

TOWARD A NEW ENLIGHTENMENT: NECESSITATING THE FEMALE BODY IN
TWENTIETH CENTURY WOMEN'S LITERATURE

THESIS

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Ashley C. Bourgeois, B.A.

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INTRODUCTION

A FEMINIST THEORY OF EMBODIMENT

The Western philosophy of dualism acknowledges two independent and irreducible components of human existence: mind (soul) and body. Dualism has historically positioned these two parts as binary opposites, and that application continues to influence modern perceptions of gender associations between mind and body. Despite conflicting philosophical accounts of the theory, the underlying premise of the mind/body distinction asserts that the mind is defined by those spiritual things that human beings share with God; the body then, is likened to a machine and therefore excluded from all participation with God. In terms of binary opposition, the body is, by default, worldly matter—the dark, sinful and unreasonable bane of human existence that threatens a soulful progression toward enlightenment. Repeated philosophical references to the body and its “deceptive senses” lead to a certain somatophobia (fear of body) and ultimately demand a denied body in pursuit of higher knowledge and freedom (Spelman 111).

This call for corporal rejection creates a dilemma for women, who maintain a natural connection to the body.¹ In terms of biological functioning, menstruation, lactation, gestation and menopause necessitate a consciousness of body, despite gendered

¹ Although the literary women addressed within this research are born biological females, the identification of women as oppressed victims of patriarchal dualism is not necessarily so limited.

performance. Similarly a feminine gendered performance (on the part of any third or fourth sex acknowledged outside the realm of Western dualism) necessitates special attention to certain bodily attitudes and presentations. Under the tenets of the classical mind/body distinction, any preoccupation with body becomes problematic, and dualism promotes a gender association that casts women—along with body—as inherently inferior.

Patriarchal application of dualism necessitates a feminist theory of embodiment to establish the validity and necessity of the female body (biological or otherwise). Given the negative connotations derived from associations with “body,” many feminist theorists have seemingly embraced the oppressive ideology of dualism, urging women to free themselves from association with the corporal existence and thereby demonstrate a male capacity to advance the mind.² An opposing camp of feminist thought challenges the patriarchal notion of the body as a hindrance, encouraging women to value the fleshly experience, and recognize the “corporeal ground of [their] intelligence” (Spelman 126). In her 1982 essay, “Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views,” Elizabeth Spelman proposes a “theory of embodiment” as a necessary component of the feminist theory of self. Spelman’s argument evokes French feminist Helene Cixous, who in her 1975 essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” posits a female body that is “prolific, exploratory, and processively erotic--rooted in Becoming rather than Being” (Drake 2009). As the embodiment theory considers dualism and attempts to promote recognition of body as equal to mind, it must assess evolving concepts of the philosophical

² Spelman identifies several in her article: Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan and Shula Firestone.

mind/body dichotomy and also consider the actualization of “enlightenment” as a term of mind-related transcendence that remains almost inextricably related to the philosophy of dualism.³ This feminist literary study will trace the progressive need for body as exemplified through women in cross-cultural twentieth century fiction, and propose a feminized enlightenment that seeks to facilitate dissolution of the mind/body distinction.

Toward a New Enlightenment

Every kind of thought, which exists in use, belongs to the soul. Rene Descartes

The roots of dualism run deep. Plato is often credited with the explication of, if not the earliest conception of, the mind/body distinction, and all Western philosophy, whether in support, revision or rebuttal, rests on his premise. In *Phaedo*, Plato’s theory of forms suggests that the material world (perceived by bodily senses) is changing and imperfect; only through the mind can one transcend to the realm of forms, the superior realm, which is constant and real (94, 118). The body, being a “material” object that contributes to a false perception of other worldly material, necessitates the mind’s detachment. Supporting Platonic dialogues present lessons that “carry with them strong praise for the soul and strong indictments against the body” (Spelman 111). The mind/body “problem” then, as Plato describes it, is the mind’s inability to escape the body that threatens the mind’s ultimate transcendence.

Although basic implications of dualism are not problematic, dualism facilitates the recognition of two entities in terms of binary opposition. The mind and body then are

³ Plato did not use the term “enlightenment.” Immanuel Kant often receives accreditation for the term. In Konigsberg, Prussia, in 1784, he defines enlightenment as a “man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s understanding without guidance from another.”

not simply separate; an inherent need to attach priority and supremacy to one results in the debasement and inferiority of the other. Also problematic is the “understood” hierarchal application as it develops within Western tradition: that mind/body must not only exist separately, but must be solely attributed to either and only one sex of seemingly similar dualistic proportions: male and female (sexes as defined by Western culture). Considering the androcentric foundation and tradition of philosophy, it seems unlikely that the mind be regarded as anything but the male sphere, which, in terms of dualistic application is enough to position male as the exclusive thinking subject, versus the female as the passive object. From here, dualistic thought translates to a world defined in terms of binaries and applied across the board: mind/body, male/female, rational/irrational, good/evil, white/black, Christian/pagan.

Although “enlightenment” is coined for a specific period of Western philosophy and cultural life that originated in Europe during the eighteenth century, a more generic conception of enlightenment carries with it a connotation of transcendence that was conceptualized by Plato. Standard definitions of enlightenment according to Western tradition outline it as an independent aspiration of the mind to divine an ultimate sense of freedom, truth, clarity and reason. While early philosophical discourses do not explicitly exclude women in terms of achieved enlightenment, these discourses maintain a position of mind over body, and while enlightenment may be theoretically accessible to women, women are seemingly less inclined to reject the body and less capable of doing so.

But why should women ascribe or aspire to these androcentric limitations of enlightenment? The potential dissolution of dualism calls for a revised definition of enlightenment that feminists can claim for themselves. A theory of embodiment stands to

repudiate the mind/body distinction and acts to elevate the body's value to that of the soul, asserting the body's necessary participation in the whole (mind and body) transcendence. A female enlightenment does not exclusively employ either mind or body, nor esteem body over mind—if the two remain separate, they are indubitably equal and necessarily complementary. A female enlightenment is one that recognizes embodied women engaged in independent thought and action, progressing toward full knowledge of self; through that knowledge, women are free to access an independent reality. Individual experiences derived of mind and body define the terms of their progression. Unlike the patriarchal ideal that necessitates freedom *from* body, a woman finds freedom with and through body.

Embodiment

Spelman asserts that a feminist theory of embodiment is essential to the theory of self, but her essay leaves development of that theory unresolved. The theoretical conception of positive embodiment is not a new philosophical position. Scholarship of the last three decades reflects an increasing interest in the role of body, and introduces a myriad of “embodiment” theories, many of which remain outside the feminist realm.

The body has assumed a lively presence [...] on the stage of interdisciplinary studies. Feminist theory, literary criticism, history, comparative religion, philosophy, sociology, and psychology are all implicated in the move toward body. [...] In her keynote address to the 1990 annual meeting of the American Ethnological Association dedicated to the theme of ‘The Body in Society and Culture,’ Emily Martin suggested that ‘we are undergoing fundamental changes in

how our bodies are organized and experienced' [...] and suggests we are seeing 'the end of one kind of body and beginning of another kind of body' (Csordas 1). What is the feminist's response to this progressive "body" that Martin describes? And if there was one "kind" of body, what will the "new" kind be? Feminist scholarship must continue to examine and present a theory of embodiment that is its own, and although feminist efforts remain equally concerned with the cultural and political body of women, women must also demand respect for an independent, physical body that is unique.

A feminist theory of embodiment must consider the unique, female body as an active subject—a body that is "doing things" and not having things done to it. It is not so concerned with those routine behaviors that generate and dictate norms of cultural existence, but things reflective of the individual journey of any given female body. The feminist realm of embodiment is not limited to established patriarchal associations between the female body and its biological functioning but also incorporates a broader realm of bodily experience. Any body experience, as the female experiences it, is subject to scrutiny. Most importantly, the theory of embodiment analyzes ways in which the female body acts to bring about a consciousness of the mind (through either voluntary or involuntary involvement) and works to uncover the body's progressive role as it relates to a feminized state of enlightenment. Embodiment theory does not attempt to neglect the mind, nor promote body over mind, but seeks to reveal and establish an inherent complementary existence between the two.

Literary Application

As we move toward "new" bodies, it is important to remember where the "old" bodies have been. A theory of embodiment serves feminist literary criticism because it

allows scholars to trace a cultural perception of the female body through literary representation—how the body is recognized (if at all), how it is defined and attitudes toward it. As both male and female authors write on the body (to the extent that they do), we can recognize fundamental differences in attitudes toward the body, and then identify social patterns that inform such interpretations. Theoretical application to women's works allows critics to access a second layer of perception, that of an individual embodied female. Just as Spelman notes that the theory of self is essential to the feminist theory, a considerable range of women's fiction portrays a female protagonist in search of herself. Female authors remain preoccupied with this theme, because for women, the self has been more difficult to fully know and accept. The female struggle to arrive at a sense of self demands acceptance of the bodies women have been conditioned to resent. Feminist literary theorists must embrace a theory of embodiment in order to trace the changing role for body in women's literature.

