picture of a demure patient or, as she suggests, blushing bride, but rather a woman of confidence and assurance. It suggests Esther may have succeeded in rewriting the traditional marriage plot, and that she may be able to make her own way in the world with “flamboyant” plans for her future. This is where the novel ostensibly ends, seemingly leaving open-ended Esther’s immediate future. A brief moment in the very earliest pages of the novel, however, undermines the potential to read this as a subversion of the traditional marriage plot, and complicates what is otherwise an insightful critique of hegemonic patriarchal discourses.

Although the majority of the novel reads as though Esther is narrating from the present moment, in an early scene she makes one very minor aside, revealing that she is actually describing past events from her position in the (presumably not-so-distant) future. While she’s remarking on the small gifts and trinkets that the interns at the teen magazine obtained during her summer in the city, she makes an offhand comment, remarking:

I got such a kick out of all those free gifts showering on to us. For a long time afterward I hid them away, but later, when I was all right again, I brought them out, and I still have them around the house. I use the lipsticks now and then, and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses case for the baby to play with (3).

This brief early moment ultimately has the power to undermine the liberatory potential the rest of the novel has worked toward. Esther’s depression and eventual madness was caused, in large part, by her dissatisfaction with the either/or dichotomy that would force her to choose between
domesticity and career. Her refusal to passively accept these roles as simply the matter of course for a young woman results in her madness and resultant suicide attempts. While the conclusion of the novel momentarily depicts Esther subverting the traditional marriage plot, ultimately the failure of this subversion sits in the novel from the very beginning. Her brief comment about the baby reveals that not only did she feel the need to “hide” the gifts from her internship, thus secreting away any evidence of her professional and academic life, but that those very same gifts can now be destroyed and used as a child’s toy. Despite her clear frustration with systems of gendered inequality and the psychiatric institution that works to enforce it, the novel suggests that shock therapy “cures” her of her discontent and allows her to fall in line with social convention. The conclusion ultimately removes the fangs from what is otherwise a biting work of criticism.

*The Bell Jar* pre-dates the various political and artistic protest movements that will soon challenge women’s societal roles in the coming decades, and thus a model for Esther enacting a greater rebellion is not readily available to Plath as a writer. Gentry describes Plath’s work as “an outpouring of the grief and despair of a woman who believed too much in the domestic myth of twentieth-century America,” attesting to the way in which the novel inevitably capitulates to the very same system that it protests (48). Phyllis Chesler, whose work has served as one of the foundational critiques of the psychiatric institution’s role in maintaining normative gender codes, has claimed in that in the 1950s and 1960s “no one ever said that women (or men) were oppressed, or that oppression is traumatizing,” and that more often than not “those who suffer are blamed for their own misery and diagnostically pathologized” (1). Indeed, as a novel, *The Bell Jar* is invested in exploring Esther’s inner turmoil, and while it makes connections between her experiences and her socio-political context, it refrains from offering an overtly political protest.
The text is a product of its time, and Plath cannot come to terms with how to write a future for
Esther that enable her to escape the intersection systems of patriarchal and psychiatric
discourses. Much like Esther’s fellow patient Valerie, who underwent a lobotomy to cure her
problems with rage, by its conclusion the novel isn’t angry any more.

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I would now like to place The Bell Jar into conversation with an analysis of Susanna
Kaysen’s Girl, Interrupted. Published in 1994, the memoir chronicles her experiences with
psychiatric institutionalization in the late 1960s. There are a striking number of similarities
between Plath and Kaysen, both as authors and as psychiatric patients. White, middle-class
women from Boston, who checked into treatment at roughly the same age during their late
teenage years and early twenties, they actually even spent time in the same asylum, McLean
Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts. Despite these parallels, there are critical differences
between their narrative approaches that may be attributed to the cultural changes that took place
between Plath’s writing of her novel in 1963 (based on her experiences in the early 1950s) and
Kaysen’s memoir, which begins with her asylum stay in 1967 and is not published until 1993.
Although the setting of each texts is only separated by a little over a decade, read side-by-side,
these works offer a glimpse into drastically different narrative possibilities available to women
both before and after second-wave feminism, the counterculture, and the various social protest
movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Discussing the changing form of madness narratives across
the twentieth century, Susan Hubert explains that while earlier texts tended to praise the
psychiatric institution and its methods of treatment, by the latter half of the century “narratives
neither advocate institutional reform nor passively accept pathology,” calling such texts
frequently “revolutionary in form and content” (25). While Plath’s novel reflects the author’s
frustration with the patriarchal medical establishment, it concludes with Esther coming to view shock therapy as a kind of “rebirth,” curing her of her madness and allowing her to accept the role of wife and mother. Kaysen, who was institutionalized in the midst of great social upheaval, and then had the ensuing decades to further reflect on her experiences, offers a text that is overtly critical of the asylum system and uses tactics of textual deviance in order to subvert traditional narrative forms. Writing in the tradition of what Smith has described as autobiographical manifesto, her memoir is “purposeful, bold, and contentious,” a performance of deviance meant to influence the way we understand the relationship between gender, mental illness, and the asylum (157).

Kaysen’s memoir opens with a reproduction of her case file from when she was first admitted to McLean Hospital on April 27th, 1967, a move intended to immediately challenge the notion of narrative reliability. The document lists her personal information (age 18), emergency contacts, her “established diagnosis” of borderline personality, and her hospitalization history (admitted to Mt. Auburn Hospital for having her stomach pumped in 1965). By including this form before any of her own narration, Kaysen plays with the long tradition of the “authenticating document,” or a prefatory remark written by someone other than the author and included at the beginning of a literary work to frame the author’s social location. This maneuver has historically been employed most often in the slave narrative genre, in which introductions written by white abolitionists often preceded the narratives of former slaves, at once vouching for their legitimacy, but simultaneously suggesting the need for such white authenticating in the first place. The practice is also a common feature in many women’s asylum narratives, particularly those in the first half of the century, in which a (typically male) doctor would preface the account with his own brief assessment of the woman/patient, attesting to her ability to accurately tell her
own story. In this way, “psychiatrists controlled the presentation of madness narratives by appropriating them as ‘case histories’ or offering expert commentary” (Hubert 58). Kaysen uses the intake form to subvert the traditional purpose of such authenticating documents, both disrupting the literary tradition and challenging readers of her autobiographical text. The document is not from when she leaves the hospital after being “cured,” but rather is from the very beginning of her stay at McLean. It does not vouch for her truthfulness or the ability to accurately describe the events of her stay there, but instead sets her up as a mentally ill patient with “borderline” personality disorder, thus projecting the image of a decidedly untrustworthy individual. By beginning with this documentation Kaysen challenges readers’ allegiances, asking them to consider the reliability of such narration, while nevertheless staking a claim for her authority as narrator, regardless of her status as mental patient.

The troubling of narrative reliability is a defining feature of Kaysen’s memoir, and one of the ways she complicates any reductive or one-dimensional interpretation of madness. On one hand, she clearly implicates the social climate of the late 1960s as being complicit in producing her feelings of anxiety and depression, suggesting that her alleged madness and deviant behavior is only viewed as such because of repressive gender ideology. While the decade of the sixties is associated with the growing counterculture and various social protest movements, many such liberatory movements were often deeply patriarchal in their structure and women were still primarily governed by strictures of feminine presentation and behavior. Moreover, although the counterculture may serve as the face of the 1960s in the cultural imaginary, it cannot be said to represent the thinking of the majority of Americans at the time, and traditional gender ideology would not be fully challenged until the advent of the Women’s Movement in the 1970s. Kaysen illustrates this point in her memoir when she reflects on her very first meeting with a psychiatrist,
who she claims moves to institutionalize her after a brief twenty minute session: “Take it from his point of view. It was 1967. Even in lives like his, professional lives lived out in the suburbs behind shrubbery, there was a strange undertow, a tug from the other world – the drifting, drugged-out, no-last-name youth universe – that knocked people off balance. One could call it ‘threatening,’ to use his language” (40). Even though Kaysen comes from a respectable middle-class family, her defiance of normative conventions aligns her with this subversive undercurrent. She describes herself by saying, “I was the one who wore black and – really, I’ve heard it from several people – slept with the English teacher,” referring to a sexual encounter with her high-school teacher (156). Although her social location actually places her in the same safe world of suburbia, she comes to be seen as a manifestation of the “threatening” changes taking place in society more broadly.

As Sander Gilman suggests, “we need a specific cause and pattern for ‘madness,’ this need is society’s and mirrors society’s desire to control and to isolate those elements that it perceives to be uncontrollable” (15). Thus, while other young people engage in acts of political and social disruption, Kaysen is unfortunate enough, due to largely to her gender, to serve as the scapegoat for this larger scene of protest. Her institutionalization then becomes an attempt to cure the madness of society and its uncontrollable elements. She recalls, “The world didn’t stop because we weren’t in it anymore; far from it. Night after night tiny bodies fell to the ground on our TV screen: black people, young people, Vietnamese people, poor people” (92). Her list is a poignant reminder of the great social upheaval taking place, as violence and protest seemingly continued to escalate. Ironically, while the counterculture flourished outside, glorifying a culture of rebellion against the status quo, Kaysen feels not only left out, but also as though she is forced to carry the burden for others’ acts of rebellion. She claims, “People were doing the kinds of
things we had fantasies of doing: taking over universities and abolishing classes; making houses out of cardboard boxes and putting them in people’s way; sticking their tongues out at policemen” (92). Although society at large is bucking tradition and rules, in essence “going mad,” Kaysen and the girls of her ilk are designated as the truly insane, even if their frustrations and ambitions are just reflections of society at large.

Although Kaysen offers a cultural reading of madness, in which deviant behavior is perceived as an indication of insanity, she does not dismiss the existence of actual mental illness. Throughout the memoir she carefully weaves together cultural and medical/biological approaches to understanding mental illness, demonstrating how one is inextricably connected to the other. While much feminist theorizing on madness is necessarily informed by the analytical framework constructed by those in the anti-psychiatry movement, Kaysen rejects a model that views madness as solely a social construct. While highlighting the discursive systems of power at play in the ostensibly objective rhetoric of the medical establishment, some anti-psychiatry devotees rejected the concept of mental illness entirely. Such a stance neglects the everyday lived experience of those dealing with psychological suffering, and, as Kaysen demonstrates, while repressive social conditions may have contributed to her mental pain, her symptoms were quite real. Leah White has claimed that women’s autobiographical narratives of mental illness can “function as a form of discursive resistance against a world that does not want to hear the story of mental illness, and a medical community that depersonalizes the female subject…autobiography offers the option to create one’s own understanding of self, as opposed to accepting an external construction of self, and in turn offer that understanding to others” (4). Kaysen takes up this call, using her narrative to share her own, often complicated, experience, and in so doing refutes any superficial readings of mental illness and institutionalization. By
refusing a such a reductive reading, her memoir is able to challenge hegemonic and medical authority, while also advocating for those who experience mental illness themselves.

Kaysen’s mental breakdown also leads her to commit an act of embodied deviance, in which she attempts to commit suicide after feeling she’s losing her sense of reality and selfhood. She describes her altered view of the world by explaining, “I was having trouble with patterns. Oriental rugs, tile floors, printed curtains, things like that…When I looked at these things, I saw other things within them…Reality was getting too dense” (41). Feeling increasingly despondent and aimless in her own life, she literally loses the ability to make sense of the world around her, and begins to contemplate suicide. However, echoing the voice of Esther Greenwood looking at her “defenseless wrist,” Kaysen is also conflicted about wanting to kill herself. She writes, “Actually, it was only part of myself I wanted to kill: the part that wanted to kill herself, that dragged me into the suicide debate and made every window, kitchen implement, and subway station a rehearsal for tragedy” (37). It is not her physical body that she wants to destroy, but rather some internal self-destructive impulse. When attempting to describe what causes this feeling, Kaysen first claims, “My motives were weak: an American-history paper I didn’t want to write and the question I’d asked months earlier, Why not kill myself? Dead, I wouldn’t have to write the paper” (36). In her work on literary representations of women and suicide, Margaret Higonnet suggests that in classic works suicide was often depicted as a heroic, and therefore masculine, act, employed as a way to protest tyranny. By the eighteenth century, however, this interpretation changed, with suicide coming to be understood as a medical malady, a kind of innate weakness and mental instability (105). She claims, “in literary depictions of suicide, the focus shifts from function to motive. At the same time, the stock motives for suicide narrow in range and become more ‘feminine’ than in classical times” (106). Although Kaysen’s sense of
malaise and despair is, in part, a response to conditions of gender oppression, which one might accurately call tyrannical, the reason she actually gives for her attempted suicide is her unwillingness to write a history paper, a motive she herself describes as “weak.” Kaysen demonstrates her indoctrination into a system that would read women’s suicides attempts as weakness, for although she gives the flippant excuse of not wanting to write a paper, she also reveals she’s been having these feelings for months, attesting to a much longer and more serious struggle. Although her pain is, in large part, due to tyrannical social conditions, her action is constructed as and understood to be a sign of her own weakness. Kaysen does eventually attempt suicide, and it once again illustrates the limitations in embodied protest. Taking an overdose of aspirin, she then leaves her home to walk to a local corner store where she then collapses. She is rushed to the hospital and has her stomach pumped, the same incident alluded to on her initial McLean intake form. After her attempt at self-destruction she describes her state of mind: “My ambition was to negate. The world, whether dense or hollow, provoked only my negations…My hunger, my thirst, my loneliness and boredom and fear were all weapons aimed at my enemy, the world…All my integrity seemed to lie in saying No” (42). Once again, her act of embodied deviance is revealed to be a misguided attempt at protest. Her enemy is unaffected by her actions, “that didn’t matter a whit to the world, of course,” and her actions only work toward her own destruction, doing little to challenge the interlocking systems that would drive her to despair in the first place. Her wish for complete negation does not serve as a viable means of protest or resistance.

When her suicide attempt fails, Kaysen is forced to find other means of personal and social negation, and voluntarily checks herself into a psychiatric hospital. She claims, “the opportunity to be incarcerated was just too good to resist. It was a very big No – the biggest No
this side of suicide” (42). Her desire to enter the asylum space serves as a kind of extreme interpretation of the phrase, “Turn on, tune in, and drop out,” popularized by counterculture icon and LSD advocate Timothy Leary in 1966. Although Leary was advocating the use of psychedelics as a way to free oneself from existing normative social conventions, here Kaysen extends his concept to a radical conclusion and nearly “drops out” of the world entirely. However, while she succeeds in isolating herself from the outside world, the psychiatric establishment simply takes over as another system of patriarchal authority. Before entering she boasts, “I knew I wasn’t mad and that they wouldn’t keep me there, locked up in a loony bin,” only to then be institutionalized for the next two years (41). Kaysen’s memoir dismantles any romantic notion of madness or embodied deviance, and reveals that neither function as a way to escape hegemonic discourses of power. Her madness is the cause of real suffering, and her attempt to protest her condition through suicide only results in her extended institutionalization, an event that places her under the authoritative governance of the asylum and removes her from the social sphere for two entire years, starting at age eighteen. Inside the hospital she is in no position to challenge existing social structures, and is understood by those around her as a sick, pathologized woman.

Once inside the asylum, Kaysen encounters a host of other institutionalized women, and their stories come to constitute a significant portion of her memoir, resulting in what might be read as a kind of communal narrative. Her fellow patients are committed for a variety of illnesses, which Kaysen lists accordingly: “Cynthia was depressive; Polly and Georgina were schizophrenic; I had a character disorder. Sometimes they called it a personality disorder…Lisa had been the only sociopath among us. ‘We are very rare,’ she told me once, ‘and mostly we are men’” (59). The role gender plays in the psychiatric diagnostic practice is evident in Kaysen’s
cataloguing of the women on the ward, with most being committed for “feminine” ailments, such as depression and character disorders, with the exception of Lisa. She is the “rare” female sociopath, a condition more often associated with violence, and thus masculinity, in the cultural imaginary. Accordingly, Lisa flaunts her diagnosis with a certain sense of pride. However, while she views herself as having a kind of masculine authority over the other women because of her sociopathy, Lisa is still incarcerated with them, her actual diagnosis making little difference in terms of her treatment.

Kaysen is not alone in her embodied protest, and, indeed, almost all of the women of the asylum engage in acts of self-harm to varying extents. Polly (the schizophrenic) is taken to McLean after her own dramatic suicide attempt in which she set herself on fire. Badly burned in the incident, she is covered in scar tissue, and Kaysen observes that her “neck and cheeks were scarred the most,” so bad, in fact, that she is unable to turn her head, but must swivel her entire upper body to address a person standing next to her. Initially, Kaysen and the other women on the ward admire Polly for her actions, going so far as to say “What courage!” when they think about her extreme commitment to ending her own life. The admiration is bolstered by Polly’s seemingly unflappable and calm demeanor. She “was never unhappy…She was faultless, in her impermeable tight pink-and-white casing. Whatever had driven her, whispered ‘Die!’ in her once-perfect, now-scarred ear, she had immolated it” (17). In Polly’s action Kaysen recognizes her own desire to kill the tormentor within, and believes her fellow patient has succeeded. However, this interpretation is eventually undercut when one day the women hear Polly screaming, repeating “My face! My face! My face!” Polly’s delayed response to her disfiguring act causes Kaysen to admit, “I think we all realized what fools we’d been. We might get out sometime, but she was locked up forever in that body” (19). When Polly is able to project an
illusion of serene contentment the other women view her extreme act of self-mutilation as courageous, her being brave enough to fully commit to ending her internal anguish. However, when this confident exterior cracks and Polly finally realizes the extent of the damage she has caused, the others are forced to acknowledge that the real casualty is not her inner torment, but her actual corporeal form. Polly’s self-immolation accomplishes little, except for permanently disfiguring her and resulting in her institutionalization.

By including detailed portraits of the other patients at McLean, Kaysen uses her personal memoir as a means to enact social protest. Her descriptions of embodied deviance and acts of self-harm are shown to be futile efforts that only further position the women she discusses as “mad.” However, including their stories in conjunction with her own works as an act of textual deviance, a kind of literary performance that challenges our assumptions about women’s madness and their ability to tell their own narratives. Smith claims, “during her public performance the manifesto speaker positions herself expressly as a member…of a nonhegemonic group or counter-public,” thereby legitimizing the experiences of the marginalized group (161). I would argue that not only does Kaysen challenge the way we understand the mentally ill, showing them as complex individuals and rejecting a dehumanizing model of madness, but she also reminds readers to resist reading their illness itself as liberating. By identifying with these women she legitimizes women’s experiences of institutionalization more generally, and also challenges romantic readings of madness and mental illness.

Kaysen’s reflections on the hospital administration echo many of the same elements of Plath’s novel, in that the institution’s course of treatment is informed by normative gender ideology and employed to maintain docility in the patients. Her criticism is frequently bolstered by documents from her patient files, and she treats her records not as purely objective medical
notes, but rather as documents capable of being read and interpreted like any other literary text. In addition to her preliminary intake form, she includes an “inquiry concerning admission” sheet, which again lists family information and the reason for her referral to McLean for services. In this portion of the form the reader is able to see the actual handwriting of a medical professional, who describes the young Kaysen as having an “increasingly patternless life,” while calling her “promiscuous” and finally concluding that she “might kill self or get pregnant” (11). The hastily written note reads her “patternless” life as an indication of pathology, and although she’s only eighteen years old her inability to adhere to the social scripts of adulthood (school, marriage, motherhood) are taken as signs of mental illness. Moreover, the hospital staff deduces that the possible outcomes for such a lifestyle are suicide and pregnancy, presenting these options as if they are equivalent, and perhaps in terms of the social weight they carry they are. The form reduces Kaysen, who admits to real feelings of despair, to a promiscuous and suicidal deviant, its evaluation of her condition more a reading of her socially unacceptable behavior than an in-depth consideration of her mental pain. This superficial approach to evaluation is also evident in a subsequent document, an “Inter-Office Memorandum” sent by the doctor that performed Kaysen’s intake evaluation. In listing his reasons for referring her to McLean he includes symptoms such as “the chaotic and unplanned life of the patient at present…immersion in fantasy,” as well as “history of suicidal attempts” (13). Once again, her suicidal tendencies are discussed with the same gravity as her “unplanned” life. By including her records Kaysen demonstrates the way in which these documents were “petty, bureaucratic, ambiguous, and punitive,” their diagnostic practices informed by social convention and seemingly incapable of providing a nuanced evaluation of her actual condition (Dow 128).
The forms of treatment that Kaysen receives inside the institution also work to enforce normative behavioral codes. She observes, “The doctors were men; the nurses and aides were women. There were two exceptions: Jerry the Aide and Dr. Wick” (84). She repeatedly critiques the doctors, both the men and the female Dr. Wick, for slavishly following a psychoanalytic script that often forecloses on any real opportunity to engage with her or her actual feelings. At one point, Dr. Wick informs her that she is “compulsively promiscuous,” and tries to determine what would make Kaysen carry on a sexual affair with her high school English teacher. The doctor asks her to discuss “her attachment” to the man, using coded language because of her unwillingness to overtly talk about sex. According to Kaysen, the actual sexual encounter is of little importance, and instead she attempts to talk about the time her teacher took her to New York to visit the Frick Collection, where she is taken by a Vermeer portrait, *Girl Interrupted at Her Music*. The portrait depicts a young woman studying sheet music who is disturbed from her work by an older man. The painting captures Kaysen’s interest and later comes to serve as a kind of symbol for her own life and her sense of having her life disrupted for the two years of her confinement. However, although her most vivid memories of her “attachment” with her teacher revolves around her witnessing of the painting and how it makes her feel, Dr. Wick ignores this and pushes her to discuss the physical relationship with the English teacher, insisting on reading it as the obvious focal point of the therapy session. A frustrated Kaysen wonders, “Didn’t she want to hear about the Vermeer? That’s what I remember,” going on to feed the doctor an exaggerated story about the sexual encounter so as not to “disappoint” her (85, 86). Once the medical authorities have determined “promiscuity” to be her primary distinguishing characteristic, they pursue an investigation into her deviant behavior without delving into her actual feelings or reasoning behind her actions.
In addition to the misguided attempts at talk therapy, Kaysen also discusses the hospital’s practice of medicating patients in order to render them passive and manageable. An innovation of the twentieth century, psychopharmaceuticals were available beginning in the 1940s, and by the 1960s valium become the world’s most widely prescribed medication. Sources indicate that by 1970 one out of five American women was using some form of minor tranquilizer (Porter 205). Inside McLean, Kaysen becomes familiar with a variety of psychotropic and antipsychotic drugs, recalling an impressive list of medications frequently given to patients: “Thorazine, Stelazine, Mellaril, Librium, Valium: the therapists’ friends…Once we were on it, it was hard to get off. A bit like heroin, except it was the staff who got addicted to our taking it” (87). The staff’s zealous use of medication is not predicated upon its miraculous results for the patient, but rather the fact that it produces compliant behavior, an outcome preferable for the staff. While the doctors and nurses praise the women, reassuring them that they’re “doing so well” while on the medications, Kaysen troubles this assessment of their recovery, countering with, “That was because those things knocked the heart out of us” (87). Even if the use of medication might only mask the underlying problem, it is preferable to unruly behavior. She later quips: “Depression, manic-depression, schizophrenia: All that stuff they always had trouble treating they now treat chemically. Take two Lithium and don’t call me in the morning because there’s nothing to say; it’s innate” (142). Once again, Kaysen foils any attempt to read mental illness as one-dimensional. The hospital diagnoses the women based, in large part, on normative discourses of gendered behavior, and when they are inside over-medicates them with a one-size-fits all pharmaceutical approach meant to bring the errant women back into the fold of appropriate social behavior, even if it dramatically alters their personalities and desires.
While Kaysen takes to task the curative abilities of both psychotherapy and medication, she reserves her most pointed criticism of the psychiatric system for a discussion of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, and her particular diagnosis. Published by the American Psychiatric Association, the DSM establishes the criteria for classifying mental disorders, and has gone through several printings and revisions since its inception in 1952. Kaysen, writing her memoir in 1993, obtains a copy of the DMS-3, published in 1987, and finds the entry for her diagnosis of “Borderline Personality Disorder.” Under the heading, “Associated Features,” she reads the following: “Frequently this disorder is accompanied by many features of other Personality Disorders, such as Schizotypal, Histrionic, Narcissistic, and Antisocial Personality Disorders…Quite often social contrariness and a generally pessimistic outlook are observed” (148). This list of qualities is then followed by a heading for “Sex Ratio,” which asserts that “The disorder is more commonly diagnosed in women” (149). Here the DSM nearly betrays itself with its own wording, seemingly implying that the disorder is not necessarily more common in women organically, but that it is *more often diagnosed* in women. The list of qualities associated with borderline personality disorder read like a checklist of stereotypically negative “feminine” traits, including being histrionic and narcissistic. Perhaps most egregious, and thus most telling, is its inclusion of “social contrariness,” demonstrating that simple unpleasantness and a refusal to capitulate to the normative social script can itself be read as a sign of insanity.\(^\text{19}\)

\(^{19}\) While Kaysen’s reading of the DSM reveals it’s shocking (mis)treatment of gender in the diagnostic process, Jonathan Metzl traces a similar history of using psychiatric language to maintain racial hierarchies. In one shocking example, he discusses American surgeon Samuel Cartwright, who 1851 announced the existence of the disorder “drapetomania,” or a particular kind of insanity that caused slaves to flee their masters. As it so happened, the suggested “treatment” for this disorder included “whipping, hard labor, or amputation of the toes” (30).
After two years behind the asylum walls Kaysen is eventually released, and in keeping with her experience of institutionalization even this event is influenced by gender normative ideals of sanity and wellness. Although she begins to make progress and eventually earns privileges to work outside of McLean and return at night, it is only after she receives a marriage proposal that she is officially allowed to leave. As she explains, “In 1968, everybody could understand a marriage proposal” (133). Although this marriage eventually crumbles, it does secure her freedom from the asylum, as it serves as an indication that she is finally losing some of her “contrariness,” and is poised to enter into a stabilizing domestic union. Reflecting on this series of events in her memoir she writes, “Sexism! It was pure sexism – isn’t that the answer?” (133). Kaysen’s text is invested in demonstrating the discourses of power at work in the psychiatric institution, and her outright claim of sexism is indicative of her access to a vocabulary and critical framework unavailable to Plath years earlier. However, ending her proclamation with a question works to once again complicate any easy interpretation of her narrative agenda.