Kate Chopin may be the first canonized, female American author to introduce and tackle the concept of a female enlightenment. In 1899 she published *The Awakening*, and even the title suggests illumination, a shift in consciousness from the darkness of sleep and unawareness. Chopin's protagonist, Edna Pontellier, spends the novel in search of a self that exists outside domestic space and responsibilities—a self defined beyond the roles of wife and mother. Maria Anastasopoulou argues that Chopin “encourages the reader to expect that Edna will make a successful passage to become an independent and aware person functioning to her full capacity towards growth and fulfillment” (1). Certainly as Edna's plight unfolds, Chopin affords her character a budding sense of independent identity. “In short, Mrs. Pontellier [begins] to realize her position in the

universe as a human being and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her” (Chopin 535). Edna’s penultimate scene finds her on the verge of transcendence: “How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! How delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (654). Once in the water, however, Edna swims out “on and on,” and finally exhaustion overtakes her (654). Chopin chooses to drown her protagonist in a rather ambiguous ending that is most commonly read as suicide, but also entertains the possibility of an unintentional death. Critics debate Chopin’s intent and struggle to interpret Edna’s death as either triumphant escape, or desperate surrender.

Patricia Yaeger views Edna in those moments before she enters the water as “her own subject, a blissfully embodied being,” and understands Edna’s suicide as an emancipation strategy. Although the scene is, as Yaeger describes it, “breathtaking,” it is impractical. Certainly Edna’s first time “naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun,” connotes an important moment of body experience, but Edna cannot translate an acceptable version of embodiment into her daily existence; she cannot incorporate a body that is alive and free. Plato’s conception of death, steeped in mind/body tradition, values a release from body that is necessary for the soul’s ultimate progression (Spelman 111). Adhering to that philosophical tradition, death prompts a literal “awakening” and it is arguable that Edna’s soul does transcend into the world of knowledge. Swimming out “where no woman had swum before,” perhaps she pioneers that male territory of treacherous water, and finally trades her earthly body for an ultimate freedom (Chopin 551). Still, in terms of a female enlightenment that necessitates embodiment, Edna cannot be successful. She willingly surrenders the body that is her self.

Even if Edna fails to reach an enlightened, embodied existence, Chopin's work is a success—progressive and controversial, Chopin questions the oppressive social scene and gendered expectations of her time. Most importantly, she answers a call for the female voice of discontent and provides a portrait of the woman as an artist that allows women to envision a female space beyond the domestic realm. Through Edna's restlessness, Chopin allows women to confront negative feelings without guilt. *The Awakening* is a literary first step—an attempt to conceptualize a new reality for women, and to communicate a vision that acts as a necessary precursor to change.

This research addresses the protagonists of three twentieth century America woman writers who have responded to Chopin's voice of discontent and expressed conviction for the possibility of a positive resolution. Chapter One considers Dorothy Bryant's 1972 novel, *Ella Price's Journal*, as representative of the consciousness-raising (CR) feminist fiction made popular during the Second Wave of feminism in the United States. Chapter Three analyzes Toni Morrison's character of Consolata, in her 1997 work, *Paradise*, and evaluates the character's conscious and subconscious incorporation of body and bodily gifts to reach a height of reason and clarity. Chapter Four treats Louis Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2002). Father Damien is a female who has posed the majority of her life as a male priest and missionary to the Ojibwe Indians. Through Agnes/Father Damien, Erdrich epitomizes the harmonious duality of mind/body and male/female within a single human identity, and makes progress towards a full existence that embraces both genders in order to achieve enlightenment. Chopin's Edna Pontellier serves as a model for comparison as I track the

progressive portrayal of the female body and assess each character's individual realization of a female enlightenment.

CHAPTER I

TRAPPED BENEATH THE (SECOND) WAVES: BODY STRUGGLES TOWARD THE SURFACE IN *ELLA PRICE'S JOURNAL*

We must remember that we are only one of a larger group. Sherry Sonnett

Trumbo

In order to structure a modern perception of “female” enlightenment and trace the progression of embodiment throughout the literary works of women writing in the late twentieth century, it is logical to consider literature of the Second Wave as a theoretical foundation of change in reference to *The Awakening*, because the Second Wave represents the first radical movement promoting political change for American women in postwar years. The Second Wave refers to a period of feminist activism in the United States which began during the 1960s and lasted through the late 1970s. Scholarly references to the movement most commonly acknowledge a unified body of white, middle-class women resisting the conventional roles of wife and mother, and seeking political equality that would extend to the workplace and the home. The social implications of the Second Wave would seemingly support a radically new literary direction for women writers. Feminist fiction of that era was dominated by what Lisa Marie Hogeland refers to as the consciousness-raising (CR) novel, a novel designed to introduce feminist ideals to a larger reading public, and trace the progression of the

Women's Liberation Movement (ix). In her critical account, *Feminism and its Fiction*, Hogeland positions the CR novel as the "most important form for feminist writers in the 1970s," and establishes that form as a foundation for understanding the relationship between reading and social change (Hogeland 23). Therefore it is crucial to evaluate the countercultural work of this fictional form by performing a fresh reading that lends credibility to the CR novel's literary significance. I will assert, however, that the movement of "women" during the Second Wave, from a gendered identity to a collective, political body can translate within the CR novel to a certain loss of the individual female body—a body that remains imperative to female identity. Dorothy Bryant's *Ella Price's Journal*, a CR novel written in 1972, tackles the internal and private aspects of an individual oppression. Rather than address the story's success as a CR novel, or defend its rightful place among feminist fiction, this reading applies a theory of embodiment to consider Ella Bryant's progression toward enlightenment throughout the text and to determine whether that journey toward enlightenment successfully incorporates a necessary corporal dimension.

According to Joanne S. Frye, female characters of CR fiction allowed women reading in the seventies "new ways to interpret [their] own and other women's experiences" (Hogeland x). Women could access the "growing edge of their own humanity, extending beyond available roles and categories and into a renewed future. As [they] learn [...] they help to reshape the culture's understanding of women, and participate in the feminist alteration of human experience" (x). As Bryant tackles restrictive societal norms including domestic space, marriage, heterosexual relationships and reproductive rights in terms of birth control and abortion, she speaks directly to the

political “roles and categories” that demand attention. However, Frye’s expectations of the CR novel and its overall impact go beyond the political. The need for a new, feminist version of the “human experience” necessitates the individual—both the political woman and the individual woman, and recognition of the individual woman involves an inherent association with the female body that she must incorporate in order to divine a new “human experience.” A theory of embodiment seeks to inform contemporary and future feminist thinkers by revealing and advancing the individual female body that the Second Wave often overlooked in favor of a united, political body. “Once the concept of woman is divorced from the concept of woman’s body, conceptual room is made for the idea of a woman who is no particular historical woman – she has no color, no accent, no particular characteristics that require having a body” (Spelman 128). The theory of embodiment operates under the premise that a woman who exists outside of her body does not exist. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan (a prominent thinker of the second wave), was anxious to promote a mind-centered existence for women, adhering to traditionally patriarchal mind/body philosophies and attempting to assume a male form of knowledge. However, overwhelming preoccupation with the mind results in further movement away from body and supports the oppressive notion that the body is comparatively worthless next to the mind. In order to “reshape” the culture’s perception, the collective female body must reshape its own perception, and the female body must take an active role in driving feminist thought.

Over seventy years after publication of *The Awakening*, Dorothy Bryant wrote *Ella Price’s Journal*, and the story of her protagonist, Ella Price, bears a remarkable

resemblance to Chopin's story of Edna Pontellier.⁴ Both women have "wonderful" husbands, both succumb to senseless affairs, and both are unsatisfied in their domestic roles. Despite each woman's increasing sense of self-awareness, the body remains a point of contention—a nuisance and a threat. While, for Edna, there is no textual evidence to support the notion of a premeditated suicide, Ella relates conscious thoughts of suicide that read much like the closing paragraphs of *The Awakening*, almost suggesting that Chopin was the first to offer women the consideration of death as a viable, alternative option. Although Ella's journey toward potential self-discovery does not end as Edna's does, Ella's progression toward embodied enlightenment is nearly imperceptible throughout the majority of the text. Ella's reflections actually carry a stronger indictment against body than do Edna's, and bodily resentment inhibits Ella's search for self. Certainly Ella stands to benefit from her experimentation in terms of sexuality and political activism, but although Bryant allows Ella to break free from an oppressive domestic space and make independent decisions concerning her mind and body, Bryant cannot ultimately confirm the character's achieved sense of clarity and freedom. Bryant chooses to end Ella's journey both abruptly and ambiguously, leaving the final question of Ella's mind/body resolution unanswered.

Vision of Self

He is the Subject, He is the Absolute—She is the Other. Simone de Beauvoir

If a theory of self is, as Elizabeth Spelman asserts, essential to the overall theory of feminism in order to dissolve patriarchal identification of the female as the binary

⁴ This seems especially interesting in light of the fact that *The Awakening* received canonical status in the 1970s.

“other,” then a theory of embodiment is essential to that overall theory of self in order to facilitate self-discovery. In 1963, Betty Friedan’s solution to the “problem without a name” was to “ascend” to the male sphere of mental activity (Spelman 122).⁵ Friedan’s solution reflects popular feminist thought that remains molded by the patriarchal application of dualism. In order to market themselves as deserving of equality, Second Wave feminists wanted to prove a female capacity to occupy that same male space—the mental domain—rather than assert their own sphere of knowledge that would incorporate both mental activity and corporal experience. In “Woman as Body” Elizabeth Spelman challenges the popular Second Wave opinion that a woman’s “essential self” lies, just as a man’s, in her mind, and urges women (in the words of Adrienne Rich) to “touch the unity and resonance of [their] physicality” (123). Rich suggests there is a distance that a woman keeps from her self when she tries to establish a distance from her own body. Throughout Bryant’s novel, Ella attempts to maintain that distance, and whether subconscious or deliberate, the contrived distance does not allow for full knowledge of self. Although she becomes increasingly introspective throughout her journal entries, an applied theory of embodiment reveals a preoccupation with the mind that stands in the way of true self-discovery.

Ella immediately conveys a vision of self that is fraught with insecurity. She portrays her mind as inherently weak, as she repeatedly refers to her neuroses and indicates tendencies toward intellectualism that she considers embarrassing. She knows

⁵ In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan defines women’s discontent during the 1950s as “the problem that has no name.”

there is “something wrong” with her, and a specific dramatic breakdown prompts her to see a doctor.

I was driving down El Alma Boulevard and all of a sudden I was lost. [...] Then I started to cry. But I didn't feel it—didn't feel as if it was me crying—I just listened to the sobbing and felt water running down my face but I didn't seem to be doing it and didn't understand it. After a few minutes I was all right. I saw I was just a block from my turnoff, and I went home (Bryant 28).

Edna Pontellier experiences a similar breakdown early in Chopin's story after an altercation with her husband.

The tears came so fast to Mrs. Pontellier's eyes [...] Turning she thrust her face steaming wet into the bend of her arm, and she went on crying there, not caring any longer to dry her face, her eyes, her arms. She could not have told why she was crying. Such experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life. [...] An indescribable oppression which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness filled her whole being with a vague anguish (Chopin 527).

Both women experience a bodily release that signifies an internal struggle. For Ella this response feels strange and unfamiliar, whereas Edna seems accustomed to such outbursts. While Ella is compelled to consult a doctor, Edna exhibits an attitude of self-reliance. It is her husband who finally solicits Dr. Mandelet when he is concerned that Edna is “not like herself” (Chopin 596).

When Ella visits the doctor, she cannot define the “what's wrong.” He suggests she find “new interests,” and so she enrolls at the local community college. As Ella

explores “new interests,” Bryant maintains an emphasis on the mind that supports Friedan’s assessment of mental activity as “the profession of highest value to society” (Spelman 123). Bryant makes an emphatic statement on the value of mental activity when Ella learns the derivation of the word “educate: related to Latin *educere*—to lead forth” (Bryant 29). Ella understands the phrase “lead forth” to mean being led out “of some dark place by a guiding hand” (29). In a world of binaries, the dark place is the place that is uneducated, and the educated place basks in light. Metaphorical light is directly linked to the development of “mental or moral growth” (“Educate” def.). The binary of that same mental development is physical (body) development, so physical power is linked to darkness. Indirectly, Ella is convinced she must leave the body in pursuit of higher learning. Through her character, Bryant seemingly adheres to what Susan Bordo has described as a “supermasculinized model of knowledge in which detachment, clarity and transcendence of body are all key requirements” (Bordo 8).

Ella evolves as a student, mentored by Dan Harkan, her English instructor at the college. Harkan’s suggested canonical readings stand to challenge stereotypical characterizations of women, but even these examples, *Madame Bovary*, *Main Street*, and *Anna Karenina*, fall short because, as Ella notes, Emma, Carol, and Anna are females conceived by prejudiced men (Bryant 79). Even as Ella attempts to dissect each character’s unique dilemma, Harkan’s interpretations discourage and devalue the women as individuals, and his reading demands a social reflection, that is, ironically, in keeping with the larger purpose of the CR novel—to inspire political change. When Ella is discouraged by the deaths of the three women, Harkan assures her that the “destruction of the protagonist only implies indictment of the society” (77). He mocks Ella’s

sentimentality and links it to an immature desire to see the survival of a character “as if she [is] a real person” (77). Indeed, Ella is so anxious to discover her own identity that she throws her self into these fictional roles, only to find each outcome more disheartening than the next. She wants a viable solution applicable to her own plight—not a careless rebellion that can only offer death as resolution. The women she reads “all rebel, [and] they all fail. They [cannot] make the rebellion complete” (79). Ella is seemingly oblivious to her own implication: that a complete rebellion—a successful rebellion—requires a partnered victory of body and soul. These literary characters force Ella to assume a process of self-realization because she wants to envision an embodied success story of her own. At the same time, these literary reflections act as a foreshadowing, as Ella ultimately fails to make her own rebellion complete.

When Ella finally discovers a true literary inspiration—Antigone—she bases her admiration on what she believes is the female protagonist’s ability to somehow subvert her womanhood. “Antigone faces a problem that’s not a woman problem, it’s a human problem. [...] She’s heroic by any standards and feminine by any standards. She’s not trapped in sex” (90). And that is what Ella wants—to “get above that,” above the nuisance of her sex. As she reflects upon the advantage of a gender-neutral problem, like the one Antigone faces, she explains “what’s awful about being a woman or a negro, [is that] you have to take [the] tar baby with you wherever you go and everyone sees only it and never notices you” (90). Modern, colloquial use of “tar baby” denotes a sticky situation for which separation is the only solution. Ella’s sentiments echo Plato as he discounts the body as a part of self: “In their most benign aspect our bodies are incidental appendages; in their most malignant aspect, they are obstacles to the smooth functioning

of our souls” (Spelman 117). Likewise, Ella bitterly accepts her body as an extension of herself rather than an essential part of herself. She associates her female self with a “negro” identity, and implies that both are equally external and equally detestable. Ella’s comparison reflects a clear disdain for an inherent “body” manifestation. She is so anxious to cast off her female identity that she cannot possibly conceive of something new for her body, and therefore she is powerless to “reshape” a cultural understanding of women.

Ella’s inability to view herself as a whole informs her perspective on the “self” others see. “The younger students look through me like I’m invisible. I wish I were” (14). This perception reveals a lot about Ella’s relationship with her body. She does not wish to be non-existent, just invisible—in essence, to lose the body and exist in spirit only. The wish for her flesh to simply disappear reflects a discomfort and insecurity within her own skin. Ella believes the reaction of the students is due, at least in part, to her age. “It’s because I’m older. Like a disease” (14). Age is undeniably manifested in her physical form, and she resents her body for exposing her age. She also associates progressed age with the Barbie doll standard of female beauty that Harkan attacks in class. In response to his accusations, Ella gets defensive and claims “after a certain age no matter what you do you’re not going to be attractive to men anymore—what do you have left, motherhood?” (37). Ella forms two definitions of self: she can be either the desired object of male attention, or the mother. Neither identification offers freedom beyond conventional roles.

Ella’s inability to appreciate her body as a worthy part of self leads to her resentment of female biological functioning. As Ella offers perspectives on menstruation, sex, childbirth, breast feeding, and birth control (reproductive rights), she communicates

a repeated sense of shame that is most often associated with what she considers her own lack or deficiency. “Anytime I don’t enjoy sex much, I feel ashamed of myself for feeling that way” (81). Ella’s hate for contraceptives and menstruation further complicates her ability to enjoy sex. More than once throughout her ramblings she mentions the woes of her diaphragm and the fear of unwanted pregnancy. After her affair with Harkan, her “stupid clutching” diaphragm is there all day, squeezing to remind her of her adulterous action and impose a sense of guilt. Ella longs for the day she will be “old and sterile and not wait[ing] for sign of blood” (Bryant 81).⁶

With such strong negative feelings related to sex, menstruation and birth control, it follows that Ella is conflicted on the subject of childbirth, and she views pregnancy as another way in which her body threatens to betray her. Ella’s attitude recalls Adrienne Rich, who indicts an oppressive patriarchal condemnation of body. “Defined as flesh by flesh-loathers, woman enters the most ‘fleshly’ of experiences (childbirth) with a predisposed self-loathing—surely physical self-hatred and suspicion of one’s own body is scarcely a favorable emotion with which to enter an intense physical experience” (Spelman 126). When Ella’s psychology professor discusses the trauma and “shock of being born,” Ella questions the effects of this experience on the mother, but she is dismissed. She recounts: “I remember when I had Lulu a lot of women were having ‘natural childbirth’ and I read some articles that said women only felt pain in childbirth if they were tense and neurotic. [...] Such a profound experience for a woman—and you can’t even be honest with yourself about it” (Bryant 70). Ella recalls anger, pain, fear and

⁶ Ella adheres to the perceptions of Western culture that maintain an obvious disdain for menstruation.

trauma associated with her pregnancy, but she never alludes to a sense of pride or accomplishment in relation to her mothering role. She “pretend[s] to be happy” but she is not, and notes that it happened in spite of her being “careful” (71). Because Lulu was not a planned pregnancy, Ella resents her body for forcing her into the role of motherhood.

Body as confinement

According to Plato, true enlightenment is only achieved when the soul transcends the body. Therefore, bodily death, according to dualistic tradition, is nothing to be feared: immortality of the soul not only is possible, but to be desired, for the “real business of life is the business of the soul” (Spelman 111). Ella seemingly accepts this version of reality, and her desire to flee her bodily prison translates to literal thoughts of suicide. “All of a sudden, [...] a voice inside me might say “why don’t you cut your wrists tonight” (Bryant 40). Ella associates death with rest. “I wouldn’t feel so tired. I wouldn’t feel” (41). Again, Ella misdirects her misery, assigning blame to the body that forces her to feel, rather than impugning social pressures or addressing private concerns that contribute to her feelings of inadequacy.