Indeed, Kaysen unpacks the way in which “madness” as we understand it is a combination of social factors and true psychic distress. Although she takes the DSM to task for its gendered diagnostic criteria and criticizes her therapists for being inattentive and willing to overmedicate patients, she does not attempt to undermine the existence of mental illness. Describing her pain, she explains, “What I felt was complete desolation. Desolation, despair, and depression” (157). Staking a claim for the validity of her feelings, her confession once again resists reading mental illness as subversive to discourses of power. Although her critique of the psychiatric institution is certainly an indictment of patriarchal systems that limit women’s autonomy and full participation in the public sphere, her description of her actual mental distress
is not offered as a means to protest these same systems. Explaining that she felt she crossed the borderline between sanity and insanity during her time at Mclean, she is grateful for her recovery and pointedly asserts, “I do not want to cross [that line] again” (159). Marta Caminero-Santangelo argues that “when we treat madness as a theoretical construct without regard to how it is experienced from the inside, we relegate protagonists’ (and authors’) recovery of self-expression to a status of secondary importance” (43). In keeping with this reading, Kaysen’s memoir illustrates how incredibly alienating the experience of mental illness can be, and shows that forms of embodied protest, such as suicide, only further this disenfranchisement. Although a critique of the asylum is a key component to the memoir, she never loses sight of the actual experience of mental illness and what that means for women who undergo institutionalization.

When compared to Plath’s novel, Kaysen is able to form a fuller critique of women’s social disenfranchisement and the gender normative ideology at the heart of the psychiatric institution because of the critical social changes that took place between both their experiences and the creation of their texts. Similarly, she is also able to draw upon a wider array of narrative strategies in terms of the structure of her text, enacting a performance of what I will refer to throughout this project as textual deviance. Writing in the style of an autobiographical manifesto, she uses her personal experience to stake a claim for the validity of women’s experiences in the face of erasure via the medical gaze. Autobiographies have typically been perceived as a “feminine” genres, as they relate to the private life of the author, but as Mary Elene Wood suggests, asylum narratives like Kaysen’s often “go beyond the private nature of the genre to challenge the notion of separate spheres by blending personal narrative with expository sections on psychological and political theory. The threat of these texts is that they actively promote social and political change from with a ‘feminine’ genre” (11). As I have illustrated throughout
this chapter, Kaysen’s memoir is not simply her own. She constructs a communal narrative by devoting much of her memoir to the stories of her fellow patients at McLean, and in so doing shows the way in which her story is not that of a singular, pathological madwoman, but rather that she speaks with and for many other women in her same position. She both legitimizes their experiences, working to destigmatize mental illness, and also offers a well-reasoned critique of patriarchal society and the psychiatric institution.

In addition to the way she politicizes the genre of autobiography, Kaysen also constructs an overtly performative text that calls upon strategies of resistance found in the performance art tradition. Feminist performance art emerged in the 1960s and continued to flourish in various iterations in the ensuing decades. Thus, Kaysen was not only coming of age in time with the rise of performance art practices, but she was writing her memoir in the 1990s, by which time performance art had penetrated even mainstream society and was regularly featured in museums alongside more traditional art forms. Throughout this dissertation I make the argument that literary works written in the latter half of the century are not only shaped by the given socio-political climate, but also that they are in line with and part of a greater artistic movement that makes use of performance as a primary strategy to subvert hegemonic understandings of gender, race, and practices of looking. Reading the literary works as part of this tradition enables us to see the way in which writers use strategies of performance in order to challenge our traditional ways of reading. In theorizing why performance was particularly appealing to feminist artists, Amelia Jones has argued that it “threw into doubt the supposed disinterestedness of the Modernist critical project,” with Jayne Wark adding that this made it possible to view “the body as the site of a newly politicized understanding of subjectivity” (Wark 31). Refuting the notion of art as purely aesthetic and beyond social influence, feminist performance artists used their bodies
to highlight the inherently embodied nature of artistic production, dispelling the myth of the artist-genius that worked to mask the white male body and all of its social privileges. This led many female artists to represent the explicit body in action as a way to force audiences into grappling with the body of the artist as political subject. Adopting this aesthetic concern, Kaysen does not try to conceal her repeated diagnosis of “promiscuity,” and openly discusses her relationship with her English teacher as well as other young men her own age. Instead of attempting to hide what might typically be considered embarrassing or private, she puts her sometimes shocking personal experiences on display for the reader, refusing to capitulate to a system that would read her sexual agency as madness. In a similar vein, she never attempts to protest the fact that she did suffer from mental illness. Although she illustrates the psychiatric institution’s role in maintaining normative gender scripts, she also shows her own moments of insanity and losing touch with reality. These revelations allow her to legitimize her experiences and the experiences of other institutionalized women.

As I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this chapter, Kaysen’s memoir not only embodies the performance art tradition in terms of content, but also in its textually deviant form. She rejects linearity and the notion of a cohesive narrative, instead creating an episodic memoir that tells the story of the other patients at McLean as much as it tells her own. Her use of documentation, including files from her medical records, works to upend the hierarchal relationship between patient and doctor, giving her control over her own narrative of illness and allowing her to critique the documents and the system of social ideology they represent. Performance art has long been perceived as a more democratic art form employed by female artists and artists of color because it does not present the same limitations of access as other, more traditional art forms. Originating outside the mainstream art establishment, performance
required only the use of the artist’s body and readily available props. Kaysen uses her medical records in a similar way, making her embodied experience the focus of the memoir and resisting the totalizing and superficial narrative the psychiatric institution would attempt to construct for her via their systems of documentation. Ultimately, her memoir offers a nuanced reading of the intersection of gender and mental illness, and performs a kind of textual deviance that allows her autobiographical work to function as a protest against systems of social and medical power that would silence her narrative voice.

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Plath and Kaysen share much in common, and their narrative arcs bear out these similarities. They both push against normative gender ideology and indict the asylum system as working to enforce the notion of traditional femininity as a marker of a woman’s sanity. Moreover, each work shows the limitations in romanticizing madness and embodied deviance through their description of suicide. Both the fictional Esther and the living Kaysen have moments during their contemplation of suicide when they realize that it is their inferior positioning in the social hierarchy that they want to destroy, not their actual bodies, which have come to symbolize that inferiority. Turning their frustration inward against their bodies only results in more suffering and their institutionalization, a move that leads to their further disenfranchisement.

That being said, their texts also demonstrate critical differences. Pre-dating the social and artistic protest movements of the latter half of the century, most of which took place after her early death at age thirty, Plath’s novel lacks a critical vocabulary and artistic framework to more forcefully challenge existing systems of power. This is not to say, however, that her novel should be read as a “failure.” Gentry asserts that “in the area of women directly expressing in their work
the rage they feel, it is Sylvia Plath who first breaks that ground,” and cites Adrienne Rich as describing Plath’s work as “a blowtorch of language cleansing the rust and ticky-tacky and veneer from an entire consciousness” (92). While most sources indicate that Plath did not consider herself a feminist, a position illustrated by Esther’s unease with the “career woman” model, when her novel was finally published in America under her own name in 1971, it was widely adopted by many feminists as an example of the destructive nature of living under an oppressive system. Although *The Bell Jar* might end with Esther falling in line with 1950s convention, in the decades since its publication it has continued to be read as a scathing commentary on the sexual double-standard and the psychic toll such inequality can take.

Writing nearly three decades after her release from the asylum and well into her own successful literary career, Kaysen’s voice gains a kind of authority that may have been unthinkable for Plath decades earlier. Growing up amidst the counterculture and the burgeoning feminist performance art movement, Kaysen has access to narrative strategies that allow her to purposefully disrupt the autobiography genre and enact a performance of textual deviance. Her memoir complicates reductive readings of madness, refusing a nature/nurture dichotomy, and challenges readers’ to question their own beliefs about gender, madness, and the psychiatric institution. Although Kaysen is released from the asylum because she gets a marriage proposal,

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20 Plath was buried in England, where she was living at the time of her death, and visitors to Plath’s grave had repeatedly scraped off the “Hughes,” from the Sylvia Plath Hughes heading on her tombstone. Although the actual culprits remain unknown, according to Plath legend it is feminist activists at work removing the name of Plath’s estranged husband and fellow poet, Ted Hughes. Until his death in 1998, Hughes faced ongoing scrutiny both for his treatment of Plath in their marriage and for his role as executor of her estate and literary work. See Janet Malcolm’s *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* for an extended investigation into the contentious battle over Plath’s literary work and legacy.
we know she ends up pursuing her ambition to become a writer, demonstrating that she did find avenues to resist gendered conventions.

Ultimately, Plath and Kaysen’s texts are fitting examples to situate at the beginning of this project because their stories, and stories like theirs, have come to serve as the archetypal American madness narrative. Accounts of psychiatric confinement are largely considered to be the story of women’s madness, and thus, at least in the American context, madness is associated with the physical asylum space. This is an inherently limited view, as the asylum, and particularly a stay at a private hospital (like McLean), was primarily available to those from white, middle to upper-class backgrounds. Immigrants, people of color, and the poor were more often than not shunted into public hospitals, which served more as holding pens meant for the containment of the “truly insane.” When fretting that eventually the funds supporting her asylum stay will run out, Plath’s Esther Greenwood worries, “Finally, when the money was used up, I would be moved to a state hospital, with hundreds of people like me, in a big cage in the basement. The more hopeless you were, the further away they hid you” (160). If patients were able to make it out of such confinement, the chances that they would have the money, skills, and time necessary to write about their experience were slim. Thus, accepting the narrative of institutionalization as the only account of madness is an inherently limited view, as the asylum represents not only a prison space, but also a privileged space. When reflecting on her own institutionalization, Kaysen talks about her desolation and depression, and yet qualifies this remark by claiming, “angst of these dimensions is a luxury item. You need to be well fed, clothed, and housed to have time for this much self-pity” (157). Taking up similar concerns, Breines expresses her reservation in attempting to locate radical subversion in the narratives of middle class white women from the fifties, suggesting that few could accurately be described as
“secret radicals.” And yet, she argues that their “small movements away from proscribed roles were of great significance. The most obvious rationale for this is the magnitude of the feminist movement that subsequently developed and that owed much of its force to women’s experiences in the 1950s” (xi). Thus, while revising the limited view of women’s madness narratives is an issue that will constitute much of the focus of this project in subsequent chapters, I also stake a claim for the inherent value in recognizing the subversive potential the more “traditional” asylum narratives discussed here.
Chapter 3
Perverse Performances of Cleanliness: The Racialized Body and the Colonizing Gaze in the work of Toni Morrison and Louise Erdrich

Both Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks* (1988) feature young women driven into madness. In Morrison’s novel this figure is eleven-year-old Pecola Breedlove, a poor black girl living in Lorain, Ohio in the early 1940s. The product of a distant mother and sexually abusive father, Pecola develops an obsession with casting off her blackness and acquiring blue eyes, a feature she deems the ultimate symbol of beauty and goodness. In Erdrich’s *Tracks*, this female figure takes the form of teenaged Pauline Puyat, a light-skinned Native-American girl living in North Dakota at the turn of the twentieth century. With an intense desire to shed her Native roots, Pauline turns her back on her own people in order to train as a Catholic nun, adopting a strictly ascetic lifestyle in order to cleanse herself of all worldly sins and pleasures. Constructed as racially inferior under the omnipresent white gaze and consequently internalizing accusations of their own bodily deviance, Pecola and Pauline seek to purify themselves by consuming all available forms of whiteness while disavowing their own (dark) bodies. By the close of each novel both girls crumble under the weight of their respective burdens and descend into madness. Perhaps most tragically, they are ultimately seen as public spectacles that earn derision, not sympathy, from their own communities, demonstrating the insidious nature of such deeply entrenched racial ideologies.

Even in its brevity, this introduction to Morrison and Erdrich’s work signals a significant and critical departure from the material of the previous chapter. Using Sylvia Plath and Susanna Kaysen as case studies, I analyzed narratives of psychiatric institutionalization, and the way in
which female authors critiqued ideologies of domesticity that limited women’s social mobility in mid-century America. In such texts the asylum is constructed as a corrective space for women, “curing” their socially deviant behavior if not their actual mental anguish. However, even when the asylum worked to reinforce dominant gender ideology, the private psychiatric hospital was nevertheless a space of certain privileges. While narratives of institutionalization abound in the twentieth century (and continue into the twenty-first), these texts are almost entirely penned by white women of (upper) middle-class backgrounds. Their very existence testifies to the fact that while these women’s voices were often socially marginalized, they still had access to systems of treatment, as well as the tools and time to later write about their own experiences. When reading accounts of the asylum system it is important to consider the vast difference between a stay in a private institution, such as McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts where both Plath and Kaysen received treatment, and the public hospital. Almost all asylum narratives are written by those admitted to private institutions, which speaks explicitly to the patient’s privileged class status and implicitly to their racial status. Public asylums, by contrast, were often used as long-term holding pens for people of color, the poor, and those who suffered from incurable mental illness. Indeed, Jonathan Metzl’s work has shown that after the process of deinstitutionalization in the 1960s and 1970s, during which time many hospitalized psychiatric patients were moved back into the community, African-American patients were often kept behind, deemed to be “too ill or too violent” to return to the general population, in effect turning former hospitals into prisons and silencing the voices within (14).

Thus, while the imposing image of the asylum might loom large in the American literary imagination, narratives of institutionalization represent only a fraction of women’s textual explorations of gender and madness. Although first person non-fiction accounts of such
experiences written by women of color are exceedingly rare, a number of authors have grappled poignantly with the complex relationship between gender, race, and madness through fiction. In their work Toni Morrison and Louise Erdrich remind us that for many women there were no avenues to private hospital beds or formal methods of treatment, and the thought of publishing an account of one’s experiences would essentially be unimaginable in the face of much more pressing material concerns of survival. Building on Arlene Keizer’s use of “postmemory,” Caroline Brown suggests that after a cultural trauma, such as the racial atrocities perpetrated against both Native and African people throughout the United States’ history, “a chasm results that cannot be simply filled with official history; history must be creatively reimagined” (30).

*The Bluest Eye* and *Tracks* are not political novels in the traditional sense, as both authors eschew realist narrative form and any in-depth discussion of historical events that shaped racial relations in American history. Rather, they focus on the day-to-day existence of black and Native people in order to recreate the experience of being racialized under the white hegemonic gaze. Focusing on the young, female figures of Pecola and Pauline allows for an exploration of the psychic trauma that comes from living under conditions of race and gender oppression.

A central claim in this chapter is that race plays an integral role in constructions of both bodily deviance and madness. In the previously mentioned asylum narratives, the whiteness of the hospitalized women worked to essentially mask the racial implications of their treatment, as whiteness is often socially read and understood as a kind of “default,” or non-racial identity. However, it is not my intention to suggest that race only factors into my larger conversation when considering representations of women of color, and rather I aim to show the way in which the practice of racializing bodies is linked to the creation and maintenance of ideologies of deviance, pathology, and madness. George Yancy argues that “the history of the Black body…is
fundamentally linked to the history of whiteness,” in which the white body is constructed as the “transcendental norm” and the black body is necessarily its inversion: “criminality itself…the essence of vulgarity and immorality” (xvi). While Yancy’s text focuses specifically on the African-American or black body, his language is nevertheless useful for theorizing constructions of race and both white and non-white bodies more generally. Thus, while I don’t want to conflate his study of blackness with my later analysis of Native-American identity, his general arguments about the dialectical relationship between whiteness in the abstract and the corporeality of non-white bodies nevertheless offers a useful theoretical framework for my discussion. Here it is important to consider not only what actually constitutes the “norm,” but also how deviations from said norm are most often defined by the physical body. Owing to its hegemonic privilege, the white male body has come to define the “normative” body, and alternatively those gendered and racialized subjects who do not fit such a mold might be said to exhibit a “surplus corporeality,” in which their bodies are rendered hyper-visible in their difference, and this difference is then marked as deviant (Berlant 112). Throughout this chapter I will consider the historical treatment of both African-Americans and Native-Americans, and the way in which the bodies of people of color have been labeled as inherently deviant under the white gaze and hegemonic constructions of race and gender. More specifically, I consider representations of women of color who also eventually earn the designation of madwomen. To borrow Kimberlé Crenshaw’s term, they epitomize the intersectionality of competing systems of power and oppression, in which vectors of gender, race, and mental ability converge (to say nothing of class and national status). In doing so, they illustrate the very complicated ways in which gender and race come into play when both identifying and responding to signs of deviance and, ultimately, madness. In each novel that I discuss in this chapter, the experience of being understood as
deviant because of their racial identities, coupled with the vulnerability of age and gender, results in the young female characters’ mental dissolution. This madness is then subsequently read as further proof of their innate deviance, forming a mutually constituting cycle of dehumanization.

In Morrison and Erdrich’s fiction, living under conditions of racial and gendered violence results in insanity, and the novels underscore the systemic and often subtle nature of this violence. Both authors construct texts in which racism and racially motivated aggression are a given, or part of the cultural milieu in which racialized bodies always already exist. Thus, instead of focusing only on overt acts of violence against the physical body, they are invested in interrogating the insidious cruelty of being constantly exposed to and constructed by the white gaze. In describing the authority afforded to those with the power to look, Yancy claims “the production of the Black body is an effect of the discursive and epistemic structuring of white gazing and other white modes of anti-Black performance” that need not even be “enacted consciously” on the part of whites (xix). Indeed, few white characters exist in either novel and yet their influence is forever looming at the margins, unseen by most but acutely felt by all. As Yancy’s quote suggests, society at large is structured by white practices of looking that function on a discursive, and thus largely unnoticeable, level. White characters may not often be physically present in the texts, but their gaze remains an omnipresent and constituting force nevertheless. Both novels focus almost entirely on communities of color, which allows for a consideration of the long-term effects of such sustained cultural violence not only on the physical body, but also on the mindset of persecuted people. Sander Gilman has claimed “whenever an image of difference projected onto a group within society has sufficient salience for an individual in the stereotyped group as to be completely internalized, the individual acts as if the image is a pattern for self-definition whatever the validity or implications of the charge of difference or the
image imposed” (5). Thus, in the Foucauldian sense, the gaze functions at the level of discourse, exerting its influence without ever having to announce its presence, ensuring the self-internalization of a particular belief. In *The Bluest Eye* and *Tracks* this internalization of ideology results in self-destruction, and for both novels the most extreme and annihilating form of this destruction is madness, for it “constitutes the inability to construct a counter narrative of any sort” (Caminero-Santangelo 132). As opposed to positioning madness as a protest against discourses of power, the novels represent it as being the complete destruction of one’s agency and subjection. In these novels madness appears in two primary manifestations. First, characters internalize beliefs about their supposed deviance, resulting in racial self-hatred that is primarily directed toward their physical bodies, for the body serves as the visible register of gender and racial difference. Characters thus endeavor to ameliorate these feelings of self-loathing through a rigid policing of their own bodies, attempting to purify themselves and deny all bodily pleasures or experiences in order to prove their mental, spiritual, and social worth. Their insistence on the beauty and cleanliness of their bodies, and the visual markers of such cleanliness (whiteness and its attendant features), results in an obsession with the body that in actuality perverts any notion of cleanliness or decency. The second and more dramatic manifestation of madness is the total psychic destruction of each character; unable to live up to the standards imposed by the constituting white gaze both Pecola and Pauline go insane, ultimately serving as spectacles of derision within their own communities.

It is this notion of spectacle, or more specifically performance, that I finally want to turn to in my analysis of *The Bluest Eye* and *Tracks*. As I have mentioned, briefly, above, in each novel characters enact performances of purification, meant to symbolically cleanse themselves of their racial identifies in order to achieve whiteness, even if it is only in their own minds. These
performances ultimately become obsessions that lead only to madness and suffering for Pecola and Pauline. Once again demonstrating the limited potential in positioning madness as a kind of resistance to oppressive discourses of power, in both novels it only leads to the further marginalization of each girl. Instead of trying to recuperate the characters’ embodied performances as subversive, I argue that Morrison and Erdrich more successfully confront the destructive influence of the white gaze by constructing textually deviant novels. Employing the use of performance aesthetics, the novels challenge the dominance of the written text by relying heavily on orality and the aural qualities of the spoken word, while simultaneously and continually shifting the narrative viewpoint, in effect creating communally authored texts. As Caroline Brown notes, such performative strategies “invoke bodily presence by making the text an almost interactive tool,” which ultimately “reconfigures…characters’ relationships to their bodies and the audience’s relationship to the collective black body” (5). Recreating disruptive elements associated with embodied performance art, Morrison and Erdrich’s narratives not only shock the reader with visceral depictions of violence and madness, but enact textually deviant performances that challenge the colonizing gaze and the Western literary paradigm. By encouraging audiences to engage with the material in often productively uncomfortable ways, the novels hold the potential to destabilize both the readerly experience and our collective understanding of how bodies come to be both gendered and racialized under the hegemonic gaze.

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Published in 1970, The Bluest Eye is Toni Morrison’s first novel and a clear demonstration of the author’s skill as an astute historical and cultural critic. While the novel is principally about Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl living in Lorain, Ohio in the early 1940s, it also spends considerable time with a host of additional characters, including Pecola’s family,
various community members, and another young girl named Claudia MacTeer, who serves as a frequent narrative voice for the text. While the novel itself spends little time making any overt historical or political commentary, choosing instead to focus on the personal lives and day-to-day interactions of its characters, its setting in the 1940s and the period of its actual production in the late 1960s factor prominently into the construction of the narrative nonetheless. The setting of the novel, post-Depression era America on the cusp of entering World War II, locates the text at a moment in time when the country was championing freedom globally in their condemnation of Nazi Germany’s Aryan ideology. In spite of this global stance on inequality, racial atrocities were still being committed at home where segregation remained the law of the land. Although Morrison chooses to “eschew the dramatic foreground of national history for the undramatized background” she does not dismiss it entirely, and includes a series of subtle references to pertinent historical markers (Gillan 284). Most pointedly, perhaps, is her inclusion of three prostitutes with whom Pecola shares a friendly relationship: China, Poland, and the Maginot Line. Jennifer Gillan notes “while the names China and Poland signify the European and Asian fronts of World War II, Maginot Line refers literally to the failed French Border fortifications and metaphorically to the tendency to focus on the wrong front” (285). This inability to focus on the “right” front, or a willingness to turn a blind eye to inequality at home, characterizes much of the action within the novel and defines not only American history more generally, but also

21 In addition to the World War II battlefront allusion, Morrison includes a number of additional references to history beyond the daily lives of the inhabitants of Lorain, most notably in her reference to racial violence in the form of lynching. Maureen Peal, a popular light-skinned girl that attends school with Pecola and the MacTeer girls, is described as being “a high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back” (62). Not only does her “high-yellow” status imply the sexual exploitation of black women under slavery, but her braided hair serves as a direct reminder of a pervasive form of racial terror.
Pecola’s position within her own family. Morrison has written at some length about her experience of creating the novel, which took place between “1965-69, during great social upheaval in the life of black people” (Morrison, “Unspeakable Things,” 147). Taking shape during the heart of the Civil Rights Movement, the novel is clearly invested in giving voice to Pecola’s internalized feelings of unworthiness and ugliness. Responding, in part, to the “Black is Beautiful” sentiments circulated by black rights advocates at the time, Morrison chooses to avoid offering any overtly affirmative message and instead explores the often grim reality of being constructed as “ugly” because of racial identity. Ultimately, though, while the text is informed by these critical cultural moments, the action of the novel is largely devoid of clear markers of time or political conflict. Instead, Morrison’s novel is more invested in showing the everyday and familial consequences of racist discourse when enacted upon what she deems “the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female” (Morrison, Bluest, xi).

While Pecola is the novel’s central protagonist, a critical element of The Bluest Eye is the fact that it is not simply her story, but the community of Lorain’s story as well. Morrison’s novel is invested in showing how a girl like Pecola might be driven to madness in the first place, and questions how it is that a child, so full of life and potential, is pushed to complete psychic destruction. Her madness necessitates an investigation into the structure of her community, which includes the pedophilic West Indian mystic, Soaphead Church, who claims he can give Pecola the blue eyes she so desperately yearns for. While he appears only briefly within the text, he confirms Pecola’s self-hatred and endorses her desire to move from black to white. Moreover, while Pecola and her family largely lack the ability to articulate their feelings of frustration and ugliness (a fact meant to further emphasize their poverty and ignorance), Soaphead Church
clearly express these same feelings of internalized racial loathing and the longing for a kind of self-imposed racial purification that speaks directly to Morrison’s project within the novel.

Named Elihue Micah Whitcomb at birth, Soaphead Church is an enigmatic and largely reclusive figure in the town of Lorain, with few knowing his true origins. The novel briefly sketches his genealogy, revealing that the concept of the “colonizing” gaze is not merely an apt metaphor, but a very accurate description of his heritage. He is depicted as a “cinnamon-eyed West Indian with lightly browned skin…he had been reared in a family proud of its academic accomplishments and its mixed blood – in fact, they believed the former was based on the latter. A Sir Whitcomb, some decaying British nobleman, who chose to disintegrate under a sun more easeful than England’s, had introduced the white strain into the family in the early 1800s” (167). This Anglophilia is then preserved by the family with rapt devotion, and Church himself recalls “they were hoping to prove beyond a doubt De Gobineau’s hypothesis that ‘all civilizations derive from the white race, that none can exist without its help, and that a society is great and brilliant only so far as it preserves the blood of the noble group that created it”’ (168). In their almost religious adherence to this doctrine the family struggles to maintain the whiteness of the bloodline, resorting to incestuous relations in order to preserve their supposedly noble racial heritage. The resultant “weakening of faculties” or “eccentricity” bred from of these unions is thus blamed on “intermarriage with the family, however, not on the original genes of the

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22 Joseph Arthur, Comte de Gobineau (1816-1882) was a French aristocrat and author of *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*, a text that advanced the theory of a master Aryan race. It has come to be considered an early and influential example of the scientific racism that flourished in the nineteenth century. See, "Gobineau, Comte de (1816-1882)." *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. Detroit: Gale, 1998.
decaying lord” (168). Ironically, their insistence on maintaining their noble heritage leads them to recreate the same long-documented patterns of incest and intermarriage found among white, frequently British, aristocracy. Chronicling the dissolution of the bloodline down to himself, Soaphead Church is but the latest installment in this long line of corrupting influence. The family’s internalized belief about the superiority of their lineage results in an obsession with preserving their white blood – a kind of metaphorical cleanliness bestowed upon the family by virtue of both race and a (vaguely) aristocratic background. However, this desire for purity results only in perversion, through both the degenerative unions between family members, and, as Morrison suggests more pointedly, through the “decaying” Lord himself, suggesting that the vaunted whiteness they so value might be inherently diseased.

Soaphead Church comes to serve as a symbol of both the trauma that passes down after generations of living under the white gaze, and the transmission of these same negative traits to the future generation. He is described as “an old man who loved things, for the slightest contact with people produced in him a faint but persistent nausea” (164). He exhibits a marked distaste for the corporeality of human existence, and, more specifically, it is revealed:

He abhorred flesh on flesh. Body odor, breath odor, overwhelmed him…all the natural excretions and protections the body was capable of…disquieted him. His attentions therefore gradually settled on those humans whose bodies were least offensive – children…he further limited his interests to little girls. They were usually manageable and frequently seductive. His sexuality was anything but lewd; his patronage of little girls smacked of innocence and was associated in his own mind with cleanliness. He was what one might call a very clean old man. (166-67)
The perversity of an obsession with cleanliness and the eradication of all “dirt” is dramatized to its extreme in Soaphead Church, the “clean old man” who, in reality, represents the very depth of corruption. He rhetorically codes his interest in young girls in his belief of their innocence and perceived physical purity, but his connection to younger children and girls is not paternal, like that of a father to child, or the natural nurturance an elder generation provides to the younger. Rather, his intentions are pedophilic, targeting the most vulnerable members the society and ensuring that his actions will further reproduce guilt and shame. Towards the conclusion of the novel, it is Soaphead Church that Pecola approaches for blue eyes, seeking him out after reading of his self-advertised mystical capabilities. While he does not assault her sexually, he does participate in her mental and physical degradation, making Pecola believe that she’ll soon possess the light-colored eyes she so desires. Soaphead Church does not work to make Pecola feel beautiful in her own skin, but rather encourages her desire for blue eyes, the symbol she associates with idealized whiteness. Ultimately, he demonstrates the lineage of devastation in the black community. The desire to suppress all bodily pleasures or experiences out of a fear of being constructed as over-embodied and bestial under the white gaze results in a perverse adherence to unachievable ideals of cleanliness and inevitable self-loathing. While he is not depicted as “mad,” in the traditional sense, he represents the insanity of racial hysteria, in which the insistence on the purity of whiteness belies the way in which it gains authority only when constructing itself in relation to darker Others.

In addition to Soaphead Church’s aversion to the (black) body and “dirt,” Morrison also appropriates the language of the well-known Dick and Jane school primers as a means to demonstrate the way codes of cleanliness/goodness and dirt/deviance are reinforced by everyday cultural signifiers. Created by William Elson and William Gray in the 1930s, the familiar primers
feature the exploits of the eponymous Dick and Jane, their loving parents, and a host of rotating minor characters. The primers exploded in popularity during the 1940s, making them a cultural apparatus with which the school age Pecola and her family would have undoubtedly been familiar (Werrlein 56). The very first lines of Morrison’s novel begins, “Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy,” before going on to introduce the family pets (both kitten and dog) and detailing the general good-natured happiness of the family.

By beginning her novel with the language of the primers and the imagery of Dick and Jane, Morrison plays with the trope of the “authenticating document,” a white-authored text that historically served as a prefatory remark for the work of black writers, validating the authorship and trustworthiness of the text (Stepto 5). Such authentication was a move that typically undermined the textual authority of the black author as much as it was meant to “vouch” for its validity. In her use of the primer Morrison destabilizes the tradition of white literary authority by presenting the authenticating voice as simplistic schoolbook language for children.

The inclusion of the primers, and Morrison’s subsequent manipulation of them, allows for an act of textual deviance that reveals the discrepancy between the idealized world Dick and Jane occupy and Pecola’s daily-lived experience. One might be forgiven for thinking that the primers’ depictions of family life are pleasant, if not a bit saccharine, until considering the implications of what the primers leave out – namely, children of color. After the end of World War II the Elson-Gray primers began to serve a subtle ideological purpose, as the depiction of an idealized middle-class suburban home and family took on political import. According to Werrlein, “since the government housing subsidies that prompted whites to flee crowded cities excluded African Americans, few black families occupied the suburbs that demonstrated
America’s success to the world. Thus, by associating white suburban families with prosperity, morality, and patriotism, Americans painted black urban working-class families as un-American” (57-58). The primers, pedagogical tools meant to instruct all school aged children, render children of color socially invisible while implying that this absence is based upon their own inadequacies. Ruth Rosenberg cites a study undertaken by Nancy Larrick in 1965, the very same year Morrison began writing the novel, in which she “studied 5,206 children’s books published between 1962 and 1964” and subsequently found that “only 349 of those thousands of books include even one black child either in illustrations or the text” (Rosenberg 435). This visual absence is suggestive of black Americans displacement in the greater national context. While Morrison uses the 1940s schoolbooks to critique this white middle class ideal, she was also undoubtedly influenced by and writing in (partial) response to Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 Department of Labor Report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. The controversial text, later known primarily as the “Moynihan Report,” was written with the goal of reducing poverty in the black community, but largely reinscribed notions of black deviance and inferiority in the process. Attributing a lack of economic success to matriarchal black family structures, the report used “the specter of the emasculating black matriarch to shield from blame the American patriarchal system and its policies of social and economic exclusion” (Gillan 287).

In another moment where both the historical context of both the novel’s setting (the 1940s) and its production (the 1960s) speak to one another, Morrison uses the primers as a way to illustrate the fact that notions of black deviance have not disappeared, but recur in different iterations over time. Repurposing the Elson-Gray primers, Morrison is able to critique the racially biased conclusions that the Moynihan report draws while revealing the much more complicated web of systemic disadvantages faced by the poor black families in Lorain.
Morrison does not simply adopt the language of the children’s books however, and instead alters the text to suit her own subversive purposes, forcing the primers to perform as they were unintended. Sam Vásquez has argued, “black women writers’ key disruptive strategies include a problematization of hegemonic representations of race and gender relationships within kinship groups” (71). Morrison employs such a strategy by first removing all punctuation, so that the sentences have no clear indication of starts and stops. She then removes all spacing entirely, so that the short direct sentences run together in a tangle of letters. Although the primer delivers the same content, it has been rendered confusing, unsettling, and devoid of any real meaning. Her literary alteration prevents the primer from acting as a teaching tool. It no longer functions as an instrument of meaning making, and instead serves as an agent of disruption. Moreover, her treatment of the text attests to what a girl like Pecola might think of the primers in the first place. A world of loving parents, a sibling partner-in-crime, and shining happy white faces would indeed be senseless to a young black girl without access to any of these niceties. By the end of this introductory passage, and immediately before the introduction to the Breedloves, the reader is faced with an altered primer excerpt that reads:

HEREISTHEFAMILYMOTHERFATHER
DICKANDJANETHEYLIVEINTHEGREE
NANDWHITEHOUSETHEYAREVERYH

Here, the primer not only lacks punctuation and spacing, but the alteration of capitalization intensifies the statement being made about the Breedloves and their house. The insistence on all capital letters makes it seem as though the nonsense words are being yelled, further disfiguring their meaning and adding a sense of anger, or perhaps, desperation. The capitalization of the phrase about their house and family is performative in the Butlerian sense, in which an overtly performative action calls attention to itself, and in so doing reveals the constructedness of its
very nature. The familiarity of the basic primer form leads readers to expect an excerpt
describing a happy family, a romanticized image that over time has become nearly solidified in
the collective memory as a true representation of some idyllic former time when life was more
prosperous and generally better. Such an image is, of course, only a fabrication employed to
preserve white middle class and largely capitalist agendas. Instead of this traditional performance
of Dick and Jane Morrison delivers a screed, an exaggeration of the original material that reveals
it for the performative artifact that it is, and in the process demonstrating that it does not resonate
with the Breedloves’ reality. Indeed, now the only remnant of “happy” from the original primer
is the solitary H clinging to the third line. Through her deployment of the school primers,
Morrison is able to reveal the way in which the white gaze informs the very foundation of the
educational system, thus serving as the building block for future generations’ internalization of
implicit conclusions about race and class.

The heart of the novel is focused on Pecola and her family, the Breedloves, who
Morrison uses as an extended case study showing the psychic destruction that can occur when
living with self-internalized ideologies of racial inferiority. The Breedloves are first introduced
with a description of their house, which is not really a house at all, but an abandoned storefront.
Morrison writes, “they lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there
because they believed they were ugly” (39). In their work on embodied deviance Jacqueline Urla
and Jennifer Terry chronicle the long history of conflating moral and bodily deviance, in which
non-normative physical features were thought to signify an otherwise hidden character flaw.
They suggest “classificatory practices at the heart of this notion depended theoretically and
pragmatically on making deviance visible. Thus, in many cases, the search for signs of deviance
privileged sight above the other senses” (9). In part, then, the Breedloves are constructed within
their community and by themselves as belonging in the (zoo-like) storefront home because of their “ugliness.” Their lack of physical beauty and outward signs of poverty thus serve as visible registers of their innate moral failings. This designation of ugliness is not simply an act of description on Morrison’s part, but rather the family’s own strongly held belief. Indeed, “you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question” (39). Although left unsaid, this “all knowing master” might be read as “the ideological hegemony of whiteness [that is] too overwhelming to be successfully resisted” (Byerman 449). In accepting their “ugliness” they implicitly accept the classification of themselves as deviant, and subsequently enact this deviance upon one another, perpetuating a vicious cycle of continued oppression.

Pecola’s mother, Pauline Breedlove, is in equal measure disgusted by her (black) family and their lives of squalor and enamored with whiteness and the fantasy of an alternative existence. She eventually acquires a job that allows her to more fully immerse herself both in the white world and the cleanliness it represents. Taking a position as domestic servant for the (white) Fisher family, Pauline comes to view work as a kind of idealized haven away from her life at home. In fact, deemed “an ideal servant” by the Fishers, “more and more she neglected her house, her children, her man – they were like afterthoughts one has just before sleep, the early-morning and late-evening edges of her day, the dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely” (127). For Pauline, life as a servant is not characterized by arduous labor or the drudgery typically associated with such a job, but rather by its loveliness and delicacy, a juxtaposition that speaks more to her infatuation with the white family and their world than with any act of labor itself. Her own family becomes an afterthought,
the notably “dark” edges of existence that recede into the background in comparison to the
overwhelming whiteness the Fishers represent both via their skin and the gleaming cleanliness of
the house that Pauline oversees.

It is not until Pecola and the MacTeer girls (Claudia and her older sister Freida) pay a
visit to Pauline at work that the extent of her disassociation from her own family is made clear.
After entering the kitchen Pecola and her companions notice one of Pauline’s famous blueberry
cobblers, fresh out of the oven and resting on the stove. Pecola reaches out to test the
temperature on the cobbler and calamity ensues: “It may have been nervousness, awkwardness,
but the pan tilted under Pecola’s fingers and fell to the floor, splattering blackish blueberries
everywhere. Most of the juice splashed on Pecola’s legs, and the burn must have been painful,
for she cried out and began hopping about just as Mrs. Breedlove entered” (108-09). Upon
seeing the mess and the ruined cobber, Pauline strikes Pecola with enough force to send her to
the ground, picking her up only to slap her again. The ruined dessert is more than an act of
carelessness resulting in a mess. The Fisher family praises Pauline for the cobbler, Mr. Fisher
even going so far in his flattery as to say, “I would rather sell her blueberry cobblers than real
estate” (127). The family’s desire to consume the dark berried dessert is of course suggestive of
more than a sweet tooth, and representative of the many ways they consume her blackness via
her various acts of labor. They are literally sustained by her food, but also benefit from her
maintenance of their home and care of their child. For Pauline, who willingly gives of her body
to the family, to lose the cobbler is to deprive them of what they want and need. More
importantly, though, the toppled dessert contaminates the perfectly clean white world she has
constructed for herself, the dark mess of the berries mirroring the intrusion of her black daughter
into her white world. As a result, Pecola is doubly burned by the encounter; the hot juice from
the berries scalds her legs, further imprinting upon her the association between darkness and pain and suffering. She is then struck by her own mother for her honest mistake and sent from the home, but not before she gets to witness her mother’s interaction with the little white girl of the Fisher household. Alarmed by the noise and the unfamiliar faces in her home the “little pink-and-yellow girl” begins to cry, asking “Who [are] they, Polly?” (109). Pauline comforts the girl with a tenderness withheld from her own daughter, consoling her with hugs and reassurances of “Don’t worry none, baby” (109). In this brief exchange Pauline disavows her daughter, refusing to introduce or even acknowledge her own child, while simultaneously calling the white girl “baby” in a rhetorical act of adoption. Moreover, it reveals the hierarchical relationship of power within the Fisher household, as even the youngest member of the house is permitted to use the familiar and diminutive nickname Polly, when, as an increasingly enraged Claudia notes, “even Pecola called her mother Mrs. Breedlove” (108). Ultimately, Pauline has so developed a love and infatuation with whiteness through her life with the Fishers that she would rather be their Polly (even delighting in being given a nickname) than Mrs. Breedlove, wife and mother to her own family.24

23 In this scene Morrison might also be making subtle reference to Wallace Thurman’s 1929 novel, The Blacker the Berry: A Novel of Negro Life. Through the character of Emma Lou Morgan, a dark skinned black woman, Thurman interrogates racial discrimination in the black community and the way in which lighter skin is often given preferential treatment. The “black” berries that splash Pecola reinforce this negative association with dark skin.

24 A number of scholars have made the argument that in The Bluest Eye Morrison signifies on Fannie Hurst’s 1933 novel, Imitation of Life. A central plot point in Hurst’s novel is the light-skinned “mulatta” character Peola’s repeated attempts to “pass” into the white world against the wishes of her dark-skinned mother, the “mammy” character, Delilah. In both novels the mother figures are shown to outwardly dote on their young white charges more than their own daughters. However, as Jane Caputi notes, while this behavior is valorized in Imitation of Life, in The Bluest Eye we view the action “from the horrified perspective of Claudia MacTeer…we know this mandated favoritism as…a wounding” (721). In addition to Morrison’s revision of the mother/daughter relationship, scholars have also analyzed the rhetorical effect of the
Given the lack of a real familial support system it is little wonder that Pecola Breedlove develops an infatuation with escaping her own embodied blackness for an idealized notion of whiteness. In a telling scene that occurs immediately after Morrison first introduces the Breedloves in their storefront home, an early morning fight occurs between Pecola’s parents. After her drunken father, Cholly Breedlove, refuses to awaken, Pauline douses him with water to rouse him from sleep. Leaping naked from the bed Cholly attacks his wife, the two engaging in a vicious physical fight while their son, Pecola’s brother Sammy, tries to help his mother, shouting for her to kill his father. While Sammy engages in the fracas, even advocating for his father’s death, Pecola, “restricted by youth and sex, experimented with methods of endurance” (43). While the domestic war rages on, Pecola stays in her bed, covering her head with a quilt and whispering to herself, “Please, God…Please make me disappear.” What follows is an extended depiction of her method of coping:

She squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away. Now slowly, now with a rush…Her fingers went, one by one; then her arms disappeared all the way to the elbow…The legs all at once. It was hardest above the thighs…Her stomach would not go. But finally, it too, went away. Then her chest, her neck. The face was hard, too. Almost done, almost. Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left…They were everything. Everything was there, in them (45).

Peola/Pecola naming. Werrlein has suggested that “without the ability to ‘see’ – or without the ‘c’ – Pecola believes she can be Peola; she hopes to enact her own blue-eyed, white-faced version of blackness,” while Gary Schwartz proposes “the name with the ‘c’ has some suggestion of Latin peccatum (mistake, fault, error) while Peola sounds floral” (123). Ultimately, while the Peola of Hurst’s novel does eventually pass into whiteness, securing a job and an (oblivious) white husband in the process, Morrison’s Pecola is too dark to pass, and is never allowed such opportunities.
Unable to physically fight back or realistically entertain the thought of running away, both strategies employed by her brother, Pecola practices an almost meditative strategy of making her corporeal form disappear, removing herself from the situation in theory, if not in practice. The scene is pivotal as it introduces the concept of a psychic splitting that will come to define Pecola later in the novel; her ability to disassociate from her physical body is thus very early on a way for her to disengage from the mental trauma she experiences on a (presumably) regular basis. Moreover, this moment reveals the value she places in sight and visuality, as her eyes, the one part of her body that can never disappear, are rendered simultaneously her most significant feature and the only blockade to achieving potential happiness. Historically, there has been a perceived division between mind and body as exemplified in the classic Cartesian dualism. The mind was associated with rationality and lofty philosophical goals that aimed to transcend the burdensome, bestial body, ruled as it was by animalistic desires and emotions. However, the sense of sight has the potential to transcend its connection to a purely embodied state as vision “stands out as the highest sense because it is most closely linked to the mind; as ‘the mind’s eye,’ it is connected to insight and enlightenment” (Mermann-Jozwiak 190). For Pecola, her eyes are directly connected to this notion of the power of the gaze. In bearing witness to what is bad, wrong, and vile around her she increasingly associates her eyes with all things negative. At one point she thinks, “if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights – if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different…maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove, too. Maybe they’d say, ‘Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We musn’t do bad things in front of those pretty eyes’” (46). However, not any pair of beautiful new eyes will do – they must be the “bluest,” for she has made a correlation between blackness/ugliness and whiteness/beauty in which blue eyes come to symbolize the pinnacle of
fair-completed beauty. By this logic, Pecola takes on much of the burden for her parents’ actions, assuming that it is her own ugliness/blackness that causes them to act the way that they do.

In order to alleviate her problems, which she associates with her own “deviant” body, Pecola engages in a series of attempts at physical purification, intent on consuming and thus embodying whiteness to cleanse herself of the “darkness” that defines her space in the social order. She begins this process while staying at the MacTeer house. After Frieda introduces her to a blue and white cup with Shirley Temple’s image on it, Pecola becomes enamored with the cup, eventually using it to drink three quarts of milk (much to Mrs. MacTeer’s chagrin) for the “opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley’s face” (23). In Temple, Pecola finds a kind of inverse version of herself. While Pecola is poor, black, and lonely, Shirley Temple is an idealized little white girl, charming and loved by many. She idolizes the young star, symbolically praying at the “temple” of Temple, while consuming excessive amounts of milk in her effort to imbibe and metaphorically internalize its pure whiteness.

Pecola attempts to recreate similar sensations when purchasing some Mary Jane candies from a local corner store. When trying to buy the candy from the storeowner, Mr. Yacobowski, Pecola realizes the shopkeeper chooses not to acknowledge her, or, perhaps, does not even see her. Standing before him it is as though she is almost entirely invisible. The text posits, “How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant storekeeper with the taste of potatoes and beer in his mouth…see a little black girl? Nothing in his life even suggested that the feat was possible, not to say desirable or necessary” (48). Here Morrison echoes one of the central themes of Ralph Ellison’s influential *Invisible Man* (1952), in which the nameless title character is “invisible” only because, as a black man, people willingly choose not to see him. One of the many privileges
associated with the power of the gaze is the ability not to look, or, to deny another’s subjectivity by the refusal to acknowledge their existence. Yacobowski’s immigrant status further complicates the encounter, as he capitalizes on the power of his gaze in relation to the young black girl to establish himself as both more fully white and more fully citizen. By placing himself in opposition to Pecola, he enforces his own bid for hegemonic and cultural authority. Nevertheless, Pecola succeeds in procuring the Mary Janes and after leaving the store lingers over the treats: “Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort…to eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane” (50). The Mary Jane candy confirms the same ideology of girlish whiteness as the milk-laden Shirley Temple cup. Through eating the candy Pecola again attempts to bring herself that much closer to the beloved and cherished little girls with gleaming blue eyes. Between the school primers, the Shirley Temple cup, and the candy, Pecola is essentially inundated with images of what girlhood “should” look like, and the image is smiling, blond-haired and blue-eyed, living in a world of material comforts, and, most importantly, white. She consumes the candies in the same way she drank the milk, not necessarily taking pleasure in the taste, but rather taking them as a kind of communion, or means of purification. While she longs to disassociate from her own embodied state, she tries to fully embody whiteness through acts of consumption.