Ella’s “real” suicide plan necessitates the ocean. “I’d take off my shoes and stockings and let it lap up over my feet as the waves came in. A lot of people did that. Nobody thought anything of it. I’d walk further and further out until the waves splashed my skirt then I’d stop. But I wonder what it would be like just to walk out and keep walking” (40).

Edna Pontellier is similarly lured by the ocean: “The foamy wavelets curled up her white feet... she walked out. The water was chill but she walked on. The water was

deep but she lifted her white body and reached out with a long, sweeping stroke. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” (654).

The extent of similarity between these two passages is startling. In 1899, Edna Pontellier cannot conceive of a successful embodied escape—she is trapped. Seventy years later, Bryant’s protagonist adheres to the same dualistic ideal of freedom, but in her similar moments of desperation, Ella struggles with the ambiguity of literal death and redirects her purpose:

“When I got knee deep in the ocean and looking out to sea not seeing anything but the water as if the world was gone and there was just me and the ocean, the suicidal thoughts would disappear. I’d still walk forward toward the ocean but it didn’t seem as if it would be toward death... something better than life or death” (41). It is not necessarily death that Ella finds so appealing, but whatever the “something better” is, it requires a body sacrifice.

Acting Body

When Ella makes willing decisions that do necessitate body, her decisions represent larger political agendas of the Second Wave movement. Through Ella, Bryant speaks to issues of sexual freedom and political activism. In the early 1970s, CR was central to fiction and sexuality was central to CR. These CR books provided women’s testimony to women’s experiences of sexuality, including the experience of having sexuality defined for them by men (Hogeland 61). Through her journal entries Ella chronicles her short-lived affair with her professor, Dan Harkan.

After a close encounter with Harkan in his office one day after class, Ella’s body tries to communicate a basic need. Later, Ella recounts in her journal what she felt that

day sitting in the car: “I could feel each of my sex organs. My vagina ached. My womb churned and my nipples tingled. Every cell of my body is alive—I can feel each one” (149). For the first time, Ella openly relates the sexuality of her biological female body, and although she feels “like an animal in heat, disgusting,” she does not feel disgusted. This instance marks the first time a reference to her body is not marked by feelings of resentment. The body she has been compelled to hate, she suddenly accepts, but still she cannot appreciate its functioning without attaching some soulful value to the response that gives it “meaning.” Rather than try to decode her body’s message as one that can translate into a new knowledge of self, she immediately links her active sexuality to feelings of love for Harkan, and implies her sexual dependence.

Just prior to their first sexual encounter, Ella anxiously awaits Harkan and she imagines that together, as lovers, they will “finally [...] be as one” (Bryant 166). Similarly, Edna anticipated final consummation with Robert that was never realized. “She could picture no greater bliss on earth than possess on the beloved one” and believed they will be “everything to each other” (Chopin 651, 646). When Harkan finally arrives two hours late, however, he pushes quickly into Ella, and she is “cold and dry” (Bryant 166). Unlike her body’s response that day in the car, Ella’s body does not respond to Dan’s touch during intercourse. Ella perceives her “lack” as a bodily malfunction, and yet, that same “lack” can be interpreted as the body’s active participation—a natural rejection. Although Ella’s reaction in the car was in response to a close encounter with Harkan, her body’s solicitation does not necessitate his direct involvement.

During their second encounter Ella's body remains again "unresponsive" despite Harkan's more concentrated efforts. He projects his own inability to arouse her, so that it becomes her inability to be aroused. For what he perceives as her body's lack, Harkan patronizes Ella and offers condolence for her "trouble," but he does not express genuine concern or propose any collaborative solution that might enhance her experience (Bryant 171). Discredit of the vaginal orgasm in 1966 offered hope that a woman could finally "take the first step toward emancipation, to define and enjoy the forms of her own sexuality" (Hogeland 57, 59). If Ella seeks sexual freedom by way of what she believes will be a liberating, extramarital relationship, she fails to find it. With Harkan, Ella is left in a "familiar state of dependency upon a man [...] not knowing what she wants, ready for anything, even asking for more, so long as he will take her as his object when he seeks his own pleasure. Thus she will not say what she wants, or no longer knows what she wants" (Irigaray 250). Ella has no voice in the bedroom, and rather than prioritize her own pleasure, she becomes obsessed with his. Even though after sex, she feels like a prostitute, she seeks Harkan's approval and her search extends beyond the bedroom. On campus she is concerned with "how often [she] should look at him, and with what expression on [her] face." She is constantly worried she will say something to "displease him, disappoint him, [...] make him love her less" (Bryant 164).

Ella's personal plight does little to establish a "freed" sense of sexuality for women, and fails to offer a satisfactory placement for body in terms of an involved sexual relationship. Ella describes sex with her husband as obligatory and often dispassionate. The only exception is the brief period prior to her consummation with Harkan. During that time, she is so sexually turned on that they make love more often, and she views her

husband as the “only one who gains” (164). Bryant constructs a hopeless portrayal of heterosexual relationships that are either impossible, or destructive, or elusive. Even Laura, Ella’s friend, who left her husband and entertained a barrage of sexual advances, quickly tires of the dating scene she describes as an “unimaginable jungle,” Bryant offers no viable alternative. Laura is left alone, with hardly any friends and children who dislike her. She finds no reward in sexual freedom (144).

The March

Ella’s journal entry that relates the most positive body experience is the longest entry. Ella’s entry on the night of the political march constitutes eleven pages, whereas most entries range from one to a couple of pages. Bryant includes the march in an effort to glorify and incite political activism, and to promote the collective movement of women from the domestic realm into the male-dominated public space. Still, while Bryant may not intend to communicate special concern for an individual female body, Ella’s reflections offer a unique perspective on the female body’s involvement. The physicality of marching, as a distinct bodily act, signifies her most considerable progression toward a new conception, acceptance and elevation of body that must precede potential enlightenment.

Ella’s decision to march is both independent and rebellious, as she acts with full knowledge of her husband’s disapproval. Her decision also reflects a fundamental change in thinking, as her initial response to the rally is distaste predetermined by her family’s conservative stance: “demonstrations don’t do any good,” and they are populated by “communists, drug takers, freaks [and] misfits” (Bryant 118). Although Dan encourages a fresh perspective that invalidates her first concern, Ella independently addresses the

question of her own fear, and makes a conscious decision to overcome it. Ella's physical placement within the larger movement of the march serves to substantiate the female body as more than a whirlwind of hormonal and biological functions. "Finally I started to walk, following the movement of larger and larger groups" (124).

The march signifies Ella's first positive attitude toward body. Almost immediately, her "body feels like it belongs," even though her mind believes and tries to convince her she does not. Finally she begins to envy the participants. Leaning over the curb, she feels a "longing to step off and join them" (127). When her body does act, it is in seeming opposition to her mind, but Ella "takes a deep breath and steps off the curb" (128). The physical act of marching allows Ella a moment to potentially know herself as someone who belongs. Among "friends" and family she constantly regards herself as an outsider: as freakish, odd, inadequate, and abnormal. Among fellow protestors she feels "just right, like a piece of tile dropped into place, perfectly fitting its place in a design. And warm with closeness to the people walking beside [her]" (130).

After the march, Ella has a newfound appreciation for bodily involvement. "It was an act, not a thought" and she begins to understand the "importance of moving the body, walking from here to there or even just standing" (139). With such a simple statement, Ella arguably repositions herself, within the context of the novel, and esteems body over mind—because it can act, and that is more than a thought. Even more fascinating is Ella's new knowledge of her body, and the realization that the march may have been the first time Ella has understood her body to be acting under her direction. She is the active agent, and she is an embodied success of the march. After the march she feels like it is

“the most real thing that’s ever happened to [her]” (146). Ella still relates it as something that happened to her, but the march was more than that—it was something that she did.

Ella’s participation in the march marks a turning point within the novel. After the march and just prior to the abortion, Ella begins to access a new reality. Although she does not know her full self yet, she knows what she is not: “the house, that life, even our daughter—none of that has anything to do with me” (225). Her thoughts are the beginnings of an independent self. She is looking for “something like that first feeling I had when I was in love, that first week, when I was high and the world came alive and belonged to me, and I belonged to it. It’s wasn’t Dan, it was something he triggered in me. Something in me” (227). Although she cannot yet identify that “something,” she is eager to uncover it. Ella works toward a positive familiarity with self and finally gains a sense of clarity related to her relationships:

I must have fallen into the oldest, stupidest woman’s attitude—seeing, myself and my problems and my needs in terms of men. I had realized that I had to make a change. But I saw that change as a change of men, as if I don’t exist except as part of a man. But I’m not Joe and I’m not Dan and I’m not defined by my relation to either of them. They’re just part of my life. I’m myself, although I’m not too sure who that is yet.

Even though she is unsure who that “self” is, Ella begins to process identity in a new way. Ella envisions a self that is constructed free of male intervention and affiliation. Still lacking is Ella’s full acceptance of her female body as an active resource rather than a threat, and evidence of communication and collaborative efforts between mind and body. In spite of her progress, Ella lacks a single defining moment where mind and body come

together to produce a new reality, and readers cannot be convinced that she is wholly dynamic—that she will ultimately transcend.

In the moments before her abortion, Ella's final reflections offer little indication of the sense of clarity she was ostensibly moving toward.

"I feel like a sacred virgin chosen for an elaborate initiation rite, prepared and purified according to ancient rule.

I feel like a plucked chicken to be gutted.

I feel"

Bryant leaves her audience hanging, but even more anomalous are her chosen metaphors through which Ella communicates a sense of delirium that is disconcerting, even in spite of her drugged state.

First is the metaphor of the sacred virgin, which is immediately ironic given Ella's expectant condition. Although allusion to a chosen, sacred virgin might immediately evoke the Madonna, proposed initiation potentially signifies a pagan ritual. Preparation and purification according to "ancient rule" recalls traditional patriarchal terms of human sacrifice. A moment later, she reduces herself to the dirtiest body, a barnyard fowl, plucked, shorn, shamed and stripped of necessary life organs. These two unseemly metaphors offer no sense of clarity, but even as they propose disparate illustrations, they effect similar implications. Both denote situations and experiences alien to Ella, so she ascribes her feelings blindly, and avoids more meaningful assessment of her feelings. Both require the ultimate body sacrifice and both put her in the passive position, with someone else making a choice for her—a decision that demands death. Ella's final

musings suggests confused communication between mind and body. Ultimately, she lacks clarity that is characteristic of harmonious, embodied existence.

Ellen Morgan notes that CR novels usually end depicting the “doubt, uncertainty and inconclusiveness which are the experiences of many women of this era” (Hogeland 44). Certainly this rationalization sheds meaning on Bryant’s chosen ending, but with that same understanding, we cannot assume Ella’s enlightenment, even in spite of progressive independence defined by education, activism and domestic rebellion. Hogeland suggests that the novel ends “just as Ella has begun to act according to her newly raised consciousness, and just as she has been prepared for an abortion,” but Bryant offers no security in this “newly raised consciousness” (Hogeland 44). “Bryant ends the novel mid-sentence, partly to suggest that Ella has received the anesthetic, partly to suggest that her process of consciousness raising and change is not over” (44). In her progression toward successful embodiment, Ella surpasses Edna Pontellier because, by refusing bodily surrender, Ella maintains the potential to achieve enlightenment. Hogeland notes that CR novels make their demands “by asking us to envision what happens after the novel, in creating their unfinished futures” (44). Readers may be hesitant to presume Ella’s newfound clarity after the abortion. While the CR form may achieve its cultural goal to incite “new interpretations” of the female experience, the individual female self is lost beneath the larger, social body.

CHAPTER II

A CROSS-CULTURAL CONSIDERATION

The foundation of second wave feminism collapsed sometime during the 1980s, and according to Naomi Zack, “the most promising path to a new coherence runs through the sharpest criticism of the second wave—the claim that white middle class women do not speak for all women” (1).⁷ An answer to Second Wave feminism in the form of a “third wave” movement remains equivocal among academic feminists.⁸ Perhaps the most significant reconsideration in feminist scholarship since the 1980s involves the position of intersectionality that challenges the essentialism of the Second Wave, and celebrates the freedom among women of color to create and observe their own feminisms.⁹

Throughout the conception of Second Wave feminism, women of color were either invisible, or treated “purely as women without significance attached to colour and

⁷ By the 1980s, it was widely perceived that the movement had been successful. Although the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) had failed, three states short of ratification, the movement celebrated significant legal victories.

⁸ See *The Third Wave: Feminist Perspectives on Racism* by M. Jacqui Alexander (ed).

⁹ Intersectionality refers to an experience defined by a multiplicity of oppressions on the basis of race, gender and class. The term “feminist” is problematic for women of color who prefer non-association with the white, middle-class movement. See Alice Walker’s *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, for her definition of “womanism.” The term “feminism” can also be insensitive to the fluid notion of gender.

race” (Bhavnani 19). Intersectionality recognizes race and class, along with gender, as indivisible constituents of identity. Whereas middle-class white women during the 1960s and 70s formed a collective political body seeking to challenge a shared assessment of social inequalities, multi-cultural feminism recognizes a varying range of oppression, dependent upon every or any contributing factor of identity. Multi-cultural feminism promotes a more diverse union among women that does not attempt to generically categorize the female experience, but instead campaigns for movement toward acceptance and appreciation for diversity. The multiracial dimension presents a major potential for growth within the feminist camp that is not limited to inclusion. The broader range of female experience informs new feminist perspectives and allows for the incorporation of cultural traditions that offer more flexibility in the construction of woman and the body.

Any effort to exalt the body’s purpose through resolution of the mind/body problem requires consideration of the binary construction of sex. According to Western tradition, the binary recognition of male and female is linked to gender identification. “By viewing gender as a social construction, it is possible to see descriptions of other cultures as evidence for alternative but equally real conceptions of what it means to be woman or man” (Oyewumi 10). For the Western tradition, gender begins with sex. Males and females are biologically defined at birth and then restricted to social constructions of gender assigned to the corresponding sex. Feminist theorists and anthropologists now identify a wide range of gender construction among non-Western societies, and those unique constructions dictate attitudes toward the body that do not support the dualistic composition of mind and body. In many ways, the multiracial presence within America

retains remnants of such non-Western cultures. If the philosophical construct of mind versus body must maintain association with the male/female derivation, then the distinction of race is significant because it adds another dimension to the binary quandary. If these most familiar systems of dualism fall under the larger umbrella of Western tradition, then it becomes necessary to challenge the notion of Western knowledge, and recognize the American experience as assimilation of both Western and non-Western practices.

For many American women of color, this inherent understanding of Western and non-Western translates to a bi-cultured memory—one rooted in the American experience, and one clinging to a native, ancestral past. In terms of literary application, authors who call upon this bi-cultured memory offer a fresh perspective as we consider a progressive perception of the female body. Two of the most distinguished female authors writing today call upon such a memory: Toni Morrison and Louise Erdrich. Both Morrison and Erdrich tell stories that embrace rich cultural legacies. Even beyond the Western conceptions of African American and Native American, these authors embrace the historical cultures that inform them.

Toni Morrison has said: “I really think the range of emotions and perceptions I have had access to as a black person and as a female person are greater than those of people who are neither.... So, it seems to me that my world did not shrink because I was a black female writer. It just got bigger” (Rothstein 1987). As a “black person” writing, Morrison maintains an African presence within her works. Afrocentric scholars have repeatedly identified elements of Morrison’s works that call upon Yoruban tradition. Historians often reference the Yoruba as one of two chief people groups representative of

West Africa prior to colonization (Parrinder 2). Olugboyega Alaba, professor at the University of Lagos in Nigeria defines Yoruban culture as:

The aggregate of the ways of life of the Yoruba-speaking peoples of southwestern Nigeria and their kiths and kins elsewhere in the world. It is a continuum beginning from their subsistence, communal, agrarian life of the pre-literate and pre-colonial times to the capitalist, individualistic, free-enterprise life of the literate, colonial and post-colonial, modern times.

On the subject of gender and the body, Oyeronke Oyewumi notes in her 1997 book, *Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, that the body “was (and still is) very corporeal in Yoruba communities” (10). But, prior to the infusion of Western notions into Yoruba culture, the body was not the basis of social roles, inclusions, or exclusions; it was not the foundation of social thought and identity. In Yoruban cultures, social relations derive their legitimacy from social facts, not from biology (11). The recognition of any gendered performance is free from association with biological sex, and the terms male and female lose their meaning as binary opposites. An understanding of her ancestral past allows Morrison to conceive of a gender construction that operates much differently than that of her Western counterpart, and she can allow that conception to distinguish her writing.

Louise Erdrich directly addresses her own creative entwining of American and Native American traditions. When questioned as to whether she is a “‘re-storier’ for the Ojibwe,” Louise Erdrich has replied: “I write in English, and so I suppose I function as an emissary of the between-world, that increasingly common margin where cultures mix and

collide” (Bacon 2001). That between-world encompasses both Western and Native American truths.

Although there is no universal Native American tradition, Native American studies reveal gender constructions that do not reflect the rigidity of Western tradition. Not only do tribes recognize a multiplicity of genders, (translated in Western terminology as male-women, or women-men), but they also designate biological sexes beyond the duality of male and female (recognizing ranges of hermaphroditism). Social roles and interactions are derived by a “spirit” determinate, not assigned according to physical sex, and most often, individuals possessing this “dual-sexed” status are treated with deference, even considered sacred.

In cross-cultural studies, the projection of Western categories on non-Western cultures is unnatural, and examination of unfamiliar categories incites new interpretations of the world. Western society has come to depend upon the foundation of binary opposition for meaning, to define something by what it is not. In cultures that are not grounded in dualistic construction, the question of mind/body distinction is unfamiliar. If the body is never inferior to the mind, it cannot pose a threat to the mind’s purpose, and without reason to exclude its participation, it seems natural to acknowledge it, even celebrate it. Exposure to these non-Western customs and attitudes toward body translates and informs the literary contributions of multi-cultural authors. Through the multicultural works of women writers, feminist theory can note a new progression of females free to transcend with body and achieve a version of female enlightenment.