Each character I have discussed thus far exhibits the ramifications of having been constructed through the white gaze, internalizing not only the belief that whiteness is inherently connected to beauty and cleanliness, but also that blackness necessarily functions as the dialectical opposite, representing all that is dirty, deviant, and pathological. The consequences
for such a way of life reach their crescendo when Cholly violates his daughter Pecola, bestowing upon her the only kind of “love” he is now capable of. Coming home drunk one Saturday afternoon he finds Pecola alone washing dishes in the kitchen. A flood of emotions run through him, with anger and resentment being tempered by a kind of corrupt version of affection: “He wanted to break her neck – but tenderly. Guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet. What could he do for her – ever? How dare she love him? Hadn’t she any sense at all?” (162). Drunk and trying to process his own lifetime of abuse and disappointment, Cholly grapples with paternal feelings of care for his daughter and rage at his own shortcomings, the flurry of emotions directed at the young girl before him. He rapes the shocked Pecola, leaving her on the kitchen floor. Although the rape is clearly a vicious act Morrison describes the encounter with terms such as “tenderness” and “love,” concepts that are seemingly antithetical to the abuse that Cholly has enacted upon Pecola’s body. Through the constant devaluation of his worth as a person, Cholly no longer understands what it means to love and protect, and his attempt to do so with Pecola is a perverse expression of paternal care, corrupted through the ongoing economy of hate. While the reader understands Cholly’s actions as violent and destructive, in his maddened state he believes himself to be bestowing love, demonstrating that neither love nor sanity can exist in such a corrupt system.

The concluding sections of the novel rely on orality and textual experimentation to implicate both the community of Lorain and the reading audience in Pecola’s inevitable demise. Already convinced of her ugliness and essentially (mis)treated as invisible by family and the greater community, after the rape Pecola becomes pregnant with her father’s child and suffers even more under the collective gaze of those around her. Indeed, the greatest tragedy of the novel may very well be the public response to Pecola’s predicament, the story of which Claudia and
Frieda piece together bit-by-bit from overheard town gossip. While the novel already largely falls under the category of what Henry Louis Gates might deem a “talking book,” signifying on other literary works and traditions, the final sections of the novel truly begin to “speak,” placing an even greater emphasis on oral discourse and the power of speech. The sisters eventually begin to make sense of the overheard conversations, a sample of which runs:

“Did you hear about that girl?”
“What pregnant?”
“Yas. But guess who?”

…

“That’s just it. Ain’t no little old boy. They say it’s Cholly.”
“Cholly? Her daddy?”

…

“Well they ought to take her out of school.”
“Ought to. She carry some of the blame.”
“Oh, come on. She ain’t but twelve or so.”
“Yeah. But you never know. How come she didn’t fight him?”
“Well, it probably won’t live. They say the way her mama beat her she lucky to be alive herself.”
“She be lucky if it don’t live. Bound to be the ugliest thing walking.” (189)

In this smattering of town chatter, the community’s lack of sympathy for Pecola is apparent. Instead of viewing her like the victim that she is, they turn against her, first treating the news like some kind of trivial rumor (“guess who?”) and then blaming her for her own rape by positing she didn’t fight her father hard enough, thus implying her complicity in the act. They also confirm Pecola’s feelings of ugliness. Her baby is forecasted to die and they deem this preferable not because it is the product of incest, but rather because it will be too “ugly” to merit living. She is invisible to the white community, and an object of scorn amongst her own people, the lack of
supportive community being yet another casualty of the novel. The town’s reaction to Pecola’s assault demonstrates that they too are afflicted by this imposed ideology of bodily deviance.

The inhabitants of Lorain are ultimately correct in their predictions and Pecola loses her baby, an incident that finally breaks any remaining vestiges of her sanity. Claudia recalls, “the damage done was total. She spent her days…walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly” (204). Forced to endure constant physical and psychic trauma, Pecola ultimately descends into madness. In so doing, she might be read as a symbolic indictment of the systems of gendered and racial oppression acting upon her. Such a reading is in line with traditional interpretations of women’s madness in literature, as largely influenced by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s now canonical analysis of madwomen in Victorian literature, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (1979). In their work, Gilbert and Gubar read the madwoman as an angry double for the more sedate female protagonist or author, a woman whose rage represents a protest against patriarchal order. However, as Marta Caminero-Santangelo has pointed out, “the symbolic resolution of the madwoman as an alternative to patriarchy ultimately traps the woman in silence,” further reproducing systems of gendered oppression (1). If one is already socially marginalized, earning the designation of “mad” can only result in further exclusion from the social sphere. In addition, Laura Halperin has characterized the “canon” of madness narratives as being “Eurocentric and Anglocentric…[focusing] on the roles gender and sexuality play in the construction of literary ‘madwomen,’” often at the expense of a more intersectional reading that also takes race into consideration. Indeed, In Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre (1847), Bertha Mason, the original madwoman in the attic, is a Creole
woman from Jamaica. Although in the Caribbean context Creole refers to an individual of white heritage, Bertha is nevertheless marked by her connection to the non-white space and Rochester’s belief that madness must thus inherently run in her blood. Gilbert and Gubar’s reading focuses on Bertha as the volatile counterpart to Jane, but does not trouble the problematic treatment of Bertha’s racial identity. As Gayatri Spivak has famously critiqued, Jane gains upward social mobility largely at the expense of the racially ambiguous and mad Bertha Mason, and thus any reading of Jane as a feminist figure must be tempered with an acknowledgment of her implicit act of imperialism (248). Morrison’s novel demonstrates that the ongoing practice of racializing bodies is central to the production of norms related to both propriety and deviance, and a critical factor in Pecola’s mental dissolution. Thus, I argue that while the very existence of Pecola’s madness might be read as a critique of hegemonic systems of oppression (in line with the more traditional interpretation), her madness does not work to actually subvert any of these same systems. She wanders the streets of town, futilely flapping like a bird that will never take flight, an image that dramatizes her state of extreme disempowerment. Her actions cannot accurately be read as a subversive performance because in her maddened state Pecola has no concept of herself as performer. Without this knowledge all agency is removed from her actions and the townspeople (and reading audience) are positioned as voyeurs with the power to gaze upon Pecola’s embodied spectacle without her ever being aware of the judgment she receives. Even Claudia and Frieda, her greatest sympathizers, explain, “we tried to see her without looking at her, and never, never went near” (204). Although they take her in as a spectacle to behold, they never actually “look” at her, or give deeper consideration to her movements, ultimately abandoning her like all the others.
Although Pecola’s madness outwardly takes the form of grotesque physical displays, she also returns to the psychic splitting she experimented with in her earlier attempts to disassociate from her body. A running theme throughout the novel, exemplified in Pecola’s insanity, is W.E.B Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness, or the awareness felt by African Americans of two distinct senses of self – one’s own and then how one is constructed by white hegemonic society. Du Bois writes, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (20). In their self-loathing, almost all of the characters of the text represent this psychic split, regardless of whether they are aware of it or not. However, in the penultimate section of the text, Pecola literalizes this Du Boisian concept and creates an invisible conversation partner in her own mind. Believing she has finally gained the blue eyes she has long desired, she beseeches the voice for confirmation of her beauty. A portion of “their” conversation runs:

Are they really nice?
Yes. Very nice.
Just “very nice”?
Really, truly, very nice.
Really, truly, bluely nice?
Oh God. You are crazy.
I am not!
I didn’t mean it that way.

…
Please. If there is somebody with bluer eyes than mine, then maybe there is somebody with the bluest eyes. The bluest eyes in the whole world.
That’s just too bad isn’t it?
Please help me look.
No.
But suppose my eyes aren’t blue enough?

*Blue enough for what?*

Blue enough for... I don’t know. Blue enough for something. Blue enough... for you!

(194-203)

While the retreat into her mind and a world of her own creation would seemingly signal the fact that she’s finally found a way to escape her embodied state, the regulating influence of the gaze and the preoccupation with her physical form and outward appearance still exists. Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman has argued that Morrison does not abandon Pecola in her madness, but rather “places Pecola within dialogic communion with an other, a figure with the same psychic landscape as she and her mother, who speaks to her and for her” (131). However, while this imagined interlocutor often appears to encourage Pecola, confirming that her eyes are in fact “very nice,” it just as often undermines her, undercutting any sense of support. When Pecola pushes for confirmation of her eyes’ beauty, for example, the voice tells her she’s “crazy,” and while it attempts to assuage her by saying “I didn’t mean it like that,” to the reader it is apparent that it was not simply a flippant comment, but rather a subtle accusation of her by now very real insanity. She also looks to her imaginary companion for confirmation that her eyes are not only blue and beautiful, but that they are the “bluest” eyes possible, the superlative form attesting to the unachievable standard she has set for herself. The voice functions as a manifestation of double consciousness, as Pecola ultimately suggests her eyes need to be blue “for” the disembodied voice, still measuring herself by “the tape” of an imagined onlooker.

While Pecola’s madness does little to challenge existing structures of power, and only renders her an even greater social pariah, the way in which Morrison enacts a performance of textually embodied deviance holds far more subversive potential. The townspeople of Lorain can attempt to turn a blind eye to her insanity, but due to Morrison’s rendering of Pecola’s inner
dialogue the reader cannot. In her work on African American performance, bell hooks suggests “all performance practice has…been central to the process of decolonization in white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. From times of slavery to the present day, the act of claiming voice, of asserting both one’s right to speak as well as saying what one wants to say, has been a challenge to those forms of domestic colonization that seek to overdetermine the speech of those who are exploited and/or oppressed” (212). While I do not see Morrison’s textual rendering of Pecola’s inner dialogue as a means for her to claim a voice or authority, I would argue that through the construction of dialogue/orality, the text gains a body and the sensual abilities that Pecola has lost. In a work where almost all of the characters have come to view their bodies as dirty and deviant, Morrison recuperates the body through her act of literary transgression.

Although Pecola’s interior dialogue is perhaps the most dramatic use of orality in the novel, it is not a singular example. In her recreation of town gossip, and in switching between narrative voices and profiling various characters, Morrison succeeds in creating a communal novel in which various actors contribute their piece to the larger performance. By bringing these various voices together, the narrative resists pathologizing Pecola as an insane individual, and instead reveals the larger systemic effect of the colonizing gaze on an entire community. Morrison’s “talking” text enacts a conscious and purposeful performance of textual deviance, and thus succeeds where Pecola’s madness fails.

The performance art tradition in the United States largely established itself as a space for “non-normative” bodies, or more accurately, for those individuals thought to exhibit “surplus corporeality.” While women and artists of color have often faced challenges breaking into the art establishment, performance art created a space in which the body of the artist was no longer a barrier, but could be employed as artistic subject and agent of resistance. Artist and writer Coco
Fusco has observed that “performance artists of color working in the 1970s were exploring the sense of alienation and displacement that being perceived as undesirable, foreign, or uprooted might engender” (169). Through the figure of Pecola Morrison interrogates these feelings of undesirability, or ugliness, in order to demonstrate the systems at play that construct our racialized notions of beauty/ugliness and goodness/deviance. Fusco further describes the use of “vernacular performance-poetry and storytelling in subaltern communities as the primary mode of transmitting unofficial histories and of defining vernacular style” (164). By constructing a novel that time and again relies on orality, the recreation of vernacular speech, and communal storytelling, Morrison’s text aligns itself with this tradition. Here, the ability to reclaim the black voice as a powerful mode of storytelling defies traditional literary conventions and gives the text a kind of embodiment that Pecola loses in the complete retreat into her own mind.

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In Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*, Nanapush, an elder Ojibwe tribal member and one of two narrative voices in the novel, describes witnessing the decimation of a North Dakota buffalo herd as a young man. While leading an expedition for white hunters, he observes the annihilation of countless buffalo, the hunters taking only tongues and hides and leaving behind the remains of the slaughtered animals. Reflecting on this act of brutality he claims, “the animals understood what was happening, how they were dwindling…the beasts that survived grew strange and unusual. They lost their minds. They tried their best to cripple one another, to fall or die. They

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25 In the novel Erdrich specifically uses the name Ojibwe to describe the tribal status of her characters. Much critical work done on the novel also uses the term Anishinaabe, the name used to refer to a number of culturally-related indigenous peoples in Canada and the Northwest United states, including the Ojibwe, Chippewa, and Algonquin people, among others.
tried suicide. They tried to do away with their young. They knew they were going, saw their end” (140). The buffalo in Nanapush’s story are poignant symbols of communal trauma. When the herd is nearly destroyed through an extreme act of violence the remaining animals are unable to carry on as they once did; they turn their anguish inward, losing their minds and attempting to kill themselves and their young. On one level, the story is a reminder of the treatment of the North American buffalo population, driven to almost complete extinction in the nineteenth century by white hunters for sport and commercial gain. It also clearly serves as a critical commentary on the Native Indian population’s near ruination under the very same systems of violent colonization. Erdrich explores the consequences of this brutality in her novel, interrogating the dueling impulses of communal preservation and self-destruction in the face of cultural devastation.

Raised primarily in North Dakota by her father of German descent and her mother of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa, Erdrich was a member of the first coeducational class at Dartmouth College, and later returned to Dartmouth as writer-in-residence in the growing Native American Studies Program (Bloom 24). With most scholars pointing to the late 1960s as the moment American Indian literature began to receive significant critical attention, initiated by writers such as N. Scott Momaday, Gerald Vizenor, and Leslie Marmon Silko, Erdrich has often been recognized as helping to bring about a “second wave” of popular and scholarly interest in Native literature in the 1980s (Rainwater 272). 26 Tracks is part of her North Dakota series, a set of

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26 There is ongoing debate over the various labels that have been applied to this body of literature, with the designations of American Indian literature, Native American literature, Indigenous Literature, Amerindian Literature, and others being championed at various times by different scholars. As Kenneth Roemer explains, “all pose ethical and descriptive problems because they impose European concepts and language that are inaccurate and transform diversity into a vague generic essentialist category that can be used to marginalize misrepresent a diversified people and a complex intercultural history” (9). For reasons of clarity, I employ the
novels that trace the development of several tribal families over the course of the twentieth century. The third book in the series, *Tracks* is often regarded as one of her most overtly political novels for its allusions to significant historical and political events that shaped the lives of the Ojibwe tribes in the region at the turn of the century.

Beginning in 1912 and concluding in 1924, *Tracks* focuses on several families living on the remains of their tribal land and in the nearby fictional town of Argus, North Dakota. Historical context is critically important to Erdrich’s narrative, but in a move reminiscent of *The Bluest Eye* she refrains from overt discussion of specific events or political acts. In the first pages of the novel Nanapush laments the demise of his people, claiming “Our trouble came from living, from liquor and the dollar bill. We stumbled toward the government bait, never looking down, never noticing how the land was snatched from under us at every step” (4). Although left unsaid, his commentary is, in part, a response to the Dawes Allotment Act of 1887. After forcing indigenous tribes onto reservations in order to abet white territorial expansion elsewhere, the Dawes Act allowed communally owned tracts of reservation land to be divided up and allotted to individual tribal members. Encouraging private owners to abandon traditional hunting and gathering lifestyles in favor of “finding ways to use their land for profitable enterprises,” the act was intended to assimilate Natives into the capitalist system (Stookey 72). The tracts of land were initially to be held in a twenty-five-year trust, during which time owners were not responsible for the payment of property taxes. However, this grace period was continually reduced through a series of acts that deemed “competent Indians,” those who were more than one-half white or successful in their businesses, eligible for fee patents. The new patent system commonly used terms Native Indian and Native American literatures(s) interchangeably throughout this chapter.
demanded the payment of taxes, while allowing for owners to either sell or lease their allotments. The introduction of these new acts resulted in the massive loss of allotments when owners could not pay taxes after the shortened grace period and were forced to sell their land for prices well below actual value (Peterson 986, 987). The novel’s beginning in 1912 marks the official end of the initial twenty-five-year trust, and shows the tribes’ desperation to cling to their remaining, but rapidly dwindling lands. The specter of the Dawes Allotment Act thus serves as the unspoken backdrop for the narrative.

The loss of land and the push to abandon traditional cultural practices in favor of adhering to the privatized, white capitalist system is ultimately dramatized through the novel’s two narrators. Eschewing official record, Tracks tells the story of conflict through Native voices, allowing the narrative to function as a counter-archival source that makes use of communal experience as opposed to a paper trail of governmental acts and treatises. However, as Native American texts have traditionally taken the form of performances, involving both speakers and a listening audience, Karl Kroeber suggests that the novel is “an Anglo-American literary structure that must prohibit any authentically Indian imaginative form” (98). If the novel format is antithetical to indigenous oral traditions and the interactive performances they engender, then determining how best to express Native experience through the written word is a challenge Erdrich is forced to overcome.

In her attempt to subvert the dominance of the novel format, and the colonizing history it represents, Erdrich employs the use of various narrative devices in order to bridge the gap between oral and written traditions. First, each chapter of the novel is given a heading with a season and date, both in standard English and in the Ojibwe language (with English translation). The opening chapter, for example, begins with the description “Winter 1912,” and “Manitou-
geezisohns, Little Spirit Sun.” This act of labeling combines the linear trajectory associated with history in the Anglo tradition with the seasonal and cyclical Native construction of time. While this framing device pays homage to both traditions, it is the use of two, often competing, narrative voices that allows Erdrich to more fully capture an element of the oral storytelling tradition and enable the novel to act as its own kind of performance. The previously mentioned Nanapush, tribal elder and likable trickster figure, serves as one narrator of the novel. In his chapters he tells the history of the tribal families, both their victories and defeats, to his adopted granddaughter, Lulu, in dramatic monologue form. In this way, he functions as an actual storyteller with a listening audience. Nanapush is regarded as a supremely gifted speaker, once claiming he escaped death by talking so long it tired of him and gave up, and serves as the representative voice for communal preservation in the novel. In addition to his storytelling skill, he has also been educated in the white-run Indian school system, giving him fluency in written and spoken English as well. It is this bilingualism and ability to read and comprehend government documents that often allows him to advocate for his community and prevent them from being swindled out of their land. In a kind of parallel construction, we as readers obviously take in his “spoken” account via the written text. Sheila Hassell Hughes has asserted that “the doubleness of such speech, like that of the prophet or trickster, works simultaneously to undermine the power of the privileged oppressor and to appeal for his or her realignment on the side of the oppressed” (87). Just as in the context of the novel he uses his ability to speak English to undermine white figures of authority, we as readers might note the “doubleness” of his speech in the fact that Nanapush’s narrative is simultaneously oral and written. In his trickster role, however, Nanapush’s act of storytelling works to undermine the authority of the written text and champion the subversive potential of oral modes of performance. In the face of colonizing
influences, Nanapush struggles to maintain his cultural traditions in a way that ultimately proves sustaining for both himself and those closest to him.

Nanapush’s chapters of narration are juxtaposed with those of Pauline Puyat, a young Native woman of mixed-heritage who is an outsider amongst her own people for her embrace of the encroaching white community. In her chapters, Pauline offers an alternative interpretation of the demise of tribal families (which she blames on their own inadequacies), as well as the narrative of her religious conversion to Catholic nun. The primary impetus for Pauline’s turn away from her Native heritage is tied to her aversion for her dark skin and her desire to attain whiteness, a move she believes will allow her to transcend the destruction she witnesses among her own people. However, her fervor for this whiteness, a prize she can never truly attain, will ultimately prove destructive. Much like the buffalo who sought to destroy themselves after witnessing the near annihilation of their herd, Pauline punishes her own body by committing increasingly extreme acts of racial and spiritual purification. Her attraction to whiteness and white hegemonic institutions is also embodied in the form of the narrative she delivers. Her chapters are not addressed to any specific listener and this, as Nancy Peterson claims, might be interpreted as Pauline writing her story for a reading audience (989). Adopting the written, Western autobiographical form is another means for her to distance herself from her own Native heritage and further align herself with the white literary and cultural establishment. Ultimately, Nanapush’s speech performances serve as a means of resistance to assimilationist discourses of power and function as a kind of support system, preserving not only his culture but also his sanity. In contrast, Pauline’s denial of her Native identity and the adoption of the written word capitulates to these very same discourses. Although she enacts performances of purification in order to achieve a social and spiritual kind of whiteness, she succeeds only in alienating herself
from her former friends and family, losing her community as well as her mind. Tracing her transformation over the course of the novel will constitute the bulk of my analysis of *Tracks* in this chapter.

From the very outset of the novel, Pauline makes her desire for whiteness known. She claims, “I wanted to be like my mother, who showed her half-white. I wanted to be like my grandfather, pure Canadian. That was because even as a child I saw that to hang back was to perish” (14). Although she is able to recognize the imperiled status of the Native population, she does not attribute this to the violence of manifest destiny, but rather to her own people’s proclivity to “hang back,” as opposed to assimilating to the white presence. Pauline longs to embrace the whiteness in her heritage while denying her Native ancestry, begging her father to send her from the reservation to the nearby white town of Argus where she hopes to apprentice with local nuns. She refuses to learn beadwork or leather-tanning from her own family, and positions the Native art forms as laborious and barbaric. Instead she expresses her wish to learn the “lace-making trade” from the nuns, designating their style of craft a skilled “trade” to be held in higher regard than indigenous artisanal forms. Despite her father’s protestations that “You’ll fade out there…You won’t be an Indian once you come back,” Pauline eventually succeeds in making it to town (14). Once there, however, she is initially rejected by the nuns and forced to work sweeping floors in a local butcher shop. Although she views apprenticing with the sisters as an avenue to achieving whiteness and its many benefits, she is denied this opportunity and forced to perform menial labor in the shop instead.

Much like Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, Pauline understands her inability to gain access to social privileges and prestige is due to her racialized body, which she then interprets through the twin lenses of beauty/goodness and ugliness/deviance. While working in the butcher shop
Pauline describes herself as “fifteen, alone, and so poor-looking I was invisible to most customers and to the men in the shop. Until they needed me, I blended into the stained brown walls, a skinny big-nosed girl with staring eyes” (15, 16). Pauline is disadvantaged by her gendered and racialized position in respect to the predominantly white men of the shop, rendered an almost invisible presence in their midst, and she attributes the lack of respect she’s given to her own appearance. Although she’s of mixed racial heritage and described as being light-skinned in comparison to her other family members, here she emphasizes (and denigrates) her darker complexion by suggesting she blends into the “stained” brown walls. Her feelings of alienation are not unique to her position as racial outsider in the white town of Argus. Indeed, in his own attempt to make sense of Pauline after one of her many visits to the reservation, even Nanapush reinforces Pauline’s long-held assumption that her appearance is the catalyst for her misfortune. He claims: “We never knew what to call her, or where she fit or how to think when she was round…because she was unnoticeable, homely if it must be said, Pauline schemed to gain attention by telling odd tales that created damage. There was some question if she wasn’t afflicted, touched in the mind” (39). Describing her as unnoticeable and even “homely,” he reinforces the link between ugliness and innate deviance. It is because of her unattractive appearance and strange behavior that he concludes she might be “touched in the mind,” her physical form serving as an indicator of her mental status. Pointedly, he also accuses her of “telling odd tales,” an accusation that calls her chapters of narration into question. Thus, while her Native status ensures she will be a perpetual outsider in the white community, her light skin and denial of her own people renders her an outcast in their midst as well, essentially trapping Pauline in a kind of liminal social space.
Over the course of the novel Pauline makes a series of attempts at mitigating her feelings of unhappiness and ugliness by using her body as a tool for achieving white respectability, and thus social mobility. She decides that her first effort should be entering the institution of marriage, and determines, “I must get married, must find myself a husband. I thought that the reason I was not wanted was just that I was alone” (72). Never entertaining the possibility of a more informal relationship model based on mutual affection and attraction, as demonstrated by different tribal members around her, she insists on a traditional Catholic marriage, adopting the Christian position on monogamy and a church-sanctioned union.