As this study transitions from a 1970s CR novel to two culturally diverse postmodern works, my purpose is to illuminate varied conceptions of body embraced by

female protagonists who struggle to establish independent truths. Through their female characters, Toni Morrison and Louise Erdrich have, in a sense, moved beyond the Second Wave list of concerns, which include motherhood, reproduction rights and domestic space. The characters of Consolata and Agnes/Father Damien challenge limitations of the female body experience, incorporating somewhat radical acts including cannibalism, witchcraft and cross-gendered performance. Edna's and Ella's acting bodies are largely relegated to concerns of biological functioning and read relatively restricted in comparison. In fact, the characters of Consolata and Agnes are so far removed from the mentality of Edna Pontellier and the cultural climate of the late nineteenth century that comparisons to Edna become increasingly difficult to make. Both Morrison and Erdrich introduce their protagonists as sisters adopted into the Catholic faith. The convent setting, although inundated with implications of patriarchal oppression, at the same time incites a certain sense of freedom by eliminating a dominant male presence. Such "malelessness" is foreign to Edna and Ella, who operate daily under the watchful eye of the men who perpetuate their status. Although both Consolata and Agnes, as Father Damien, operate as nurturers to a certain extent, neither assumes the role of wife or mother. In turn, they are freed from the most conventional forms of female responsibility, and immediately convey a sense of autonomy that Edna and Ella struggle (and ultimately fail) to attain.

Perhaps the most significant distinction as we move from Ella to Consolata is the lost portrayal of resentment toward the female body. Morrison and Erdrich, through their protagonists, relate the remembrance of something female and something good, something that can often be understood as a love-relationship with body that stands to challenge the somatophobia of dualistic thought. In defining a female enlightenment, the

characters of Consolata and Agnes/Father Damien tread new territory, asserting positive progression of female embodiment.

CHAPTER III

A STORY TO PASS ON: CONSOLATA PREACHES ENLIGHTENMENT IN TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE*

Following publication of *Paradise*, Toni Morrison distances herself from feminism and anything “ist” during an interview with Zia Jaffrey, claiming: “In order to be as free as I possibly can, in my own imagination, I can't take positions that are closed.” It is true that in her seventh novel Morrison seeks to deconstruct a number of “closed” positions that serve as foundation for Western thought, and at the heart of her argument lies the philosophical construct of dualism. In terms of a female agenda, Morrison's most emphatic transcendence of Western thought precipitates dissolution of the mind/body distinction.

In *Paradise*, Morrison rejects the notion of binary opposition as it relates to the mind/body distinction, and despite her intentions and claims against anything “ist,” *Paradise* stands as a feminist text. For the first time Morrison prioritizes gender over race to effect a unified female enlightenment, and the end result is an unraveling of traditional, patriarchal values. She acts as an agent of embodiment, confiscating the conceptual construct from philosophers and theorists, to portray a genuine belief in its validity through the character of Consolata. In the days just before the men of Ruby invade the convent, Morrison offers evidence of Consolata's enlightened state. Rather than adhering

to a shift from body, however, Consolata's progression toward enlightenment necessitates a constant movement toward it, as bodily experiences build and culminate to reveal an ultimate truth. Consolata's progressive embodiment acts to propel the mind through sexual gratification, cannibalism, menopause, and finally a literal and figurative "stepping in" that informs her ultimate transformation.

Sexual Gratification

According to Plato, one cannot hope to understand the nature of knowledge, reality, love or beauty unless he or she can free the soul from a "lazy, vulgar and beguiling body" (Spelman 113). The same spiritual ideal remains embedded within the Catholic religion and applies, in the strictest sense, to the most devout members of its body: the mothers and sisters of the convent. After thirty years of soul development under the watchful eye of Mary Magna, Consolata should be nearing the end of the spiritual journey as envisioned by dualistic philosophy, fully committed to an anti-relationship with the body, and primed for enlightenment; but Morrison's account exposes a stagnant existence. "For thirty years she offered her body and her soul to God's Son and His Mother as completely as if she had taken the veil herself" (Morrison 225). From age nine Consolata lives the life of a nun, but her commitment does not necessarily reflect an independent decision. Consolata is fueled by an indebtedness and childlike attachment to the woman who saved her from the life of an orphan. She takes her place among the Indian girls of Oklahoma, and Mary Magna acts out of religious obedience to "alter their diets, their clothes, their minds; to help them despise everything that had once made their lives worthwhile and instead offer them the privilege of knowing the one and only God" (227). "For thirty years Consolata worked hard to become and remain Mary Magna's

pride” (224). There is no indication of the autonomous thought or freedom that is characteristic of enlightenment.

Consolata’s real story begins at the age of thirty-nine when she ventures into the town of Ruby with Mary Magna and a “faint but insistent sha sha sha” awakens her need for body. When she sees Deacon for the first time, “rocking in his saddle, back and forth, back and forth,” she becomes sexually charged (Morrison 226). In order to live a full life, Adrienne Rich suggests that a woman must “touch the unity and resonance of her physicality,” the very thing Consolata’s Catholic faith seeks to deny her (Spelman 126). The church has proposed for Consolata a God “who became human so [she] can know Him touch Him see Him in the littlest ways... so His doubt, despair and failure [can] mirror [hers]” (Morrison 225). But Consolata cannot see or touch her Western God. He is no longer human, and he takes no visible living shape that allows Consolata to identify with and through him. Save for the abuse she suffered as a child, she has known no touch, and so she “crack[s] like a pullet’s egg when she [meets] the living man” and “the wing of a feathered thing, undead flutter[s] in her stomach” (226). Her body (sexuality) has been dormant, but it is not dead.

In that moment, Deacon awakens Consolata’s need for self, and weeks later their consummated, physical relationship draws Consolata away from the convent and into another human being. “He was there in the night and she was there too and he took her hand in his” (228). Riding with him in his truck, Consolata exudes complete ease, as if she has known him all along. They drive for hours and when Deacon finally brakes, he cannot take her in his arms because she is “already there” (229). The two become one beneath “two fig trees growing into each other” (230). Before dawn Connie and Deek

pull away and face each other as if they are “each facing prison sentences without parole” (229). Morrison’s diction is carefully crafted to necessitate urgency for freedom. For the first time, Consolata is free to view the convent as a “prison,” rather than a place of grace and safety. Consolata cannot see it as such until she can envision herself outside of it, and that self does exist, in Deacon.

In many ways, Consolata belies the stereotypical reactions of a woman physically involved with another woman’s husband. She does not need Deacon to leave his wife. She does not need to settle down and make a life with him. She does not need a baby. Her “stone cold womb” opens itself, but never conceives (229). Morrison consciously chooses a different bodily path for Consolata that is not defined by childbirth or conventional motherhood. Consolata needs a reflection of self, and Deacon gives it to her. “Have you looked at yourself?” he asks, and looking into his eyes she responds: “I’m looking now” (231).

In terms of bodily progression towards enlightenment, Consolata does act independently in her decision to be with Deacon. The affair also grants her access to freedom from the convent and a reality of bodily experience that she has never known, but the singular act of sex cannot maintain a heightened awareness of body nor can it ultimately fulfill. For Consolata, sexual freedom simply acts as a jumping off point. From a feminist perspective of embodiment, it is necessary for Consolata to continue on her bodily journey, and acquire a deeper knowledge of body beyond the sexual sphere.

During the second wave of feminism, which began in the United States in the early seventies, sexuality was deemed central to the consciousness raising (CR) novel—a novel designed to introduce feminist ideas to a broader reading public and “woman at long last

[was] allowed to take the first step toward emancipation, to define and enjoy the forms of her own sexuality” (Hogeland 57, 59). The first real push for female freedom and empowerment was defined by a sexual revolution, but the sexual revolution is only and exactly that: a “first step.” Thirty years later, Morrison necessitates advancement of female empowerment. If Consolata’s affair had directly initiated a mind transformation without further body involvement, Morrison might have implied an inherent female need for the male and *his* mind. Consolata needs more than a sexual revolution, and more than a man. Her affair with Deek is only the beginning. Although Consolata returns, unwillingly, to the convent, her body is not done with her mind.

Female Cannibalism

In order to understand cannibalism as female territory, it is necessary to examine first the literal components of oral consumption, food, and hunger and each symbolic association with the female body. The biblical story of Eve is the first story to address the relationship between food and body. As Hélène Cixous notes, Eve’s discovery goes “through the mouth, through a certain oral pleasure” and Eve’s acquisition of knowledge is not limited to the spirit (Foss 150). The fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil—the “apple” itself—is a food that delivers literal taste to fulfill a bodily sense. The apple satisfies body and soul. It follows then, that food comes to symbolize libidinal or sexual desire, because it gratifies a bodily hunger. Any invitation (explicit or implied) to “consume, to devour, to dig in,” in its own way reflects cannibalistic urges (157). The internal thoughts of the convent women reinforce the trope of cannibalism: GiGi thinks of Seneca, “her voice mildly hungry like a kiss,” and Mavis finds biting GiGi “exhilarating” (Morrison 171). Morrison’s depiction of Consolata’s “gobble gobble” love

brings to mind Picasso's 1969 painting *The Kiss* that illustrates a couple, one swallowing the other, like the two fig trees "growing into one another" (230). Identification of the consumer and the consumed remains ambiguous, because both are the same. One defines the other.