Despite her intentions of securing respectability and companionship, Pauline is once again thwarted in her endeavor. She takes the older, alcoholic Native man Napoleon Morrissey as her lover in a union that remains clandestine, as he is unwilling to allow the relationship to progress beyond secret affair. She recalls: “Napoleon and I met again and again, after I came to him in ignorance, after which I could not resist more than a night without his body, which was hard, pitiless” (95). Taking advantage of her youth and inexperience, Napoleon remains “pitiless” towards her and her affection, and it is clear he will never be the husband she desires. Much like her effort to learn lace-making ends with her sweeping floors in the butcher shop, her romance and the allure of respectability it promises fizzles as well. Eventually Pauline learns that she’s pregnant, and she views this development not as a reminder of the generative capabilities of her own body, but rather as further indication of her own deviance. While she longed to take part in the church-sanctioned institution of marriage, thereby attaining spiritual and social worth, she instead finds herself giving birth to a child out of wedlock. When Bernadette Morrissey, her aunt through marriage and Napoleon’s sister, learns of the pregnancy she agrees to help Pauline hide her condition and even names the baby for her: “Marie, she said, named for the Virgin. I
knew different. Satan was the one who had pinned me with his horns” (133). Employing the image of being pinned by the phallic horns of the devil to describe her sexual experience, she determines that her baby is thus a symbol of evil. When the time comes to deliver she attempts to keep her child inside the womb, recalling “I had decided to die, and let the child too, no taint of original sin on her unless she breathed air” (135). Pauline positions herself as a kind of martyr by employing the rhetoric of sin and evil when justifying her attempt to kill herself and her daughter, and yet she disregards the fact that suicide is a mortal sin according to the tenets of Catholicism. This contradiction illustrates two key elements of her character. First, it reveals that Pauline’s religious conviction is not necessarily dictated by established doctrine, but rather subject to her own whims of interpretation and deployed to accomplish her personal goals. Perhaps more importantly, Pauline’s willingness to commit suicide and kill her child is emblematic of her wish to end the Native line. Although she takes pride in the white parts of her heritage, Napoleon is a Native man and their child would be a reflection of such a union. In killing her daughter, she attempts to literally foreclose on the futurity of her people.

Failing to achieve respectability or status through marriage and motherhood, she embarks on another mission of racial/spiritual purification by fully devoting herself to the Catholic church. She finally succeeds in being taken in by the local convent to train as a nun, and her turn toward the religion is a fitting solution to her own struggles with embodiment. It grants her access to a powerful Western belief system, one she admires more than the mysticism she perceives in her own people, while also encouraging the denial of the physical body. The Christian tradition has long triumphed the transcendent qualities of the immortal soul, while positioning the corporeal form as sinful and being ruled by sensual desires. This dichotomy appeals to Pauline, for it not only confirms her perception of the “deviant” nature of her (dark)
body, but also provides a framework for thus escaping the embodied state. In much the same way that Pecola imagined changing her eyes, the “windows to the soul,” in order to achieve a feeling of goodness, Pauline’s religious conversion results in a spiritual awakening and new found (in)sight. Late one night she receives a vision she believes to be God revealing her true background and purpose. She explains:

Skins were stripped from my eyes. Every day I saw more clearly and I marveled at what He showed me…He said that I was not whom I had supposed. I was an orphan and my parents had died in grace, and also, despite my deceptive features, I was not one speck of Indian but wholly white. He Himself had dark hair although His eyes were blue as bottleglass, so I believed… [He told me] I should not turn my back on Indians. I should go out among them, be still, and listen. There was a devil in the land, a shadow in the water, an apparition that filled their sight. (137)

In her vision, God literally strips the Native skin from her eyes, allowing her to finally see “clearly.” This blue-eyed and decidedly white-skinned deity informs her that she is, in fact, white herself, but that her calling is to remain among the Native population in order to observe the devil in their midst. For Pauline, who has longed to be rid of her racialized body and attain a kind of spiritual whiteness, the vision confirms her greatest desires and instills in her an even stronger yearning to both tame her flesh and impose her will on those around her. For readers, this moment also calls into question the validity of her account and serves as an indication that her perception of reality may be starting to slip.

In order to demonstrate her piety Pauline begins to engage in increasingly extreme rituals of bodily mortification, in essence punishing her dark flesh in order to achieve inner spiritual purification. At first she begins with a series of daily adjustments, choosing to wear her shoes on
the wrong feet and refusing to visit the outhouse more than twice a day (146, 147). She works to keep her practices hidden from the other nuns at the convent, but Nanapush and his extended family members notice these changes in Pauline when she comes to visit and observe them. When Nanapush calls attention to her reluctance to relieve herself, she fumes internally, “No one noticed in the convent. No one reported, as they had when I left the pins in my headpieces and when I wore a short length of rope around my neck, reminding me not betray my Lord as Judas had” (147). This brief aside reveals the streak of extremism embedded in Pauline’s practice. The lifestyle of celibacy and asceticism demanded by the Church already forecloses on many physical comforts and experiences, but Pauline pushes her personal acts of penance even further, punishing her corporeal form and attempting to deny even its most basic functions. Her rituals soon intensify and she reports: “At night, I did not allow myself to toss or turn for comfort…When I woke I broke the ice in the [water] buckets. I used my hand and no spoon…I put burrs in the armpits of my dress and screwgrass in my stockings and nettles in my neckband…I let my toenails grow until it ached to walk again…I did not give up on my purpose” (152). Finally, she admits, “I had made a rule never to touch myself, to scratch, to rub a strained muscle, wash or cleanse…My rank aroma was the perfume my soul exuded, devotion’s air” (154). Internalizing beliefs of her own deviance handed down to her by both the Native and white communities, Pauline targets her body as a locus of sin and accordingly sets out to punish it into a state of purity, even if that ironically entails living in filth and degradation. Already believing that her body is deviant and unattractive, she abuses it until it begins to resemble the tortured and disgusting cage she has long thought it to be.

Pauline’s devotion soon extends beyond self-imposed discomfort and dirt as she continues to undergo real physical and mental transformation. In perhaps one the most shocking
examples of her extremism, Pauline intrudes on a healing ceremony conducted by Nanapush. He presides over a pot of boiling water and herbs, and, because he has coated his arms in a protective mixture of crushed roots and plants, he is able to plunge his hands into the water without harm. Pauline, believing herself to have divine protection and wanting to test her own power, thrusts her arms into the pot, only to be badly scalded. Her burned arms are bandaged, and with each subsequent changing of the bandages she loses layer upon layer of skin. This imagery is particularly striking given her intense adherence to Christian ideology. Although she takes part in extreme rites of purification to cleanse her soul, she ends up shedding her skin like a snake in an allusion to Satan as the serpent in the Garden of Eden. This perversion of her faith is further intensified as her wounds slowly start to heal, and her hands take on a new form. She relates that “new flesh grew upon my hands, smooth and pink as a baby’s, only tighter, with no give to it, a stiff and shrunken fabric, so that my fingers webbed and doubled over like a hatchling’s claws” (196). Pauline’s new flesh may be smooth and pink, traits she has longed for, but her hands now take the form of claws and serve as a manifestation of her physical devolution into a beast-like creature. As Lorena Stookey argues, Pauline’s attempts to recreate herself, and in so doing achieve a kind of social power unavailable to her otherwise, backfires as she “gradually reveals the ways in which she makes herself a victim of her own fears as well as her desires…to counter her fear of being seen by others as ordinary, she engages in the grotesque acts of masochism that leave her severely disfigured” (83). In her mind it is by literally shedding layers of her Native skin that she moves closer to divinity, and ultimately it is this belief in her own godlike authority that leads to a violent eruption of madness.

As Pauline becomes even more emboldened in her religious conviction her sanity continues to deteriorate. She purposefully travels to Lake Matchimanito, the body of water
around which the tribal families gather and the location of an alleged lake spirit, a nefarious creature of Native legend. Commandeering Nanapush’s old boat she rows to the center of the lake and calls out to those on shore. Realizing that the boat is worn and leaky and that a violent storm is rolling in, her former friends and family spend hours devising ways to return her to safety. As those on shore attempt to save her, Pauline gloats over the control she believes she has gained over them, thinking to herself “This was how God felt: beyond hindrance or reach” (198).

Until this point Pauline’s extreme piety served as a mask for her crumbling sanity, but her madness is fully revealed when she believes herself to have gained omnipotent control over the others. Due to the severity of the storm her rescuers are forced to abandon their mission and take shelter. However, guided either by luck or divine intervention, Pauline’s leaking boat eventually floats to shore. Upon reaching land she sees a figure emerge from the trees. Assuming it to be the lake monster and thus a symbol of heathen evil, she strangles the creature to death with her rosary beads. She recalls, “I hung on while he bucked and gagged and finally fell, his long tongue dragging down my thighs…As light began to open in the sky the thing grew a human shape, one that I recognized in gradual stages. Eventually, it took on the physical form of Napoleon Morrissey” (203). In another example of Pauline’s unreliable narration, it is ultimately unclear if she really knows the true identity of the figure that she attacks and kills on shore, or if she has truly descended into a madness that allows her to see a mythic and evil creature instead. Her description of the encounter only further complicates any attempt at interpretation, as the long tongue dragging down her thighs is at once reminiscent of a creature or beast, but also suggestive of the sexual relationship she shared with Napoleon. While her culpability in the murder is difficult to determine, it is clear she succeeds in killing one of her own by using the very symbol of her newfound white faith. Her madness and self-loathing have primarily been
directed inward at her own body, and yet in this instance she also strikes a blow against the collective Native body. 

Far from being chastened by her act of violence, Pauline finally attains the kind of empowerment she has longed for. Napoleon’s body is eventually discovered, and although local families suspect Pauline of the murder she returns to the convent without ever having to answer for her crime. After the experience on the lake she declares, “I am now sanctified, recovered, and about to be married here at the church in our diocese and by our bishop. I will be the bride and Christ will take me as wife, without death” (204). Her murder of Napoleon and the belief in her “control” over her would-be-rescuers finally “purifies” her of any connection to her Native identity. Poised to enter into spiritual matrimony, she can shed her Native, embodied state and begin a new, implicitly whitened, spiritual life. In Daniel Cornell’s analysis of Pauline’s character, he observes, “The temptation for the reader is to understand Pauline’s construction of her activity on the lake as evidence of insanity….as a misguided syncretism of American Indian and Christian religious traditions” (51). He then pushes against this interpretation by arguing that such a reading neglects Pauline’s authority as narrative voice and author of her own experience. Cornell points out that Pauline’s apparent ability to continue to narrate her story until the end of the novel complicates the attempt to read her as insane, and further claims that “she takes up a position that in a male authored order belongs solely to men: she demands the equality of a constituting gaze, the privilege of being a constitutive subject. It is not lies that she constructs but her own right to look” (52). According to such an interpretation, we as readers fall into the sexist trap of relying on Nanapush’s authority to denounce Pauline as insane, when in reality she is simply attempting to secure a position of long-denied authority. Pauline may stake a kind of claim for her right to look at others, using her large, “staring eyes” to observe the alleged devil in
the midst of her people, thereby fashioning a new identity for herself. I would argue, however, that the conclusion of the novel does not actually find Pauline in any kind of state of real empowerment. Her feelings of self-loathing have driven her to madness and the adoption of an extreme form of faith. Moreover, in order to achieve spiritual purification she must disfigure and disavow her own Native body. In her concluding chapter she embraces her new name, Sister Leopolda, demonstrating yet another step in her transformation into a non-Native. Poignantly, though, even if she has repudiated her heritage and people, it does not automatically mean she has achieved her goal of whiteness. She might be taken into the religious order, but Pauline will always be viewed as an Indian convert. Once again, madness proves itself to be a flawed avenue to resistance, further enmeshing the madwoman in systems of gendered and racialized oppression instead of freeing her.

Even more ominous than her own mental deterioration is the power Pauline comes to wield against those around her. After failing in killing her child, she succeeds in murdering Napoleon Morrissey, a member of an already dwindling tribal population. In addition to these physical acts of violence, Pauline also gains the authority to participate in institutionalized violence as well. At the convent her Mother Superior praises Pauline for her devotion, and lets her know she has been assigned to teach at the Catholic school in Argus: “She spoke in a kind voice, said that vocations such as mine are rare, and urged me to set an example for other girls from this region” (205). In her new post she will participate in the calculated system of whitewashing promoted by the Indian boarding school system. Largely modeled on the original school of its kind, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School founded in 1879 in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, these assimilationist institutions required children to give up their languages and traditional forms of dress, among other markers of cultural identity, in order to learn English and
Christian theology (Fear-Segal and Rose). Thinking about her own role in such a school, Pauline muses, “The trembling old fools with their conjuring tricks will die off, and the young…return from the government schools blinded and deafened” (205). She views this disabling of Native children as necessary, an essential forgetting of all their old ways of knowing and being. The violence of this description is apparent, and like the figure of Soaphead Church in *The Bluest Eye*, the great tragedy of Pauline’s story is not her personal and mental dissolution, but rather the way that she then functions as an agent of assimilation that will perpetuate the same cycles of self-hatred she herself suffered from.

Mirroring her fixation with white institutions of power, Pauline’s sections of the novel demonstrate a textual submission to Anglocentric literary paradigms. Hassell Hughes describes Pauline’s chapters as “clearly textual, self-authored, and linear,” and likens them to morality tales, or the “spiritual autobiography, in the tradition of Saint Augustine” (98). Her narrative sections appropriate the Western autobiographical tradition, telling the tale of one exemplary figure (and Pauline certainly positions herself as an exemplar), chosen by God to bring Natives into the new society. bell hooks has written that “too many red and black people live in a state of forgetfulness, embracing a colonized mind so that they can better assimilate into a white world” (191). Pauline’s adoption of the Western narrative form is yet another testament to her complete capitulation to white institutions of authority. She turns her back on oral storytelling traditions and communal preservation, and instead writes a narrative where she places herself at the center. Discussing the difference between indigenous narrative forms and novels about indigenous people, Paula Gunn Allen explains, “the novel about Indians, some of which are written by Indians, works on a chronological line. And what you’re going to have, when an Indian writes a chronological tale, is a tale of colonization and death. That’s what’s going to happen. Nothing
else can happen to an Indian in a chronological time frame” (19). Just as Pauline participates in the colonizing project and the destruction of the Ojibwe people, her narrative sections reflect the same aims. Her adherence to the linear form, and the narrative of assimilation and personal transformation, is a reminder to readers of the violence of territorial expansion and Native genocide.

Some critics have, in fact, challenged Erdrich for her textual experimentation and use of multiple narrative voices, questioning such a strategy’s ability to accurately represent Native artistic expression. This is perhaps best exemplified and most forcefully put in Leslie Silko’s review of Erdrich’s second novel, *The Beet Queen* (1986), a novel that also experiments in style and voice. Silko characterizes Erdrich’s work as being the product of “academic, postmodern, so-called experimental influences,” suggesting that her play with language is less an attempt to recreate a Native American oral tradition, and more an adoption of postmodern aesthetics that reflects “the fragmentation of contemporary society as portrayed by the alienated Western writer” (Silko qtd in Pérez Castillo 286). Reading *Tracks* through this framework would reduce the novel from a productive enactment of textual deviance to a demonstration of Erdrich’s ability to make use of postmodern literary devices. Instead of interpreting her novel as a performance meant to critique systems of power and speak back to a written tradition that has erased Native experience, it would thus be an example of the kinds of written texts that are often produced through largely white, academic literary institutions.

I would argue, however, that while Pauline’s chapters demonstrate the consequences of internalized racial self-loathing, the novel taken as a whole works to resist the cultural erasure of Native people. This is largely due to the dialogue that occurs between Pauline and Nanapush’s chapters. As I have discussed at length, Pauline’s chapters demonstrate the double-bind that her
character faces by the end of the novel. Not only has she been driven mad, and it is debatable whether or not she “overcomes” this madness by the time she takes her vows, but her written text enables us to see her complete assimilation to the dominant culture. However, her writing in conversation with Nanapush’s sections, which rely on orality and represent the storytelling tradition, serves as a kind of textually embodied deviance that upsets the Western literary paradigm. Although the spoken word cannot be perfectly preserved in written form, by using dual narrators Erdrich succeeds in constructing a communal narrative that more faithfully honors the oral tradition. Hassel Hughes asserts that “the oral tradition itself depends on the sharing and circulation of lived experience, including sacred and popular myth, dream, vision, and personal narrative. These narratives live by means of multiple voices, of the transference from tongue to tongue, and individual speakers generally deny individual genius or primary authorial status” (103). In this fashion, Erdrich crafts an embodied text that enacts a conversation between dual speakers. Although Nanapush and Pauline do not speak directly to one another, and choose different narrative forms, their voices come mingle in the novel, sometimes echoing one another and often challenging the veracity of the other. This performance necessarily draws the audience in as we engage with both accounts, question their authority, and come away with not with one objectively “true” account of what happened to the Ojibwe people, but perhaps equally true, although differing, accounts of Native experience. Instead of reiterating the well-known historical account of Native disenfranchisement, the novel’s performance of textual deviance allows for a communal narrative that more accurately embodies Native practices and traditions.

The central role performance rituals have played in Native American cultures makes Erdrich’s adoption of oral performance all the more pertinent. Historically, many Native dances and rituals were outlawed across the country in yet another manifestation of America’s westward
expansion and “civilizing” project. Shockingly, some of these prohibitions were not lifted until the 1970s. Even as indigenous cultures have been highly influential to the U.S. performance art tradition, they were barred from enacting their own customs. For Erdrich to reclaim this heritage and craft a poly-vocal, communal narrative, is a resistant act of textual deviance.

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_The Bluest Eye_ and _Tracks_ indict systems of gender and racial oppression, demonstrating that prolonged exposure to the colonizing white gaze can result in internalized self-loathing and madness. However, instead of positioning madness as a viable means of resistance to the gaze, Morrison and Erdrich reveal it to be the ultimate submission to hegemonic discourses of power. In Morrison’s novel, Pecola Breedlove epitomizes what hooks calls the “colonized mind,” believing blue eyes will fix her feelings of inadequacy. This eventually drives her to madness and psychic self-destruction. In Erdrich’s work, Pauline Puyat also demonstrates this kind of internal colonization, and yet instead of being completely destroyed she finds a way to “better assimilate into a white world,” losing her name, denying her heritage, and embarking on a mission to indoctrinate other Native children into the same belief system. In both novels, madness drives each character to positions of even greater social marginalization.

Rather than embracing madness, Morrison and Erdrich find other means to subvert the influence of the white gaze and racist ideology. Here it is useful to once again turn toward the performance art tradition, in order to specifically consider the treatment of people of color’s artistic contributions. Fusco explains:

> Chronologies of the history of performance art that begin in Europe, rarely, if ever, acknowledge the importance that direct and indirect contact with non-western performers played in giving shape to early twentieth century avant-garde artists’ concepts of
aesthetic transgression. The early modernist interest in performative practices of non-western cultures as key that could unlock western unconscious and offer alternatives to realism and classicism has informed nearly every subsequent form of performance art in the U.S. (161)

In the same way that discussions of women’s madness have historically focused on white women’s narratives of institutionalization, the “high art” approach to performance art also eclipses diverse performance legacies and influences. In crafting textually deviant narratives that rely on orality and communal storytelling practices, Morrison and Erdrich recuperate both African-American and Native-American performance traditions and illustrate their centrality in contemporary performance art practices. While representing mad characters may reveal the destructive nature of the colonizing gaze, it is the embodied performances enacted by the texts that more fully serve as a means of subversion and communal self-preservation.
Chapter 4

Breaking the Silence: The Power of Voice in Maxine Hong Kingston and Edwidge Danticat’s Intergenerational Madness Narratives

The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts (1976), Maxine Hong Kingston’s autobiographical narrative of growing up as a second-generation Asian American in California, begins with Kingston’s mother talking to the author as a young girl and issuing an injunction for silence: “‘You must not tell anyone,’ my mother said, ‘what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born’” (3). She reveals the story of this (almost, but not quite) forgotten aunt, who became pregnant during the long stretch of years her husband was away finding work in America. Discovering the pregnancy, her fellow villagers raid the family’s house destroying their possessions and killing their livestock for the affront they perceive in the aunt’s transgression. Her pregnancy is not only an offense against the institution of marriage, but an attack on the village itself as bearing a child during a time of famine is considered a selfish extravagance. In response to this public shaming, the aunt takes her own life, and consequently the life of her unborn child. As justification for finally telling this long-hidden story, Kingston’s mother warns her, “Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don’t humiliate us. You wouldn’t like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful” (5).

Kingston’s discussion of this “no-name woman” in the opening chapter of her memoir speaks to the tensions among gender, culture, and self-definition that mark both her specific text and writing by many female immigrant authors more generally. In essence, young Kingston must learn how to negotiate her own (gendered) identity in relation to her parents and the cultural
heritage they represent while also growing up in her new American context. While the aunt’s story is a tragedy that illustrates the consequences of patriarchal violence in China a generation earlier, it also functions as a very real warning for young Kingston in America. Pointedly, Kingston’s mother only deploys this story when her daughter starts to menstruate and thus mature sexually, issuing a cautionary tale about the potentially fatal consequences of unchecked female sexuality. Beginning with her mother’s words, and not her own, also complicates our understanding of autonomy and self-creation, challenging Western notions of individualism and the autobiographical form. Kingston implies that the story of one’s life can never be divorced from others, but rather is (in)formed by a series of intimate connections. Finally, although her mother warns her not to tell anyone the story she has just revealed, Kingston clearly disregards her mother’s command. In so doing, she denies silencing efforts and seizes the right to narrate the conditions of her own existence, revising the suppressed memory of her aunt’s existence in the process. Ultimately, the vignette demonstrates the way in which Kingston must take control of her voice and storytelling abilities in order to ameliorate past traumas, both personal and cultural.

In this chapter I read Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* alongside Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) in order to analyze the way in which madness can be harbored within families and passed down through multiple generations. Both works position systems of gender and racial oppression as the catalyst for psychic destruction, and suggest that an unwillingness to address past trauma results in passing madness from one generation to the next. In their texts, Kingston and Danticat use the relationship between mothers and daughters to illustrate the intergenerational reach of madness, and to show young women attempting to counter these destructive legacies through the creation of new narratives of selfhood and identity.
Kingston’s memoir describes the treatment of girl children in China, including being sold as slaves, and demonstrates how an internalized ideology of female inferiority manifests itself in the way her mother relates to Kingston during her girlhood in America, silencing her voice and denigrating her desire for autonomy. Danticat’s novel takes place during the Duvalier regime in Haiti in order to reveal the way in which tactics of sexual violence used by Duvalier’s militia army, the Tonton Macoutes, work alongside other forms of ritualized cultural violence directed largely at the female body. After being raped by a militia army member, Martine Caco becomes deeply traumatized and insists upon performing humiliating virginity tests on her daughter Sophie to ensure her purity. Both memoir and novel show how madness produced under intersecting systems of gender, race, and class based oppression can be thus harbored within the family, remaining even after characters make a geographic relocation to America. Indeed, once in the new country, the mothers in each text share folklore from their home countries with their daughters as a means to preserve their cultural identity. However, while the folktales speak to the power and pride of oral traditions, they also work to keep their daughters within the bounds of traditional femininity, often reinforcing patriarchal ideology. The folklore comes to symbolize the preservation of not only of culture, but also of oppressive practices, and causes both daughters to struggle with mental illness and the ability to form their own empowered identities.

As I have demonstrated in the previous chapters of this dissertation, writers in the latter half of the twentieth century repeatedly show how characters that go mad ultimately direct their frustration and rage inward, resulting in acts of self-destructive embodied deviance. Kingston and Danticat’s work also participates in this project of deconstructing any romanticized readings of madness. Young Kingston affects a limp, remains bed-ridden for over a year, and, most
importantly, loses her voice in a psychosomatic protest over what she believes to be her inferior positioning in her family and community. In Danticat’s novel, protagonist Sophie Caco injures her reproductive organs in a violent act of self-harm and develops an eating disorder attempting to cope with intertwined legacies of political and familial violence. As I have previously argued, these acts of embodied deviance ultimately prove futile, and demonstrate that forms of resistance that include the violation of one’s physical form may hold revolutionary potential in theory, but far more often work in conjunction with systemic forms of oppression.

In order to counter inherited legacies of violence and madness, the daughters in each text turn toward narration and the careful honing of one’s own voice as a viable avenue of self-preservation. By making use of confession, talk therapy, and the writing of their own life stories, the younger generation’s willingness and ability to give voice to trauma their mothers found unspeakable holds the potential to rewrite familial scripts. In both The Woman Warrior and Breath, Eyes, Memory, the protagonists negotiate a complex system of preserving important elements of their cultural heritage while working to break cycles of madness and violence. I would stress that their turn toward narration demonstrates their “attempt” at successful resistance, and neither Kingston nor Danticat’s texts can be read as resolutely triumphant. Instead, they offer purposefully ambiguous conclusions. Here I return to my central claim in this project, suggesting that the more successful expression of deviance is to be found in the form of the narratives themselves – not in the deviant bodies of the characters, but rather the deviant bodies of the texts. The disruption of the memoir genre and the inclusion of non-Western/non-US folklore allows the texts to enact their own deviant performances. Perhaps most importantly, their refusal to offer any simple solutions or moments of narrative resolution achieves the most
poignant commentary on the work still to be done in terms of challenging and overcoming
gendered discourses of power.

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Born in Stockton, California in 1940 to first-generation American parents, Maxine Hong
Kingston is widely recognized for her contributions to American literature and the emergence of
Asian-American literature as a field of study. Published in 1976, her first book, *The Woman
Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, immediately secured Kingston acclaim, both in
literary and feminist circles. The memoir has maintained its critical favor since publication, often
cited as “the most widely taught book by a living writer in U.S. colleges and universities” (Shu
200).

One of the most notable features of *The Woman Warrior* is its hybrid form, as Kingston
crafts an innovative text that moves across borders of space and time and between distinct
literary genres. Although the subtitle of the work makes a claim for its status as life writing, *The
Woman Warrior* might be most accurately classified as creative nonfiction for its inclusion of
folklore and the recreation of historical events of which Kingston herself would have no first-
hand knowledge. Moreover, while the text is ostensibly a memoir of Kingston’s own girlhood, it
quickly becomes clear that the story of her life in America is inextricably intertwined with her
mother’s life, both in China and the United States. Sidonie Smith characterizes the text by
claiming “Kingston self-consciously reads herself into existence through the stories her culture
tells about women. Using the autobiography to create identity, she breaks down the hegemony of
formal ‘autobiography’ and breaks out of the silence that has bound her culturally to discover a
resonant voice of her own” (151). This memoir of her haunted childhood “among ghosts,” the
term her family and community members give to any non-Chinese person, is thus her own and
not her own, a narrative struggling for a way to both speak for her mother and against the traditions she represents.

Kingston uses her memoir to challenge gendered norms by situating patriarchal culture as the primary antagonist in her text. Beginning with the story of the no-name woman and her destruction under the watchful eyes of her fellow villagers, she continues to paint a picture of China, and particularly the rural village of her family’s origins, as one that undervalues women and girls. Primarily filtered through the stories her mother tells her as a child, she recounts the murder of girl infants (their faces pushed into suffocating ash mounds at birth), the selling of adolescent and teenage girls as slaves (and the fact that her mother “owns” such a slave at one point), among other examples of gender-based violence and discrimination. At one point she claims, “There is a Chinese word for the female I – which is ‘slave.’ Break the women with their own tongues!” (47). She thus points to language, the very fabric of culture, as a tool used to maintain hegemonic social order. Many scholars have criticized Kingston for adopting what they call an “Orientalist framework” used to distance herself from China and more fully establish an “American” identity. Pointing to this passage in particular, Ken-fang Lee suggests that reading the female “I” as synonymous with “slave” is “archaic” and now outdated (109). Similarly, Yuan Shu objects to Kingston’s “[mystifying] these stories and [leaving] them to the imagination and speculation of an uninformed white readership, who, she knows, would never be able to figure out the cultural twists behind” (208). There is validity in the concerns over what might be “lost in translation” between various (un)informed audiences. I would also suggest, however, that Kingston’s inclusion of this anecdote and her insistence on the image of the female slave, despite that fact that it is linguistically outmoded, emphasizes her very deliberate project in the memoir. She later recalls, “When we Chinese girls listened to the adults talk-story, we learned that we
failed if we grew up to be but wives or slaves” (19). Even if the language she refers to is outdated or employed for simply for dramatic effect, the sense of disempowerment she is trying to convey appears to be quite real, and it is this fear of being a “slave” that haunts her childhood. I want to clearly state here that China, or Haiti for that matter, should not be misconstrued as exceptionally misogynistic places. Both Kingston and Danticat identify various systems of cultural violence both in their home countries and the United States. The focus here is thus not on China as a uniquely oppressive country, but rather on those cultural forces that promote and maintain gender inequality. Read in this way, Kingston’s use of the archaic Chinese term is not meant to perpetuate Orientalist fantasies, but rather to demonstrate the way in which gendered violence often becomes ingrained in the fabric of culture.

Kingston first links her discussion of gender to madness by categorizing the “mad” people of her neighborhood. There is little mention of insane men, and the only figure who might fall into such a category is a Chinese classmate of Kingston’s whom she describes as a “mentally retarded boy” who takes to following her around (194). While the boy earns a clinical diagnosis and is allowed to attend school and follow Kingston to her family’s laundry, the women and girls she describes earn no such luxuries. Instead of attaching any kind of psychiatric diagnosis to their mental illness, they are, by contrast, described as both mysterious and frightening. When recounting these women she recalls there was:

The woman next door who was chatty one moment and shut up the next…She made us afraid, though she said nothing, did nothing…There was Crazy Mary, whose family were Christian converts…She seemed cheerful, but pointed at things that were not there. I disliked looking at her; you never knew what you were going to see, what rictus would shape her face… [There was also a] witchwoman… one of my brothers named her Pee-
A-Nah, which does not have a meaning…She was an angry witch, not a happy one. She was fierce; not a fairy, after all, but a demon. (186-189)

These women function like frightening apparitions haunting the community, culminating in the figure of Pee-A-Nah who is constructed as an actual malevolent supernatural force. Instead of roaming the streets like the boy Kingston describes, they are shuffled from one hiding spot to another, with Kingston observing that “houses with crazy girls have locked rooms and drawn curtains” (187). Their inability to speak their own condition renders them unnerving phantoms to be hidden away, and such treatment ultimately results in their dehumanization.

The culturally backed systems of gendered oppression and violence are figured as playing an integral role in creating the madness that Kingston witnesses around her. While her use of the term “slave” might seem hyperbolic when employed to describe traditional domestic arrangements, it is also an attempt to represent the total destruction of an individual’s autonomy and selfhood. For Kingston, the utmost marker of both sanity and an empowered subject is the voice and an individual’s ability to not only talk, but to talk in a way that allows them to participate in the community in an intelligible way. She explains: “I thought talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity. Insane people were the ones who couldn’t explain themselves. There were many crazy girls and women…within a few blocks of our house were half a dozen crazy women and girls, all belonging to village families” (186). In this brief remark she stakes two compelling claims, the first being the subtle reminder that these women all come from “village families,” thus drawing a connection between their pasts in China and their present condition. This suggests that relocation to America, or Gold Mountain as the

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There is a long history of linking subject-formation and personal autonomy to literacy in the slave narrative tradition. Both Frederick Douglas and Harriet Jacobs position their attainment of literacy and the ability to narrate their own life stories as integral to the project of emancipation.
locals refer to it, does not alter their fates. Perhaps even more importantly, she reveals that being able to formulate coherent thought is only one aspect of sanity, and it is the ability to actually articulate these thoughts that holds the key to staving off madness.

For Kingston, then, these women serve as reminders of the connection between China, female disempowerment, and madness. As a means to combat this representation, she makes a move to rewrite the traditional understanding of Chinese femininity by turning to one of the most well-known and enduring Chinese folktales, that of the woman warrior Fa Mu Lan. Although her mother frequently repeats the discourse of limited social mobility for girls, she also offers the story of Fa Mu Lan and its subversive potential. Kingston recalls, “She said I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman” (20). The allure of the Fa Mu Lan story for Kingston as a girl is obvious, but instead of simply describing her attachment to that story, she diverges from the traditional memoir format to engage in an extended fictionalized sequence as though she actually at one point embodied the figure of the historical swordswoman. This narrative divergence demonstrates Kingston’s desire to recuperate elements of her ethnic heritage by returning to its folklore for counter-narratives of female resistance and empowerment, thus defying patriarchal cultural norms. In addition, it performs a kind of narrative deviance, breaking from the format of the Western autobiography, traditionally understood as a nonfiction genre, in order to incorporate Chinese mythology and a fictionalized account of her exploits as the historical figure Fa Mu Lan.

If voice is central to maintaining sanity and selfhood, Kingston thus utilizes the oral storytelling tradition in order to give herself power and authority through the figure of Fa Mu Lan.

She begins this section, titled “White Tigers,” by first imagining what it would be like when she received the call to train as a warrior, musing, “The call would come from a bird that
flew over our roof...I would be a little girl of seven the day I followed the bird away into the mountains” (20). From here she embarks on the story of her experience as Fa Mu Lan, offering a first-person narrative of her training to become the mythical female warrior. Traveling to a remote mountain location she encounters an elderly couple who train her in the art of combat over the next fifteen years. When she finally returns to her village she finds that a cruel emperor has gained control of the land and an army is assembling to depose him. Learning that her by-now elderly father has been drafted she offers to go in his place disguised as a man. Before riding off with the army her parents present her with gifts of herbs, clothing, food provisions, and silver chopsticks, causing her to remark “It was like getting wedding presents” (35). Her comment is a reminder of her transgressive gender performance in this moment, as she rides confidently into battle as opposed to entering into the heteronormative institution of marriage. Moreover, as she prepares to leave the sons of the village volunteer to follow her and fight at her side. Instead of stepping into the role of “wife or slave,” she instead usurps a position of traditionally male authority and respect. Throughout the memoir several of her female relatives either worry about or actually experience their husbands taking additional wives. Kingston as Fa Mu Lan revises this narrative by collecting multiple surrogate husbands made up of the village’s strongest and most daring young men.

Kingston as Fa Mu Lan charts new possibilities for female empowerment as she continues on her journey. Not only does she find success on the battlefield, accumulating victories and amassing followers, but she also meets her husband and forges an unconventionally egalitarian relationship. A childhood friend from her own village, her husband is the only person to see beyond her masculine disguise, and yet he still rides with her into battle without questioning her authority or prowess. The couple even manages to conceive a child, and it is her
husband who takes their new son home to safety in their village while Fa Mu Lan continues on her quest to vanquish the despised emperor. Her greatest coup occurs when she arrives at the palace of the emperor and announces herself as “a female avenger.” Assuming the warrior before him must be adopting the title in response to his crimes against women, the emperor tries to excuse his actions by saying “Oh, come now. Everyone takes the girls when he can. The families are glad to be rid of them. ‘Girls are maggots in the rice.’ ‘It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters,’” quoting some of Kingston’s, and in this fantasy Fa Mu Lan’s, most hated sayings (43). At this she rips off her shirt, exposing her female breasts and allowing the emperor to fully realize the meaning of her pronouncement before decapitating him with her sword. In this section of the memoir Kingston embodies the warrior woman Fa Mu Lan as means to access the authority granted to a storied and well-respected woman from her culture’s mythological history. If Fa Mu Lan can be exalted for her bravery and skill, surely there is hope for Kingston as well – a model that offers her a choice beyond wife and slave.

However, Fa Mu Lan’s post-battle story undercuts the subversive potential of the preceding portion of the narrative. She returns to the home of her parents-in-law to reunite with her husband and son, where she claims to have “knelt at my parents-in-law’s feet, as I would have done as bride. ‘Now my public duties are finished,’ I said. ‘I will stay with you, doing farm work and housework, and giving you more sons’” (45). The ending of her time as Fa Mu Lan is disconcerting and ultimately underwhelming given the arc of the rest of the narrative. She returns to the very life of feminine domesticity she successfully escaped and resigns herself to housework and the bearing of further sons (no mention is made of potential daughters). Shu critiques this narrative moment, arguing that “Kingston never challenges the patriarchal values of bringing honor to the family or committing oneself to the cause of the emperor. In other words,
Kingston’s rendition of the story never changes the nature of the legend in that her story works within the same logic of the patriarchal discourse of filial piety” (212). While I would agree that Kingston’s version of the myth ultimately holds in place traditional gender ideology, I would argue that this is not because of a flaw in Kingston’s approach or her eagerness to maintain the status quo. Rather, here I see Kingston grappling with what it means for the second-generation immigrant child to wrestle with maintaining her cultural heritage while simultaneously acknowledging some of the inherent limitations of doing so. As exciting as the story of Fa Mu Lan’s life is, the conclusion returns the powerful warrior woman to her appropriate spot in the home. This disappointing end is mirrored by the way Kingston transitions from the story of Fa Mu Lan back to the memoir of her own life. Although she first suggests that her mother gives her the story of Fa Mu Lan in spite of, or as a kind of antidote to, her declaration that her daughter will grow up to be a slave, just after concluding her fictionalized exploits as the swordswoman Kingston remarks, “My American life has been such a disappointment. ‘I got straight A’s, Mama.’ ‘Let me tell you a true story about a girl who saved her village’” (45). Although she begins the section of Fa Mu Lan by talking about the way in which her mother “gave” her the story as a means of inspiration, she concludes the very same section by undercutting her earlier claim and revealing how she also feels belittled by her mother’s deployment of the very same tale. Fa Mu Lan becomes not an escape from patriarchal systems, but rather a means of reinforcing gender norms and diminishing her own accomplishments. Thus, her attempt to use Chinese folklore in order to achieve her own sense of empowered identity is ultimately compromised.

Because of Kingston’s resistance to the limited social roles available to her, her family comes to view her as defiant and deviant. When one of her mother’s friends questions her
behavior, her mother responds, “Bad, I guess. You know how girls are. There’s no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls” (46). In response, young Kingston responds, “‘I’m not a bad girl, I would scream. ‘I’m not a bad girl. I’m not a bad girl.’ I might as well have said, ‘I’m not a girl’” (46). This exchange reveals the way in which Kingston is constructed as innately deviant because of her sex and gender, and her unwillingness to play by the rules of traditional femininity further ostracizes her and marks her as the potential “crazy” member of the family.

She muses:

I thought every house had to have its crazy woman or crazy girl, every village its idiot. Who would be It at our house? Probably me…My sister did not start talking among nonfamily until a year after I started, but she was neat while I was messy, my hair tangled and dusty…And there were adventurous people inside my head to whom I talked…Indeed I was getting stranger every day. I affected a limp (189, 190).

Kingston identifies herself as the most likely torch bearer for the resident crazy woman in her own house based on a constellation of symptoms that bring together the various social and psychological causes for madness in the text. First, she demonstrates an inability, or perhaps more accurately an unwillingness, to follow traditionally feminine codes of behavior. She notes her sister’s neatness in comparison to her own messiness, specifically mentioning her tangled and dusty hair, the emphasis on physical appearance demonstrating a key deficiency in her feminine presentation. She also refers to the “adventurous people” inside her head. While this is clearly a description of her active imagination, it takes on a negative connotation here because it is with these “people” that she carries on conversations while remaining silent in the “real world.” Her “affected” limp is another manifestation, conscious or not, of her anxiety concerning her complicated social role – both Chinese and American, a girl and yet not willing to consider
herself a slave. Adopting an ailment that restricts her physical mobility mirrors her feelings of being stifled by gendered conventions that limit her social mobility. Stuck in a perpetual state of limbo and torn in competing directions without a means of fully expressing herself or her frustrations, she engages in a series of increasingly deviant acts that function as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. She embarks on a project to turn herself into the strange madwoman she fears she will inevitably become.

As Kingston attempts to work through her anxieties and resist what she fears will be a complete spiral into madness, her acts of embodied deviance become more extreme, moving beyond simple childhood messiness or bold behavior. Her actions are in line with Susan Bordo’s concept of “embodied protest,” physical manifestations, frequently of illness, that Bordo defines as “unconscious, inchoate, and counterproductive protest without an effective language, voice, or politics, but protest nonetheless” (175). For Kingston, her speaking voice becomes the terrain over which such a protest is waged. While she recognizes that to remain silent is to signal one’s insanity and dehumanization, she nevertheless struggles with her voice and her uncertain subject position. As a child she attends American public school during the day followed by Chinese school in the evening, and it is in her daily American kindergarten class that she seemingly loses the ability to speak: “During the first silent year I spoke to no one at school…The other Chinese girls did not talk either, so I knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl” (165, 166). Kingston locates this silence not necessarily in the Chinese aspect of her heritage, but rather points the blame at the intersection of her Chinese and American identities. She explains, “Normal Chinese women’s voices are strong and bossy. We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine. Apparently we whispered even more softly than the Americans” (172). In order to fit in and distance herself from her heritage she adopts a more
“American” demeanor, yet this results in flawed act of passing. In an attempt to adhere to scripts of (American) feminine passivity, including a soft speaking voice, she over-performs and renders her own voice almost entirely silent.

One of the most gripping and tragic moments in the narrative comes when Kingston takes out her own self-directed aggressions on a fellow Chinese classmate, transferring her feelings of inadequacy onto another. She describes a prim young girl “who could not speak up even in Chinese school” (172). This silent girl sparks a rage in Kingston, and it is clear this ire is directed at herself even more than at her classmate. She recalls, “I hated her when she was the last chosen for her team and I, the last chosen for my team. I hated her for her China doll hair cut. I hated her at music time for the wheeze that came out of her plastic flute” (173). While the reference to their both being chosen last for teams overtly speaks to the similarity between the two girls, her mention of the “wheeze” that comes from her classmate’s flute is a further reflection of her own insecurities. Throughout the memoir both Kingston, and others, criticize her speaking voice, with one of her mother’s visiting friends going so far as to remark “she has an ugly voice. She quacks like a pressed duck…improve that voice or you’ll never marry her off” (192). The lackluster wheeze escaping the girl’s flute is yet another reminder of both girls’ inability to create pleasing or meaningful sound.

During a game of hide and seek one afternoon, Kingston finds herself alone with the silent girl in the lavatory, and determines she will make her speak: “‘you’re going to talk,’ I said, my voice steady and normal, as it is when talking to the familiar, the weak, and the small. ‘I am going to make you talk, you sissy-girl’” (175). Pointedly, this is one of the few moments in the memoir where the author describes her own voice as powerful, “steady and normal” only when it is being wielded against the rare person over whom she assumes a position of authority.
Cornering the girl, she orders to her speak, to make any sound at all, while poking and prodding at her, shoving her and pulling her hair. While Kingston resents the girl for serving as a mirror that reflects her own struggles with silence and creating a Chinese-American identity, the opposite is also true. Unlike the unruly young Kingston, this silent girl is neat, orderly, and the model of feminine passivity. She rants, “I hated the way she folded the wax paper from her lunch; she did not wad her brown paper bag and her school papers. I hated her clothes – the blue pastel cardigan… I hated pastels; I would wear black always…I could see her tiny white teeth, baby teeth. I wanted to grow big strong yellow teeth” (176-178). Kingston bristles at the mirror that the silent girl holds up to her – showing her as a similarly silent submissive Chinese-American girl – and also despises her for what she does not see reflected back. This girl is neat, orderly, and dressed in demure American fashions, while Kingston repeatedly describes herself as messy and unruly. While she might overcompensate in terms of mastering the “American-feminine” art of having a quiet voice, she is unable to adhere to other feminine norms of dress and comportment. More to the point, she resents having to do so in the first place. Consequently, she embraces the dirty and the masculine, black clothes and “strong yellow teeth,” although such aspirations only succeed in cementing her deviance. Ultimately, these inverse impulses, to achieve an appropriately feminine Chinese-American presentation while hating having to do so, puts her in an untenable position.

While Kingston initially intends for this encounter with the silent girl to purge her of anxieties over her own complicated identity, directing her anger against another, it instead becomes the catalyst for a more extreme enactment of her own embodied deviance. Before the interaction in the lavatory is over Kingston has reduced the girl to a crying mess and bursts into tears herself. She concludes this anecdote by noting, “it seemed as if I had spent my life in that
basement, doing the worst thing I had yet done to another person. ‘I’m doing this for your own
good,’ I said. ‘Don’t you dare tell anyone I’ve been bad to you. Talk. Please talk’” (181). The
inherently contradictory nature of the encounter is summarized in these final lines, as Kingston
issues an order for silence, and yet immediately follows with a plea for the girl to find her voice
and talk. By the end she is essentially begging the girl to speak, in part because succeeding in
getting her to vocalize her thoughts would be a symbolic victory that shows it’s possible for a
young Chinese-American girl to actually find her voice. At the conclusion of this encounter,
however, it’s possible to see the way in which oral narration is shown to be lacking. Neither the
story of Fa Mu Lan (coming out of the oral storytelling tradition) or Kingston’s insistence on
forcing a young girl into talking succeed in opening up a space that productively allows for her
own voice.

After this failed attempt at speech Kingston’s embodied protest continues, but this time it
is once again directed internally. “The world is sometimes just,” she explains, “and I spent the
next eighteen months sick in bed with a mysterious illness. There was no pain and no symptoms,
though the middle line in my left palm broke in two. Instead of starting junior high school, I
lived like the Victorian recluses I read about” (182). The lack of any clear or diagnosable
symptoms suggests a psychosomatic response to both her treatment of her classmate and her own
struggles with her gendered identity. Unable to vent her frustrations, verbally or through the
policing of the speech of another, she enacts an embodied protest that essentially chains her to a
sick bed. Appropriately, here she compares herself to “Victorian recluses,” conjuring images of
the infamous nineteenth-century hysterics, women bound to their beds after being prescribed the
rest cure for their mysterious and “feminine” ailments. Discussing hysteria in the context of
embodied protest, Bordo claims that “American and French feminists alike have heard the
hysteric speaking a language of protest, even or perhaps especially when she was mute. An expressive communication addressed to patriarchal thought, a self-repudiating form of feminine discourse in which the body signifies what social conditions make it impossible to state linguistically” (175). Much like the hysteric, Kingston taking to her bed and refusing to participate in public discourse is clearly a reaction to the kind of system that traps her in the liminal space of Chinese and American, feminine yet with aspirations of power and independence. While the schools of thought that Bordo references, found most notably in work by French feminists on l’écriture feminine,28 find a kind of resistance in the turn to silence and the misbehaving body, I believe that this resistance can only be read on a symbolic level. While Kingston taking to her bed for eighteen months serves as an illustration of the destructive nature of interlocking systems of cultural and social oppression, it also holds her back from actually participating in life and threatens to turn her into the madwoman of the family as she prophesized. She claims to relish her self-imposed exile, stating, “It was the best year and a half of my life. Nothing happened” (182), yet as Bordo is quick to point out, these forms of resistance are “protest and retreat in the same gesture.” While Kingston is attended to by her family and lives without responsibility, it would be difficult to successfully argue that living the life of a reclusive and silent hermit is a viable protest against the discourses of power and social conditions acting upon. Moreover, it reduces her to a state of passivity that she has repeatedly railed against.

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28 Hélène Cixous coined the term l’écriture feminine in her 1976 work, *Laugh of the Medusa*. Translating to “feminine writing,” Cixous argues that this mode of communication can serve as a kind of non-representational writing outside of the symbolic order.
By this point in the memoir Kingston has made two very different attempts at protesting the patriarchal cultural practices in place both in the Chinese and American contexts. The first occurred in her attempt at recuperating Chinese folklore, which ultimately illustrated tradition’s inability to adapt to a changing cultural contexts, instead reifying systems of inequality. In her second approach, embodied protest, she aimed to construct a hybrid “American-feminine” voice that ultimately rendered her almost completely silent. In her final attempt to negotiate the complexities of her hybrid identity and find a source of personal empowerment she turns away from silence and toward a willingness to narrate her own story and experiences. Interestingly, Kingston first realizes that letting loose her own voice might be a viable option when she learns that as a baby her mother “cut” her tongue, claiming “she pushed up my tongue and sliced the frenum,” the small bit of connective tissue under the tongue (164). The young Kingston is both terrified and fascinated by this maternal act of violence, particularly after her mother explains, “I cut it so that you would not be tongue-tied. Your tongue would be able to move in any language. You’ll be able to speak languages that are completely different from one another. You’ll be able to pronounce anything. Your frenum looked too tight to do those things, so I cut it” (164). Just a few lines after introducing this story Kingston complains “she should have cut more, scraped away the rest of the frenum skin, because I have a terrible time talking” (165). In discussing this particular episode, Smith calls the mother’s tongue cutting an act of “female castration” and suggests it serves as a “ritual that results in the denial to woman of the pleasure of giving voice to her body and body to her voice, the pleasure of autobiographical legitimacy and authority” (168). While the imagery of the scenario is admittedly jarring, I would disagree with Smith’s reading here. In fact, it is this act of bodily violence that offers her a kind of linguistic freedom she couldn’t imagine otherwise. Despite her claims of failing at speech, for readers it’s
impossible to ignore the fact that her mother’s action, designed to ensure her daughter will never be “tongue-tied,” aligns perfectly with her future occupation as writer.