Consolata's initial hunger is awakened in town by Deacon's "sha sha sha." She attempts to satiate that hunger with sex, and in the beginning, the regularity of that experience "smooth[s] her hunger to a blunt blade" (236). But her relief is only temporary. When the hunger returns and blurs self-other boundaries, Consolata bites Deek's lip and "hum[s] over the blood she [draws] from it" (239). Her body knows, before her mind, its desire. Deacon is a stand in for her own self. Accessing herself through another is not enough, and so subconsciously, she seeks it out—the self she sees reflected in his eyes. The only way to get there, to the "inside" part, is to dig in.

Consolata's internal reasoning seemingly follows application of the Catholic faith—a "mindless transfer." She moves from Christ, "to whom one gave total surrender and then swallowed the idea of His flesh, to a living man" (240). Raised in the church, Consolata knows that she is closest to God during communion. Bread is symbolic of Christ's body, broken, and the wine, represents his blood. Jesus tells his disciples in the Gospel of Luke: Eat it, drink it and "Do in remembrance of Me." Even knowledge of God necessitates movement through His physical body that was His son Jesus.

Deacon is at once startled and then repulsed by the woman "bent on eating him like a meal," and he reprimands Consolata: "Don't ever do that again" (239). But he will not give her the chance. Consolata's bite is a subconscious act of rebellion against the faith that seeks to deny her self, but the act also positions Consolata as the aggressor

within the sexual realm and precipitates a role reversal that upsets Deacon's patriarchal construct of male and female. In accordance with the "subordinate social standing of the woman, it is predominately female creatures, who, as 'tasty morsels' or 'delicious sips,' arouse the sexual appetite of male literary heroes and whose bodies serve male desire" (Burkhart 3). Patriarchal ideology removes agency from the female body. It remains a body having things done to it, rather than a body doing things. So, in Deacon's mind, if anyone is doing any biting or eating in the bed, it should be him. Consolata's cannibalistic act allows him to view her as a heathen. She suddenly embodies that dark and sinful existence associated with the female form, and she reflects the image projected by the inhabitants of Ruby. At least twenty-five years later, rallied by the men, Deacon ascribes an even darker cannibalism. He remembers Consolata as an "uncontrollable, gnawing woman" that tried to "trap and enfeeble him so they could do carnal things, unnatural things in the dark: A Salome [who] would have had his head on a dinner plate. That ravenous ground-fucking woman" (Morrison 280). Then, as he cases the convent in search of the women, Deacon recalls the "revolting sex" and likens it to "deceit and sly torture of children" (8).

Cixous make the argument for a "good" cannibalism, a female cannibalism, and its reflection of femininity acts as an alternative to phallogocentrism (Foss 140). Despite the seeming malelessness of the convent, its religious leader, Mary Magna, remains representative of the most archaic precepts of the patriarchy. Much later, when Consolata seeks to understand the message her own body attempts to relay during the cannibalistic urge, she must consider a body that exists outside of the Catholic faith. Finally, she understands why "being love struck after thirty celibate years [takes] on an edible

quality” (Morrison 228). Consolata knows that she “[doesn’t] want to eat [Deacon]. [She] just want[s] to go home” (240). She does not know yet where home is or how to find it, she only knows that Mary Magna is not home, and Deacon is not home. When Consolata attains a deeper knowledge and final freedom, she offers a more explicit explanation of her actions to the women of the convent. Her flesh was “so hungry for itself it ate him” (263). Her real hunger is not for the man’s flesh, but for her own. The need for self fuels a literal hunger—a desire that seeks to be satiated by the literal act of eating. Although it reveals itself during a routine sexual encounter, the body’s resort to cannibalistic tendencies is another essential bodily step on Consolata’s road to enlightenment. It acts to engage the mind and forces recognition of need for self, rather than a need for Deacon, and/or sexual intimacy.

Morrison’s trope of cannibalism does not stop at hunger for flesh and the self. She extends the metaphor introducing the apple. If cannibalism leads us to the Garden of Eden, and evokes an inherent association with Eve, then it leads us to imagery of the apple, which first reveals itself during Consolata’s most poignant encounter:

A man approach[es]. He is flirtatious, full of secret fun. Not six inches from her face, he remove[s] his tall hat. Fresh, tea-colored hair [comes] tumbling down, cascading over his shoulders and down his back. He [takes] off his glasses then and wink[s], a slow seductive movement of a lid. His eyes... [are] round and green as new apples (252) .

Consolata’s apparition represents the embodiment of her female self. He is a man because he is the side of herself that she has not fully known—the side she has refused to accept. His hair is tea-colored and long, like hers, but he is “flirtatious” and full of the “secret

fun” that might traditionally be attributed to the female body. He/she speaks and his/her words “lick the inside of her cheek” (252). Morrison parallels the dissolution of mind/body distinction with a gender-full male/female existence. She allows the whole self of Consolata to embrace both mind and body—to embody both male and female. The final realization of self, through this apparition, not only serves to break down the dualized male and female, but also allows Consolata’s bodily journey to come full circle. Morrison’s depiction of the man momentarily evokes the image of Deacon. Consolata first saw herself in Deacon, a man she recognized by his cowboy hat; but Deacon, as the “living man” and as the other, fails to offer a true reflection of self. Looking into this stranger’s eyes, she sees green apples the color of her own eyes. According to Cixous the apple “is visible, is promise, is appeal.” The apple has an inside and the “inside is good” (Foss 151). Consolata sees herself, reflected in those apple eyes, and knows that she is good. This man is home, because he is her.

From that scene, Consolata goes directly to the kitchen to prepare her last meal for the girls and the apple reappears. “Six yellow apples, wrinkled from winter storage, are cored and floating in water” (Morrison 260). A non-conventional interpretation of Eve and the apple acts to deconstruct the mind/body distinction, rather than promote it, and the fable of the forbidden fruit is transformed into a story about reclamation of the female body and appetite. Consolata’s apples are representative of the female body—each female body within the convent—and the imagery of water with those apples, serves as a foreshadowing for the ultimate scene of rebirth. The cored apples, once wrinkled, are made whole again, as Consolata fills their hollows. She will do the same for her women.

Menopause

When Consolata knows that Deacon will not return, she goes back to the church to care for Mary Magna. She recommits her body and mind, and both are lost to her. She loses her language, her embarrassment, and her ability to “bear light.” Nearly 20 years passes and Consolata has “nothing on her mind” (Morrison 242). Then suddenly, Consolata’s body reminds her again that although stifled, it is not dead. As Consolata works in the garden, sudden sweat pours from her neck and hairline, “like rain,” and Lone appears to nurse Consolata and guide her through “the change” (243). Although Western culture traditionally equates menopause with the beginning of physical and mental decline, Morrison evokes the imagery of water, most often symbolic of rebirth.

In an effort to maintain a progressive separation from the Western tradition of binary thought, consideration of non-Western cultures and practices offers a fresh perspective. Wanjiru Kamau’s dissertation, *Menopause: Perceptions and Meanings of Lived Experiences of the Agikuyu Postmenopausal Women of Kenya*, suggests that menopause is a celebratory stage of life. Menopause is the third of three stages—following menarche and menstruation—that comprise a hierarchy of “sacred laws” that belong exclusively to women and act to highlight different aspects of their spirituality. Kamua identifies eleven themes that constitute postmenopausal existence and among these are wisdom, freedom, self-fulfillment and realization of purpose of life—the same tenets that define Western enlightenment (180). In order to trace the positive body contribution of Consolata’s menopausal and postmenopausal experience in terms Kamau’s argument, it is not necessary to verify a perfect parallel. Similarities drawn

between the two separate accounts of female experience sustain an argument for Consolata's rebirth of body and mind that evolves during her postmenopausal stage.

The spiritual benefits of menopause that Kauma details in her dissertation are not immediately perceptible in Consolata at the onset of menopause. The only instant ramification is Consolata's access to supernatural powers, or "witchcraft" (Morrison 247). Menopause is crucial in terms of bodily progression because the practice of "seeing" or "stepping" in represents Consolata's final break from the confines of the Catholic faith. Consolata's initial hesitation to embrace her "gift" is not surprising, considering the art of "practice" and its association with the pagan realm that operates in direct opposition to Mary Magna, her God, and the Catholic faith. Consolata finally concedes to body, "stepping in" to save Soane's son, and she is "half exhilarated and half ashamed by what she has done" (245). Lone instructs her: "Don't separate God from His elements... Let your mind grow long and use what God gives you" (246). And Consolata does. She lives out her days caring for Mary Magna in "every way the flesh works" (263). When Consolata "steps in" on behalf of Mary Magna, she acts independently, knowing that Mary would have "recoiled in disgust and fury knowing her life was prolonged by evil" (247). Consolata's bodily exposure up to this point has prepared her to accept her gift. Its ultimate practice, on Mary Magna, is Consolata's final act of rebellion. When Mary Magna passes, Consolata mourns her, slipping into a near comatose, drunken state—hoping to die, and removed from her appetite; but Consolata's body will not succumb to death, and finally her mind is ready to receive the revelation of self that confronts her in an apparition (243).