This “freeing” of her tongue attests to the importance of narration and the ability of the younger generation to gain an independent voice, one that is both distinct from their parents (their mothers in particular) and willing to articulate inherited cultural wounds. Kingston claims, “Maybe because I was the one with the tongue cut loose, I had grown inside me a list of over two hundred things that I had to tell my mother so that she would know the true things about me and to stop the pain in my throat” (197). This list of transgressions covers an assortment of offenses ranging from her cruel treatment of the silent girl at school to secretly desiring a white horse (a “bad, mournful color”) and beyond (197). She embarks on a mission to confess her list of sins to her mother in a piecemeal fashion, typically approaching her after a long day of work at the family laundry to confess a random wrong-doing. On one such evening her mother snaps: “’I can’t stand this whispering,’ she said looking right at me…’Senseless gabbings every night. I wish you would stop. Go away and work. Whispering, whispering, making no sense. Madness. I don’t feel like hearing your craziness’” (200). Although for Kingston this daily ritual of confession feels integral to finally being able to speak freely, unburdening herself of her doubts and shames and constructing her own persona, her mother dismisses her talk as “senseless gabbings.” While her mother is most likely just exhausted after a long day of working in the heat of the laundry, she writes off her daughter’s attempts at autonomy as madness. Here madness is once again equated with failed speech, and her mother makes clear that her daughter has indeed failed to produce intelligible language. She manages only “whispers,” as opposed to fully formed and articulated words. This exchange between mother and daughter marks the failure of Kingston’s third attempt at defining herself. If folklore proved inadequate because it reinforced
Chinese patriarchal traditions, her turn to confession works similarly, albeit in the opposite direction. Kingston describes envying the “Mexican and Filipino girls at school who went to ‘confession,’” for “their chance each Saturday to tell even thoughts that were sinful” (198). Interestingly, she identifies the practice of confessing, admitting one’s deviance to a figure of authority, as liberating because it offers an opportunity to express oneself. She thus identifies Catholicism as a model for navigating her cross-cultural issues. This approach fails too, however, as it is an entirely Western construct and one that her mother cannot comprehend, rendering her confessed sins nothing more than “senseless gabbings.”

Kingston’s tormented process of procuring a voice finally reaches a dramatic climax when she is pushed to confront her worst fears about becoming a “slave,” as she believes she has discovered proof that her parents are making plans to arrange a marriage for her. Forgoing her series of whispered and barely audible mumblings she instead erupts one evening, screaming “Not everybody thinks I’m nothing. I am not going to be a slave or a wife. Even if I am stupid and talk funny and get sick, I won’t let you turn me into a slave or a wife. I’m getting out of here. I can’t stand living here anymore. It’s your fault I talk weird” (201). Once the flow of language starts she continues her rant, unleashing a torrent of angry words upon her mother, who subsequently refutes all of her daughter’s allegations, claiming she had no plans to sell her or marry her off, denying that she ever called her daughter ugly and unintelligent, and exclaiming, “That’s what we’re supposed to say. That’s what Chinese say. We like to say the opposite” (203). Her mother’s claims about Chinese practices are important here, as they illustrate the cultural and linguistic divide between mother and daughter. Although her mother does not see her actions as hurtful, Kingston, raised among members of the old “village,” is both one of them and yet apart. Her second-generation American status leaves her in a kind of social and verbal
limbo where she is unable to truly understand or appreciate the context for her mother’s words and actions, but also unable to pass as a fully assimilated American girl either. This struggle to both preserve her old heritage and embrace the new results in being not fully comfortable or fluent in either. Thus, when she finally finds her voice it is both due to and in spite of her mother’s tongue-cutting action. While the slicing of her frenum is meant to loosen her tongue (metaphorically, if not actually), what ends up coming out when she finally does speak is a condemnation of her mother and some of these very same traditional practices.

Ultimately, Kingston’s act of verbal rebellion does work to secure her a sense of personal and individual autonomy, although it is not clear that this should necessarily be read as a positive or triumphant ending. The confrontation with her mother, and by extension her Chinese heritage, comes just before she is about to leave for college, and thus she leaves her family soon after. She warns, “Be careful what you say. It comes true. It comes true. I had to leave home in order to see the world logically, logic the new way of seeing” (204). Her ability to “see” the world in a new way is achievable only after she has left her home, and yet she relates this sentiment with a mixture of triumph as well as caution. She chooses to qualify her statement with “be careful what you say,” a notable departure from the more typical phrasing, “be careful what you wish for,” adding an emphasis on the risks associated with verbalizing something you might never be able to unsay. Although she has gained the ability to “see” in a new way (privileging a difference sense altogether), it does not necessarily mean it’s any better than before. Her use of “logic” here is also loaded, for while she claims she had to leave her home in order to see the world logically (positioning her home and family, by contrast, as illogical or irrational), she again adds a qualifier, describing logic as “the new way of seeing,” suggesting that it is perhaps new or different, but not the only way of seeing the world, or even the “right” way of doing so. The
move away from her family is one that offers independence, but at the price of the loss of connection to her heritage.

As the genre of autobiography is a narrative form that reflects the Western attachment to individualism and personal achievement, it would be fitting for Kingston to end her memoir by successfully securing a sense of personal autonomy and independence. However, Kingston’s conclusion one again upends the form, ending neither with full assimilation to an American identity nor a valiant defense of her mother and the heritage she represents. She muses, “sometimes I hated the ghosts for not letting us talk; sometimes I hated the secrecy of the Chinese” (183). Her narrative resists closure or “choosing sides,” and instead maintains a position somewhere in the middle. Neither culture will truly allow her voice to speak to its fullest extent, and thus the written text becomes a way for her to construct her own persona and personhood. As Lee argues, “English becomes a language of freedom and transgression. Something unspeakable in one language finally gets released in another” (113). I would emphasize the fact that it is not necessarily speaking in English that allows this generative transgression to take place (she is silenced by the “ghosts” in their own language), but rather it is through writing her text (in English) that she is able to productively push against the various discourses of power acting upon her.

Indeed, the ultimate deviant performance is the work of the memoir itself, as Kingston’s text defies narrative conventions of both genre and gender. Some critics, perhaps most notably the playwright and author Frank Chin, have criticized Kingston’s adoption of the autobiographical form, claiming that “autobiography with its basis in the Western metaphysical tradition and the Christian confession would never capture the sensibility or the imagination of Chinese America” (Chin qtd. in Shu 200). For Chin, who has previously accused Kingston of
“restating white racist stereotypes” of Asian Americans, Kingston’s turn to the life-writing genre is not only inadequate to describe Asian-American experience, but also signals a kind of catering to white American audiences and accepted Western narrative conventions. If Kingston’s memoir more faithfully preserved the traditional memoir genre, then perhaps Chin’s argument would be more convincing. As it stands, however, Kingston is clearly invested in a project of revising what exactly constitutes the memoir. Lisa Lowe argues that “Asian-American literary texts often reveal heterogeneity rather than producing regulating ideas of cultural unity or integration,” as is demonstrated by Kingston’s conclusion where she refuses an assimilationist model while maintaining her critique of patriarchal Chinese cultural practices as well (53). She essentially co-opts the Western memoir genre, infusing it with Chinese folklore and elements of fiction in order to create her own hybrid text that manages to critique elements of both cultural traditions. Shirley Geok-lin Lim argues that Kingston “has not an autobiographical story to tell but a racial and gendered consciousness to intimate and create” (264). Ultimately, writing her own life story, an act of deviance for a woman in the Western autobiographical tradition to begin with, allows her to overcome the challenges to her voice that she experiences as an Asian-American citizen. By refusing to capitulate to either Western or non-Western literary and oral storytelling forms, the body of her text enacts a deviant performance meant to expose the limitations places on women’s voices by both cultures.

To return to my primary claim in this project, madness and the acts of embodied deviance it inspires are proven to be incapable of achieving real resistance to oppressive discourses of power. Kingston’s text repeatedly points to the limitations of embodied protest, and her affected limp and self-imposed sickness only further trap her in a world of silence and marginalization. Although these acts fail as forms of resistance, I would argue that the memoir’s purposeful and
strategic performance of textual deviance results in a revision of the autobiography genre and an insistence on her authority as creative voice. Ultimately, Kingston’s textual deviance enacts a viable critique of both gendered conventions and literary forms that limit her full range of expression.

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Early in Edwidge Danticat’s novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), protagonist Sophie Caco reminisces about a Haitian folktale passed down to her by her Tante (Aunt) Atie. She recalls:

She told me about a group of people in Guinea who carry the sky on their heads. They are the people of Creation. Strong, tall, and mighty people who can bear anything. Their Maker, she said, gives them the sky to carry because they are strong. These people do not know who they are, but if you see a lot of trouble in your life, it is because you were chosen to carry part of the sky on your head (25).

Tante Atie gives Sophie the story as a means to explain life’s hardship and to suggest that suffering is a mark of one’s innate strength as acknowledged by a higher power. Although the tale is undoubtedly meant to comfort the child, the narrative might be simultaneously read as encouraging a kind of defeatism as well. In Tante Atie’s telling there is no possibility of reprieve or of being able to unburden oneself from hardship, and the “people of Creation” will go on carrying their troubles indefinitely. Instead of encouraging the listener to take action in order to bring about future change, the tale essentially tells listeners to accept their suffering, taking comfort in the fact that they are strong enough to handle the even greater pain that will inevitably

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29 Throughout the novel characters use the name “Guinea” when referring to the afterlife or heaven.
come their way. Much like folklore’s function in Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, here too Danticat uses cultural mythology in a way that highlights the tension between its ability to offer resistance to systems of oppression while simultaneously reinforcing these very same systems. As a narrative strategy for self-definition and empowerment it remains flawed.

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory* Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat constructs a narrative of four generations of women in the Caco family, tracing their movement between Haiti and in America. Although the novel rarely makes mention of the Duvaliers by name, the presence of the despotic father and son regime looms large over the narrative. Accordingly, a number of scholars have described Danticat’s project in the novel as one of bringing to light atrocities committed against the Haitian people, and women in particular, over the course of the twentieth century. Between 1915 and 1934 the country was under United States military occupation, during which time American soldiers routinely sexually harassed and assaulted the native population, typically receiving little official reprimand. Conditions for women in the country took an even darker turn under the first Duvalier regime, that of Jean-Claude “Papa Doc” Duvalier who ruled the country from 1957 to 1971. Carolle Charles explains that while under previous administrations women were protected under the law as political innocents, a protection that nevertheless implied their innate inferiority. However, under Duvalier women were subjected to the same political treatment as men, which included torture and often violent sexual...
assault, creating a situation in which “ironically, state violence created, for the first time, gender
equality” (140). Much of this violence was carried out by Duvalier’s militia forces known as the
Tonton Macoutes, terrifying squads designed to violently suppress anyone suspected of political
dissidence.\textsuperscript{32} Although both U.S. and Haitian ruling powers employed rape and sexual terror as a
primary tactic of forcing the population into submission, little of this information was made
widely available to the public, and the legacy of this particular type of violence has been buried
under other national narratives of violent militarization. Donette Francis points to the time of the
novel’s publication, in 1994, as another critical moment in the history of documenting sexual
violence in Haiti. In 1994 the U.S. sent military troops into Haiti in order to remove Raoul
Cedras from governmental power and reinstate President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Pointing to the
political rapes committed under Cedras “the American public was to understand that the U.S.
military presence was being sent in for humanitarian purposes, to rescue women from these
sexual atrocities,” while making little mention of the sexual violence committed under Duvalier
or by American troops earlier in the century (79).

In part, then, Danticat’s text sheds light on these blind spots in the historical record, or
more aptly, gives voice to those previously silenced. Francis has suggested that “Danticat
challenges readers to reconsider what counts as political history and the locations from which
they can be written” (76). Indeed, in her novel multiple generations of Caco women grapple with
not only the history of political violence of Haiti, but also interpersonal violence within their own
lives and families, illustrating fiction’s ability to act as a counter-archival source capable of

\textsuperscript{32} Tonton Macoute roughly translates to “Uncle Gunmysack” and refers to the mythological
Haitian boogeyman used to scare young children into good behavior. Tonton Macoute was
alleged to steal bold children by stuffing them in his sack and taking them away, presumably to
be eaten.
offering a more fully realized account of historical events. The family name, Caco, speaks to this blending of public and private as it undoubtedly references the Cacos, Haitian peasant guerilla fighters that mounted an armed resistance against U.S. marine forces during the occupation. However, while the Cacos were defending Haiti against the imposition of U.S. forces they were also routinely assaulting local women, perpetrating the very same offenses they were claiming to oppose and guard against. The Caco name, then, is reminiscent of the people of Creation folktale in that it demonstrates that which has the potential to empower also has the potential to oppress. Danticat’s novel ultimately demonstrates that when individuals are either unable or unwilling to confront their own experiences with gendered violence, the subsequent pain is internalized and expressed as madness. Narrating these painful feelings and negotiating one’s place in interlocking systems of power is figured as a means of working through and potentially overcoming these traumatic legacies.

Much like Kingston’s work, Danticat is also interested in the ramifications of gendered violence in the country of her heritage, and the way in which this violence cannot be escaped simply through geographic relocation. *Breath, Eyes, Memory* exposes the sexual violence employed by the Tonton Macoutes, and indeed it is one such act of violence that sets the events of the novel into motion. Martine Caco is only a teenager when walking home from school one day, she is pulled from the road into the nearby cane fields and raped. Many years later, after her daughter Sophie (a product of the rape) has pieced together more details of her mother’s life, she theorizes, “My father might have been a Macoute. He was a stranger who, when my mother was sixteen years old, grabbed her on her way back from school…He kept pounding her until she was too stunned to make a sound. When he was done, he made her keep her face in the dirt, threatening to shoot her if she looked up” (139). Although Martine’s experience is highly
personal, Danticat uses it to reveal the systemic and pervasive nature of the violence carried out by the political regime. The torture and murder of political dissidents under the Duvalierist state has found its way into the historical record and public imagination, yet Martine is a young girl simply attempting to walk home from school. Her experience reveals the extent to which tactics of gendered violence employed by the state infiltrate even the most mundane aspects of daily life.

Martine’s attack by an alleged Tonton Macoute also illustrates the way in which Haitian folklore is appropriated by the Duvalier regime and used against the people. Discussing the implications of naming the militia army after the mythological boogeyman, Francis argues that “embedded in the very word is a cultural linguistic block that already discredits the reality of women’s stories of sexual abuse by relegating abuse to the realm of the unreal, or condoning abuse as appropriate punishment for a subordinate who has misbehaved” (81). In other words, if the alleged perpetrator of the crime is simply a creature of local lore, how can an assault really take place? Not only is Martine’s assailant apparition-like in his faceless and largely voiceless presence, but if he really is a Tonton Macoute then even his name implies his supernatural and malevolent nature. The legends long used by families to rein in the activities of children is used against local women, positioning them as misbehaving children in need of punishment while simultaneously denying the violence imposed by the regime.

Sophie’s description of her mother as being “too stunned to speak” during the attack eventually becomes Martine’s characteristic response to her assault, resulting in dire consequences for her sanity. Choosing to never speak of the terrible incident, Martine’s feelings of shame, anger, and fear come to dominate her life, both mentally and physically, resulting in an ongoing series of breakdowns that begin shortly after the initial act in the cane fields. With no
way to externalize her suffering, she directs her pain inward in a series of deviant acts directed against her own body.

The first sign of Martine’s madness takes the shape of recurring and violent nightmares that begin immediately after the attack. Any attempt at sleep leaves Martine thrashing against the sheets as if they were an intruder as she screams and bites “off pieces of her own flesh” (139). Although the violent outbursts are clearly directed toward the imagined attacker, she only succeeds in injuring herself. Turning her trauma inward, she further victimizes herself with her violent nocturnal outbursts. In an attempt to physically distance Martine from the scene of the crime and potentially ease her suffering, her mother sends her to live with a wealthy family for whom she once worked. Sophie, reconstructing her mother’s life later in the novel, comments that “even though my mother was pregnant and half insane, the family took her in anyway” (139). Her insanity is linked not only to the assault, but also to finding out she is pregnant with her rapist’s child. After Sophie is born Martine returns to her family’s home where she unsuccessfully attempts suicide several times. In Haiti, Martine is surrounded by reminders of her attack, and of the pervasive culture of gendered violence more generally. She must live near the site of the attack, the ubiquitous cane fields, and among the ever-present Tonton Macoutes, who “roamed the streets in broad daylight, parading their Uzi machine guns” (138). Most tragically, her own daughter is a constant reminder of her assault. On more than one occasion Martine tells Sophie that she does not resemble anyone in their family, going so far as to tell her daughter: “Now when I look at your face I think it is true what they say. A child out of wedlock always looks like its father” (61). Although the “father” in discussion here is actually an unknown assailant who attacked a young girl in the cane, her description of having a child “out of wedlock” works as an act of verbal elision. Instead of acknowledging Sophie’s father as a
violent rapist, and thus coming to terms with what happened to her, she talks about the events of Sophie’s conception through the lens of class or social propriety, suggesting that the real affront is the fact that she had a child outside of marriage. With both the landscape and her child serving as reminders of her disenfranchisement and physical violation, and with an unwillingness to confront her trauma, Martine’s sanity crumbles.

In this climate of state-sanctioned violence it is little surprise that women’s bodies come to bear the brunt of patriarchal conceptions of propriety in the private sphere as well. The omnipresence of Duvalier’s military forces and their tactics of sexual terror are not the only form of violence that shapes the trajectory of the Caco family. While the Tonton Macoutes and Martine’s rape speak to the way in which women’s bodies are abused as political pawns and as a means of maintaining order for the regime, there is also a communally sanctioned system of policing their bodies as well. This can be found in the cult of virginity that is ideologically upheld by the patriarchal culture and assiduously monitored by local women themselves. Tante Atie once explains to Sophie that “Haitian men, they insist their women are virgins and have their ten fingers,” with each finger representing a different domestic skill, including “mothering, boiling, loving, baking, nursing, scrubbing,” etc. (151). In this schema women are thus defined by their pre-marital chastity and their post-marital acceptance of all things domestic and traditionally feminine. Sandra Duvivier offers additional insight by speaking to the very real value associated with virginity in terms of class mobility: “virginity is seen as capital, especially for families who have limited options for socioeconomic mobility…these families place a premium on female virginity because entire families benefit when a woman marries into a higher socioeconomic stratum” (132). In order to ensure the precious commodity of virginity, and the family’s potential for social advancement, mothers routinely “test” their daughters to ensure
chastity. Martine and Atie reflect on their own experiences as girls, with Martine explaining, “My mother used to test us to see if we were virgins. She would put her finger in our very private parts and see if it would go inside” (60). Atie later gives a more detailed description, complaining, “they train you to find a husband…they poke at your panties in the middle of the night to see if you are still whole. They listen when you pee, to find out if you’re peeing too loud. If you pee too loud, it means you’ve got big spaces between your legs” (136). The process of “testing,” or attempting to determine if the hymen is still intact, is thus carried out by mothers ostensibly in the best interest of their daughters and families, while at the same time perpetuating the notion that female virginity is a defining feature of a girl’s worth. Later in the novel, Sophie reflects on the nature of virgins, saying “I learned very early in life that virgins always took small steps when they walked. They never did acrobatic splits, never rode horses or bicycles” (154). This demure behavior can be attributed, in part, to the fact that the hymen is not a reliable indicator of virginity in that it can be easily, and unknowingly, ruptured by a variety of physical activities, including sports and bicycle riding. What Sophie describes, then, is another indicator of the way young girls are circumscribed by a belief system that limits their options for even routine daily activities for fear that it will cause them to “fail” the testing, and thus ruin their reputation. Moreover, it establishes a tradition of bodily invasion in which young girls have to fear not only state-sanctioned violence by the Tonton Macoutes, but communally sanctioned violence in the form of invasive “testing” by their own mothers and grandmothers.

As in Kingston’s memoir, migration and assimilation to U.S. culture is positioned as a potential solution or means of escape from the patriarchal culture and gendered violence of their country of origin. For Martine, not only do reminders of her rape surround her, but her chances of “marrying up” are now extinguished because her purity cannot be verified. Ironically, it is
only when she suffers one form of bodily assault, the rape, that she can finally leave another, the
testing, behind. Martine thus embarks for the United States, leaving her daughter Sophie behind
in the care of her sister and mother and sending herself into a “self-imposed exile” (Duvivier
134). However, simply changing locations or adopting a different set of cultural practices will
not prove to be immediately empowering, nor will it necessarily offer the safety that Martine
desperately craves. Clare Counihan argues that Martine’s move to the U.S. “undermines the
American myth of immigration as historyless self-reinvention” (41). Martine’s change of
location ultimately demonstrates the way in which traumatic experience is not spatially bound,
but rather haunts the minds and inhabits the bodies of those wishing to flee from it, and that
national narratives of a “new” world prove to be disappointing.

Indeed, once the Caco family is established in America, the legacy of bodily violation
continues to expand to the next generation. Martine eventually sends for her daughter to join her
in New York City. Sophie is raised to be a model student and child, and she soon excels in
academics while living a largely sheltered life with her mother as her primary companion. Intent
on capitalizing on the American dream and providing her daughter with the means to advance
socioeconomically, Martine places her hopes for new familial possibilities in Sophie. This
changes, however, when, at the age of eighteen, Sophie meets her neighbor, a man named Joseph
who works as musician and happens to be the same age as her mother. The pair begin
surreptitiously dating one another, and despite the fact that their relationship remains entirely
chaste, when Martine learns about Joseph she determines to begin testing her daughter. Waiting
for her daughter to come home one night Martine ominously tells her “there are secrets you
cannot keep,” before leading Sophie to her bedroom to be tested for the first time (84). The
infringement on Sophie’s privacy and bodily autonomy are apparent here, and despite the fact
that Martine hated the practice of testing as a young girl, she continues the tradition with her own daughter, a kind of cruel legacy that she also believes to be in her daughter’s best interest. This complex relationship between care and violation is further illustrated in Martine’s deployment of storytelling as a distraction from the actual act of testing. As she conducts the exam Martine tells Sophie the story of the Marassas:

The Marassas were two inseparable lovers. They were the same person, duplicated in two. They looked the same, talked the same, walked the same…When one went to the stream, the other rushed under the water to get a better look…What vain lovers they were, those Marassas. Admiring one another for being so much alike, for being copies. When you love someone, you want him to be closer to you than your Marassa…You want him to be your soul…When you look in a stream, if you saw that man’s face, wouldn’t you think it was a water spirit? Wouldn’t you scream? The love between a mother and daughter is deeper than the sea. You would leave me for an old man who didn’t know you the year before. You and I we could be like the Marassas (85)

Martine uses the story of the Marassas to both distract her daughter from the violation of the testing, but also to demonstrate her love and dedication. She desires for Sophie to see her as her own Marassa and true soul mate. However, any feelings of intimacy Martine hopes to conjure are perverted by the fact that this conversation is taking place as she forces the testing on Sophie, as well as by the actual content of the story itself. Once again the folklore is meant to operate as a kind of ameliorative for the given situation, but its message only reinforces the apparent injustice taking place. While the Marassas might be inseparable lovers, they are also described as “vain,” with their love for one another really being love for themselves and their own image. Martine’s wish for her daughter to see her mother as her true life partner is a selfish, semi-
incestuous desire that runs counter to the natural order of her child creating her own life and pursuing her own course. She is also motivated to keep Sophie in her own home to ease her fears of being alone. One of Sophie’s primary jobs within the home has been to wake her mother from her brutal nightmares. While Martine might intend for the story to express her love for her daughter, it ultimately serves as a reminder of how she curtails Sophie’s freedom to serve her own purposes. Much like the People of Creation story told by Tante Atie, traditional Haitian folklore is again employed to offer a veneer of comfort, while actually reinforcing a limited and limiting vision for Sophie’s future.

While Sophie may thus be removed from the threat of political violence in the United States, the routine of testing means that she is not free from the larger system of gendered violence that has essentially moved with the Caco women. Martine, perhaps not even aware of the ramifications of her actions, establishes the cult of virginity in her home. However, unlike her mother, Sophie has not grown up in a context where the testing is a culturally accepted practice. It is her outsider’s perspective, having spent her childhood and young adult life primarily in America, that provokes a strong response in Sophie, causing her to rebel against testing in a way that was inconceivable for her older relatives. Much like Kingston, Sophie’s first attempts at protesting her treatment are directed toward her own body, which she identifies as the source of her abuse and thus a site of potential protest.

Sophie engages in a series of deviant bodily actions in an attempt at taking back control over that very same body. The first act of deviance Sophie undertakes is purposefully rupturing her hymen in order to put a stop to the virginity testing. Although Joseph asks Sophie to marry him, she hesitates, putting off answering his proposal and continuing to endure weekly testings at home. Finally, one night she searches her mother’s cabinet “for the mortar and pestle…used to
crush spices” and takes the pestle to her bed to break “the veil” that her mother’s routine tests sought to confirm (87, 88). Her act of defiance does succeed in putting an ending to the testing as she finally “fails” the test, causing her mother to throw her out of the house. On the one hand, then, using the pestle frees her from the traumatic examinations and allows her to enter adulthood, not simply because her “virginity” is no longer verifiable, but because she is able to leave her mother’s home and begin her own life, marrying Joseph and moving with him to Rhode Island. It prevents her from falling victim to the binding Marassa mythology, and puts a stop to the invasive cultural practice of testing that positions a woman’s worth in her sexual purity. On the other hand, however, using the pestle also seriously injures Sophie. She describes her pain thusly: “My body was quivering when my mother walked into my room to test me. My legs were limp when she drew them aside. I ached so hard I could hardly move” (88). Not only does she experience pain in the moment, but later, after her daughter is born, it is revealed that she had to deliver the child via cesarean section, as a vaginal delivery was deemed too risky given her previous injuries. Echoing Bordo’s construction of embodied protest, Duvivier tackles the problematic nature of using and abusing one’s body as a means to resist oppressive conditions. She acknowledges the way in which “women exhibit agency and find ways to resist their victimization in dire situations” while also noting that this should not be conflated with “transcending abuse and its ramifications” (129, 130). Sophie’s act of deviant bodily protest ultimately frees her from one system of oppression at the expense of her physical comfort and bodily integrity.

Although Sophie’s use of the pestle is meant to sever an intimate tie with her mother and the cultural heritage she represents, the subsequent manifestation of her mental illness testifies to another link between mother and daughter that she cannot so easily escape. Just as the violent
sexual assault in the cane field leaves Martine “half insane,” the testing and self-harm with the pestle takes a mental toll on Sophie. The first manifestation of this mental trauma is the sexual dysfunction she experiences in her marriage with Joseph. In a confessional moment with her grandmother, Sophie reveals she has difficulty being with her husband sexually, saying “It is very painful for me...He is a very good man, but I have no desire. I feel like it is an evil thing to do...I hate my body. I am ashamed to show it to anybody, including my husband” (123). It is difficult to tell whether the emotional or physical wounding she has received plays a greater role in her conflict with her husband. While she says intercourse is “very painful” for her, it is not clear whether this is due to her self-inflicted wound with the pestle, or if she’s referring to an emotional pain accumulated over many years (generations, really) of enforced virginity testings. Her mother’s testing, which placed a premium on the notion of female chastity, has ingrained in her the belief that sex is inappropriate and wrong.

Sophie’s inability to connect with her husband physically is also one of the earliest signs of the way she attempts to cope with this problem by returning to the mythology her mother gave her as a girl. During sexual encounters with her husband Sophie employs the folk concept of the Marassa that her mother used during the testings. She describes on such interaction: “He reached over and pulled my body towards his. I closed my eyes and thought of the Marassa, the doubling. I was lying there on that bed and my clothes were being peeled off my body, but really I was somewhere else” (200). Some scholars have read her doubling in these moments as an act of a resistance, a way of shielding herself and her sanity in the face of bodily invasion. According to such a reading Sophie uses the Marassa as a means of strength and self-preservation in her encounters with Joseph. However, Counihan argues that a reading of resistance “demand[s] serious conditional clauses to accommodate the novel’s unmistakable
identification of the Marassas as pathology” (48). It would be difficult to argue that begrudgingly giving herself to her husband while forcing an out-of-body experience was an act of triumphant resistance. While it might serve as a strategy for escape in the moment, it does not present itself as a tenable long-term solution. Moreover, her husband, who is either oblivious to or Pretends not to notice her discomfort is not represented in the novel as a tyrant or abusive, but rather as generally sympathetic and largely wanting to help Sophie.33 Thus, instead of seeing her doubling as a life-saving strategy in a dire situation, it is rather a temporary solution to a much larger problem and a roadblock to any chance of real happiness.

Sophie employs doubling not only when attempting to negotiate her sexual dysfunction, but also in her struggles with an eating disorder. After one sexual encounter with Joseph, Sophie recalls, “I waited for him to fall asleep, then went to the kitchen. I ate every scrap of the dinner leftovers, then went to the bathroom, locked the door, and purged all the food out of my body” (200). Here the connective tissue between her various traumas is made apparent. Testing has prevented her from being able to enjoy her body or her sexuality, and stripped her of her bodily autonomy. Her attempt to control this anxiety results in an eating disorder, an embodied protest meant to give her a feeling of control over her own body, much like her action with the pestle. Throughout the text she repeatedly mentions feeling fat, or being unable to look at pictures taken

33 It is worth saying another word about her husband Joseph’s role in these encounters. Sophie repeatedly refers to him as a “good man,” and indeed he does appear to be sincerely concerned about this wife, telling her he is willing to wait indefinitely for her readiness. However, he also offers his own interpretation of Sophie’s sexual dysfunction, saying, “You are usually reluctant to start, but after a while you give in. You seem to enjoy it” (196). Counihan convincingly argues that “there is no way to read Joseph here as not sexually bullying. In the face of Sophie’s hesitation, Joseph overwhelms her and then insists that it gives her pleasure” (49). This serves as yet another example of the novelist’s unwillingness to advance any clear delineations between hero or villain, choosing instead to examine the morally ambiguous interactions between individuals.
of her and her daughter after giving birth as she’s too ashamed “of the stiches on my stomach and the flabs of fat all over my body” (129). When her mother confronts her about not eating, she explains “After I got married, I found out I had something called bulimia…it’s when you don’t eat at all and then eat a whole lot – bingeing” (179). Sophie’s mother, unable to comprehend her daughter’s willingness to go without food given her own background growing up with very little, tells her “I have never heard of a Haitian woman getting anything like that…you have become very American,” later telling her, “We’ll have no more of that bulimia. I’ll cure it with some good food” (179, 182). Although her daughter informs her “It’s not as simple as that,” Martine is unable to understand the nature of her illness, mistakenly thinking she can simply tempt her into eating by cooking traditional Haitian foods that Sophie will be unable to deny.

The appearance of Sophie’s eating disorder serves as a commentary on the problematic nature of reading embodied deviance as resistant or emancipatory. Martine situates her surprise at Sophie’s illness in her Haitian identity, growing up with scarce resources and considering food a luxury to be indulged in. If one extrapolates from that position, though, it is clear that Martine’s understanding of disordered eating is mirrored in the psychological and psychiatric literature more widely. Echoing the generally held belief on eating disorders, Becky Wangsgaard Thomson notes “according to the normative epidemiological portrait, eating problems are largely a white, middle and upper class heterosexual phenomenon” (546). Two frequent suggestions that have traditionally appeared in the literature on eating disorders is that only those of relative privilege suffer from such problems, and as Martine suggests, those without regular access to food do not typically display symptoms of anorexia or bulimia. However, Wangsgaard Thompson pushes against this notion, suggesting “while feminist research has documented how eating problems are fueled by sexism, there has been almost no attention to how other systems of oppression may
also be implicated in the development of eating problems,” going on to argue that such disorders often occur as a means to cope with “various traumas, including sexual abuse, racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism and poverty” (546, 547). The long clinical focus on disordered eating as a middle-class white woman’s disease may have in fact created a blind spot for other women struggling with the very same issues. Doris Witt further suggests that black women in particular have always been present in the conversation on eating disorders, but “in specular form as the naturalized fat body,” and that a recent surge in women of color receiving diagnoses of anorexia and bulimia reflects African-American women “appropriating a set of discourses in which the individual has an ‘unnatural’ relationship to her appetite” thus “contesting normative black female subject positions and insisting upon their psychological complexity as human beings” (106). In returning to the notion of embodied deviance, however, it is clear that even if Sophie’s adoption of bulimia is meant to both vent her internalized distress and challenge long-held beliefs about who “gets” to be diagnosed with such a disorder, this form of protest is clearly vexed. As Saidya Hartman has claimed, the nature of subaltern resistance illustrates “the precariousness of the assaults waged against domination” (51).

Sophie’s eating disorder also pushes the conversation concerning madness in the novel into more clinical territory. Instead of suffering from some nebulous form of general “madness,” as has been seen in many of the literary examples in this dissertation, Sophie receives a clinical diagnosis in the form of bulimia. Counihan suggests that Danticat’s “explicit deployment of the diagnostic proper name of bulimia establishes a teleology of trauma, symptom, and cure” (11). Danticat uses a clinical framework to bring in the language of mental illness instead of madness \textit{writ large} in part to reflect the different world views and geographical influences that affect mother and daughter in the novel. While Martine is simply labeled “half insane” as a young girl
in Haiti, Sophie has a diagnosis straight out of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), reflecting her American subject position and the influence of the psychiatric institution. Her diagnosis, and the world of therapy that it represents, ultimately stands in hard contrast to Martine’s attempt to cope with her mental illness by herself without any immediately available support system. Newtona Johnson has argued that geographic relocation or displacement cannot be understood to inherently liberating, as demonstrated by Martine’s recurring nightmares long after she leaves Haiti. However, she further suggests that “the affirmative quality of territorial displacement, for women at least, lies in the opportunity it provides for psychological transformation necessary for liberation” (151). The discrepancy between Sophie’s clinical and Western approach to understanding and eventually treating her mental illness stands in stark contrast to how Martine handles, or refuses to handle, her madness. Martine opts not to go about the process of “decolonizing the mind” that might offer her a means of comfort, demonstrating that her troubles cannot be outrun, nor will they automatically disappear through relocation.

Martine’s struggle reaches its apex when she finds out that she is pregnant with the child of her longtime boyfriend, Marc, himself a Haitian immigrant from a financially well off family. After telling her daughter the news, Martine confesses that the idea of the new baby distresses her greatly and reminds her of her rape in the cane fields and subsequent first pregnancy. In order to spare her sanity, she considers an abortion. Although Sophie urges her mother to discuss her anxieties with a therapist, Martine resists, saying “I know I should get help, but I am afraid. I am afraid it will become even more real if I see a psychiatrist and he starts telling me to face it. God help me, what if they want to hypnotize me and take me back to that day? I’ll kill myself. Marc, he saves me every night, but I am afraid he gave me this baby that’s going to take my life away”
She articulates her very real distress over confronting her past trauma, refusing to speak about her experiences with the fear that it will prove to be unbearable. Until now, she has managed to confine the attack to the realm of the “unreal,” but having to discuss the events would finally force her to grapple with her memories, something she is unwilling to do. This demonstrates the battle over voice and narration as a strategy of survival and resistance. She employs the folktales and the Marassa mythology as a way of avoiding her past traumatic experiences. Relying on the ready-made tales allows her to forego creating her own story, and as painful as that process might be, it would also allow her to exert some control over the narrative of her own life. Martine continues to equate the coming child with her impending mental collapse, and soon begins to tell Sophie that the unborn child is assaulting her from within, biting the inside of her stomach “like a leech,” claiming “I know, these things, they sound crazy to me too, but maybe that’s what it wants, to drive me crazy” (191). For a second time, Martine’s pregnancy drives her insane, with the fetus serving as the stand in for her rapist and original bodily invasion. Ultimately, her unwillingness to assert her own voice means that the spectral voice of her rapist gets to maintain its control over her.

Eventually, Martine determines to abort her pregnancy after she starts to hear the fetus talking to her: “It has a man’s voice, so I know it’s not a girl. I am going to get it out of me. I am going to get it out of me, as the stars are my witness…Everywhere I go, I hear it. I hear him saying things to me. You tinin, malprop. He calls me a filthy whore. I never want to see this child’s face” (217). In these moments the child she’s carrying essentially merges with the rapist from the cane fields, and she is unable to separate the two. Here it is also possible to see the way in which Martine has internalized beliefs about sexual purity and deviance. She mentions earlier that the rape is the one event that finally led to the end of her testing, as it meant she could no
longer be verified as sexually chaste. Thus, while she was obviously a victim of a violent assault, it also rendered her impure and essentially unmarriageable. The new child, itself conceived out of wedlock and now “speaking” in the voice of her rapist, hurls verbal abuse at her by calling her a “filthy whore.” Her inability to confront her past trauma, inflicted by state imposed violence and intensified by the internalized ideology of female sexual purity enforced by familial structures, creates a double bind that Martine is unable to break free from.

In a final act of defiance meant to put an end to her suffering Martine performs the ultimate act of embodied deviance and commits suicide. Her lover, Marc, calls Sophie to break the news that her mother “stabbed her stomach with an old rusty knife…seventeen times” (224). Specifically targeting the site of her growing child, she undertakes this act of violence to end her suffering and, according to her internal logic, prevent her child from eventually turning into the violent rapist she believes it be. Because Martine is unable and unwilling to confront her past traumatic experiences, verbalizing her mental anguish, she instead vents her pain through performances of embodied deviance that destroy her body and end her life.

Although Martine was able to leave the geographical setting of her violent attack, she was unable to escape the residual effect it had on her psyche, causing her to fall victim to a traumatic legacy she refused to confront. Sophie, however, offers an alternative to burying the past. As previously mentioned, her “madness” is the clinically diagnosed disorders of bulimia and sexual dysfunction, and she attempts to cure herself through established Western medical and psychotherapeutic methods by seeing a therapist and joining a sexual phobia group for women. It is by actively giving voice to her traumatic experiences that she hopes to overcome them. Instead of relying on folktales handed down to her, Sophie attempts to create her own story of liberation and empowerment.
While offering Western methods of treatment as a viable avenue to mental health, the novel presents a kind of hybrid form of therapy that incorporates non-Western and Caribbean elements as well. Sophie’s therapist, Rena, for example, is described as “a gorgeous black woman who was an initiated Santeria priestess. She had done two years in the Peace Corps in the Dominican Republic, which showed in the brightly colored prints, noisy bangles, and open sandals she wore” (206). Immediately, then, Rena is constructed as “the diametric opposite of the stereotype of the Freudian analyst (white, male, silently authoritarian, and unilaterally interpretive)” (Counihan 44). If Sophie has been struggling to navigate the tension between her mother’s world and her Haitian heritage, on one hand, and her American life and its attendant diagnoses of mental illness, on the other, Rena offers an interesting and seemingly useful way to embrace elements of both. While she offers help in the form of talk-therapy out of the Western tradition, she also understands and respects Sophie’s cultural lineage. In this schema Sophie is not forced into viewing her background as inherently pathological, and neither is she encouraged to place all of her faith in a practitioner who doesn’t value her unique social positioning. Similarly, her sexual phobia group is comprised of first-generation women of color immigrants, including a young Ethiopian college student who experienced genital mutilation, and a middle-aged Chicana woman, the victim of familial sexual assault34.

Unlike her mother’s experiences, where other women were responsible for perpetuating the ritual of testing, and by extension sexist practices, in Sophie’s collective of women she feels free to discuss her history and name her “abuser,” her mother. During one such meeting the

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34 Johnson describes the portrayal of these women as “rudimentary and stereotypical,” yet also allows that their representation in the novel reinforces the point that “territorial displacement can offer women the possibility to detach themselves from those homeland cultural mores that define their lives negatively” (161).
women write the names of their abusers on a scrap of paper and burn the scraps in a candle’s
flame in an attempt to symbolically release themselves from their anguish. In the way that
Kingston eventually found solace in writing her own story and the story of her family, here
Danticat also offers the physical act of writing as an avenue toward emancipation. Nancy Gerber
describes Sophie’s “artistry” as coming from her “ability to tell Martine’s story…but to reframe
it so that she does not relive it” (11). Indeed, her own story is not simply an abstract reimagining
of possibilities, but also the physical act of putting written words on the page. Although it is only
a scrap destined to be burned, the performance carries significant symbolic import and
legitimizes Sophie as being capable of authoring her own fate.

In another ritual the women inflate green balloons (“green stood for life and growth”) and
release them into the air, further emphasizing their attempts to free themselves of pain. After the
meeting Sophie claims, “I felt broken…but a little closer to being free” (203). Seemingly this
approach to healing, one that Sophie chooses willingly and actively participates in, appears to be
more helpful to her than her previous acts of “doubling,” or relying on the Marassas mythology.
It is by acknowledging both her pain and her mother’s role in creating this pain that she can
begin to move beyond it. Sophie admits to feeling “broken,” a feeling Martine would never allow
herself to approach, but it is through engaging with this pain that she is able to move toward
“being free.”

While the novel offers talk-therapy as a potential cure, or means of confronting and
resolving trauma, it stops short of providing full narrative closure. Indeed, Sophie’s progress
with her therapy group is complicated by something she witnesses later in the novel. While
driving past the home of one of her group members one evening, where the burning of names
and releasing of balloons took place, Sophie spies a green balloon: “it was in a tree trapped
between two high branches. It had deflated into a little ball the size of a green apple. We thought it had floated into the clouds, even hoped that it had traveled to Africa, but there it was slowly dying in a tree right above my head” (221). Although the novel suggests Sophie’s embrace of talk-therapy is a viable path toward recovery, it does not offer this as a complete solution to her mental illness. It gives her the opportunity to acknowledge the greater framework of gendered violence that both she and her mother are a part of, bringing her to realization that: “I did not feel guilty about burning my mother’s name anymore. I knew my hurt and hers were links in a long chain and if she hurt me, it was because she was hurt, too” (203). Nevertheless, a greater resolution never quite comes. The green balloon, a symbol of growth and new possibility gets caught, anticlimactically, in a tree above her very head, serving as a visible reminder that her pain cannot be so easily dismissed, nor, perhaps, the narrative of her recovery so neatly resolved.

What the novel ultimately suggests is that while Sophie’s embrace of Western therapy is an important step in successfully narrating her way out of her own mental anguish, she must return to Haiti, the site of the original trauma, to attempt greater liberation. Just as fleeing to America did not offer Martine real escape, Sophie cannot simply rely on Western methods to break the family’s cycle of violence and madness. Traveling to Haiti to arrange her mother’s funeral, she returns to her hometown, Tante Atie, and grandmother. While there she takes note of the female street vendors, a ubiquitous presence in the public market: “When one dropped her heavy basket, another called out of concern, ou libéré? Are you free from your heavy load? The woman with the load would answer yes, if she had unloaded her freight without hurting herself” (96). This simple call and response she witnesses among the working women of rural Haiti gains greater import after her mother’s funeral, when she decides to return to the cane fields, the site of her mother’s rape. She runs through the fields, “attacking the cane,” even taking off her shoe to
beat the stalks, lashing out around her and bloodying her hands in the process. From the edge of the field her grandmother shouts, “Ou libéré? Are you free?” As this scene is one of the novel’s final moments, it seems poised to serve as grand narrative resolution. Finally, by forgiving her mother, coming home, and striking out at the symbol of her mother’s pain Sophie can be free of her own mental suffering. This scene is frequently read as Sophie’s triumphant moment of resistance, with Francis describing it as “the final step in her journey to wellness” and an “act of healing” (88). However, such a reading is complicated by the novel’s final lines. While Sophie wants to offer an affirmative response to her grandmother’s question, she recalls, “the words would not roll off my tongue.” Her grandmother then walks over telling her, “…There is always a place where, if you listen closely in the night, you will hear your mother telling a story and at the end of the tale, she will ask you this question: ‘Ou libéré? Are you free my daughter?’” then pressing her fingers over Sophie’s lips, “Now, you will know how to answer” (234). Despite her grandmother’s suggestion that she now knows how to answer, we never actually hear her response. There is no moment where Sophie informs her family, or the readers, that she has been relieved from her burden. Moreover, it is her grandmother who puts the finger to her lips to stop her voice, while simultaneously speaking to her of mothers telling tales to daughters, perhaps the very same kind of stories Martine told her daughter while testing. Both actions, then, are more in line with the silencing of her voice than of freeing it and releasing her burden.

I am not claiming that the conclusion of Breath, Eyes, Memory should be read as a tragedy, or as Sophie’s (much beloved) grandmother essentially quashing any hope that she will be able to successfully overcome her trauma. Rather, I would suggest the novel ends on a purposefully ambiguous note, leaving open the possibility for both tragedy and triumph. A defining feature of the novel is its willingness to explore the gray areas, or the liminal space that
is the result of transgressing literal and figurative boundaries. As Counihan argues, the conclusion of the novel reminds us of “the recalcitrance of ‘real life’ to comply with the tidy solutions of novels” (47). In keeping with this theme, Danticat once again offers an example of flawed narration and the idea that one narrative strategy cannot accomplish everything. Martine’s silence led to her death, but her reliance on storytelling and the “doubling” that it engendered were equally futile. Sophie’s embrace of therapy and the move to write her pain holds promise, but does not end in a happy conclusion or scene of empowerment.

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, while the protagonist of the novel might ultimately face a tragic end, or at least one not overtly resistant or emancipatory, the novel itself achieves something quite significant. In giving the reader a purposefully ambiguous ending the novel enacts its own deviant performance. While it refuses narrative resolution, it offers a more realistic representation of forms of systemic oppression and a more viable starting point for actual cultural work. In her work on Caribbean and Caribbean-American novelists, Francis theorizes what she refers to as the emergent genre of “antiromance,” or a purposeful narrative turn away from romanticized readings of resistance and empowerment. Novels that adopt the antiromance form, “refuse any integrity of wholeness, insisting that there is no properly realized nation to come-of-age in and no idealized domestic or ‘home’ space to reclaim” (7). Martine’s self-imposed exile from Haiti did not result in achieving the American dream, and Sophie’s return to Haiti, although perhaps necessary for her journey of recovery, is not an instant ameliorative. By adopting an antiromance strategy that denies narrative closure, Danticat suggests that while healing is a goal worth striving for, it may not be easy, or even possible, to achieve. It is possible to read her narrative tactics as in line with performance practices, for the
novel forces us to engage with systems of oppression in often uncomfortable ways, with no promise of a romanticized happy ending.

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In their memoir and novel, respectively, Kingston and Danticat demonstrate the way in which madness can be passed down through generations of women. Unable to articulate feelings of frustration, rage, and despair engendered by their traumatic legacies, women engage in embodied protests that only further their pain and social marginalization. In terms of resistance, both texts offer the narration of one’s own story as a potential form of protest against state-sanctioned and familial violence. Trapped in a kind of liminal social space by their immigrant status, the protagonists of each work find their voices through a careful negotiation of different cultural heritages, realizing that they must find a way to claim their own subjectivity instead of following any of the limiting social scripts made available to them.

Both works also engage in performances of textual deviance, in which they work to subvert the generic conventions of the autobiography and the novel. By incorporating Chinese and Haitian folklore into their texts and resisting narrative closure, *The Woman Warrior* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory* succeed in crafting hybrid texts that force readers out of their complacency and reliance on formal convention. Ultimately, I hope my reading of both works again illustrates the critical difference between madness and performances of textual deviance. When characters go mad it results in their psychic destruction and social disenfranchisement. They may attempt acts of embodied deviance in protest, but these protests are little more than self-destructive behaviors that further undermine their position in the social order. Conversely, a performance entails a purposeful action, a strategic deployment of artistic practices meant to engage an audience and unsettle social and political hierarchies. In crafting texts that deviate
from literary convention, the writers that I analyze in this dissertation challenge the way we think about representations of women’s madness, shifting our focus from the body of the mad woman to the body of the deviant text.
Works Cited