That apparition of her male counterpart necessitates a final push toward Consolata's enlightenment, and the tenets that Kauma describes as constitutive of postmenopausal experience culminate to engage Consolata's heightened state of existence. The first is freedom. According to Kauma, freedom can be indicative of "freedom from vulnerability, a sign of good health" (189). Consolata addresses the women and although they recognize her, they notice a difference in her features—"higher cheekbones, stronger chin...teeth pearly white...hair shows no gray [and] her skin smooth as a peach" (Morrison 262). Death no longer threatens Consolata; she is free of death's reach. According to Kenyan tradition, menopause also frees women to "perform religious duties" (Kauma 189). With Mary Magna gone, Consolata is free to assume her position as religious head of the convent. She is the "new and revised Reverend Mother" (265).

The menopausal woman receives "added wisdom that complements her life experiences and continues to develop with age" (Kauma 185). Once the menstrual blood ceases externally, it is retained to expand wisdom and the ability to impart it. Consolata imparts her newfound wisdom during the last supper. She acts as a "Kihetti (very old woman) [who] becomes a guiding light and assumes a prominent position within her group" (186). Consolata has been the mother, but according to the girls, she has been a "play mother" who demands no respect; a "granny goose who could be... ignored, lied to or suborned" (Morrison 262). Now she takes charge. "I call myself Consolata Sosa. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will teach you what you are hungry for" (262). In her postmenopausal state she "assume[s] charge of all children, symbolically becoming a universal mother and a repository of wisdom for the entire clan" (Kauma 186).

Consolata's realization of purpose is directly related to her new ability to impart wisdom. No longer a passive confidant and indifferent comforter, Consolata demands that the women reclaim their own independent selves. During the last supper, Consolata reveals her plan for the women, and places them on the path toward enlightenment. She delivers her message:

My child body, hurt and soil, leaps into the arms of a woman who teach me my body is nothing my spirit everything. [...] Twice she saves it. [...] After she is dead I can not get past that. My bones on hers the only good thing. Not spirit. Bones. [...] So I wondering where is the spirit lost in this? It is true, like bones. It is good, like bones. One sweet, one bitter. Where is it lost? Hear me, listen. Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve (263).

This delivery defines the moment of Consolata's transcendence and stands as solid proof of her enlightened state. She is both "spiritually and rationally informed, possessing a mature ability to independently access knowledge, reality and freedom" (Spelman 111). She knows finally that the two can coexist—spirit and bones. She knows that her bones on Mary Magna's, her attempt to step in, was the only "good" thing." She is revived by her own purpose, and fulfillment of self. Consolata preaches the feminist theory of embodiment and breaks through the dualistic ideology of good and evil. Mary is not all good, as the Catholic faith assumes, and Eve is not all bad. "Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve." There is a little of one in the other. Through Consolata, Morrison stresses the unnaturalness of separating mind from body and at the

same time, promotes a parallel religion that does not seek to satisfy a patriarchal audience.

After her sermon, Consolata puts her preaching into practice. She commands the women to undress and lie down, each holding there on the floor, the physical position of her choice. Consolata then proceeds to paint the body's silhouette (Morrison 263). Margo Crawford refers to this as a "consciousness raising activity" which evokes the feminine realm of body and movement (Crawford, 173). These templates allow an unusual outlet for creativity as the women actively fill their outlines with paint and colored chalk. This form of "art therapy" (as Crawford refers to it) distracts the women from their "foolish babygirl wishes" (Morrison 222). They find purpose in their being and lose the "drift" (222). Most importantly, the painted bodies force the women to see themselves, "see in" to themselves as Consolata has. They are free to view their bodies as alive and good, and after finally "seeing in," the "stepping in" follows. In his *Symposium*, Plato condemns bodily love claiming that "bodies in unison [only] create more bodies" (Spelman 112). His argument suggests that the only bodies working in unison are those performing the act of (heterosexual) intercourse. But Morrison invites same-sex female bodies to work in unison toward a common purpose. When she allows the women to "step in" to each other's dreams and relive a profoundly fleshly experience, the women work in unison to create a new community—a new version of paradise.

Bodies inform a mind transformation and "with Consolata in charge [...] they alter" (265). The convent women are no longer "haunted" and gradually, they "[lose] the days" (262). Among the rubble of Western tradition, even time is lost to them. Subtle organizational changes give way to righteous rebellion. The garden is untilled. The old

woman does not “cover her awful eyes with dark glasses” and the younger women shave their heads (265). The women no longer hold themselves to Western standards of beauty. They are “holy” women, but pagan women, “dancing in hot sweet rain.” Morrison paints a hedonistic picture as “they let it pour like balm over their shaved heads and upturned faces. The rain is light and the thrill is erotic” (283). Morrison uses water imagery in the form of rain again, and all of the women, like Consolata, are reborn.

A nameless chapter of reconciliation cradles Morrison’s story—a chapter that presents the women of the convent: Consolata, dead, but alive in the lap of Piedade, and the others, dead or alive, and confronting the earthly embodiments of past shame. Morrison leaves her reader to wallow in ambiguity, as even the inhabitants of Ruby fail to account for the convent’s missing bodies; but whether these “bodacious black Eves” reveal themselves in apparition or in the living flesh, each is specifically noted with special attention to physical detail (18). Death may be ambiguous, but it is certain that these daughters of Consolata Sosa have a newfound purpose. Only Billie Delia is certain that the women will return, and she waits for them to reappear as fierce warriors of a holy militia, “with blazing eyes, war paint and huge hands to rip up [...] the backward noplac run by men” (308). If Ruby is “noplac,” then the women are someplace, and if they do die there in the convent after the men take aim, perhaps Morrison allows them to carry their physical bodies with them, into a new, feminized spiritual realm. If they are not dead, they will continue along their bodily journeys with a new vision, living with one foot in this life, and one in the next.

CHAPTER IV

LOUISE ERDRICH WRITES A GENDERFUL EXISTENCE: AGNES EMBODIES THE FATHER IN *THE LAST REPORT ON THE MIRACLES AT LITTLE NO HORSE*

The great lie that was her life, the true lie... the most sincere lie a person could ever tell.

Father Damien

In *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Louise Erdrich stages a comprehensive attack on the Western philosophy of dualism. Her methods provoke controversy as she contests the gender-restrictive roles of the Catholic faith by allowing her female protagonist to successfully assume a male role of leadership within the church. The medium of fiction allows Erdrich to safely employ this radical approach in an effort to integrate realities of cross-cultural construction and propose a vision of revised social and political production of gender. Had Erdrich chosen to simply ignore the oppressive reality of Western religion, and re-appropriate a fantastic version of the Catholic faith that might allow for a female priest, she would not successfully undermine the prevalent construction of gender and exaggerate the absurdity of gender restrictions as they apply to religious roles. In order to maintain an earnest commitment to her far-reaching purpose, Erdrich avoids reckless sacrilege and frivolous mockery in the creation of her “deviant” character, Father Damien.

In creating the character that appears in *Little No Horse* (LNH), Erdrich has said “I had no idea Father Damien was Agnes when I first wrote about him. Nor did I think

that Agnes DeWitt was Father Damien when I wrote the story "Naked Woman Playing Chopin" (Bacon).¹⁰ The unconscious convergence of these two characters into one supports the natural fluidity of Father Damien that is not contrived, but genuine. Erdrich grew up in North Dakota as a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwe, and her parents worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Her immersion within the Native American culture is significant not only because it informs a sense of story-telling that is influenced by oral tradition, but also because it reinforces the impact of a non-Western influence upon her creative conception. As Erdrich demonstrates her character's ability to cross gender boundaries, she communicates the possibilities of nonconformity to Western traditions. Whereas in *Paradise*, Morrison incorporates an Afro-centric dimension to suggest a possible disruption of the patriarchy, in *LNH* Erdrich calls upon a Native American tradition. For Morrison, the possibility of finding and rebuilding a matriarchal legacy is wrought with individual emotional pain and prospective death, but Erdrich's tone is less somber, as she maintains a hope for the progression of Western thought that might eventually abandon archaic notions of dualism.

Applied to *LNH*, a theory of embodiment moves in a different direction, to recognize the body as essential to the artist and the artist's identity, and to track the female artist who aspires to enlightenment. For Agnes, embodiment involves artistic expression, sexuality, and transgendered identity within the realm of a staunchly dualistic

¹⁰ After Agnes Dewitt assumes the identity of Father Damien, Erdrich refers to her character throughout the remainder of the text, using both names and male/female pronouns interchangeably. Particularly in personal reflections, Agnes refers to her female self. Otherwise, Erdrich maintains the identity of Father Damien as the man others see and know.

religion. If, through the character of Consolata we see a progressive appreciation and need for body, first stifled by a desire to please a mother figure and adhere to western Catholic religion, Erdrich's protagonist Agnes ascribes to the same religion, and similarly subverts that religion while simultaneously maintaining a sincere faith and commitment. But if Consolata's story reflects a more linear progression, with increasing necessitation of body that culminates in a final moment of enlightenment, Agnes's movement is staged by a series of enlightenments. Her mind/body realizations are continuously overlapping, so that where one ends and the other begins becomes hard to find. Similarly her enlightenment is not defined by one single moment. Moments of clarity are arranged to suggest a fluidity that remains antithetical to the form of Western philosophy. That fluidity charges every aspect of the story as Erdrich organizes a meaningful interchange between Western and native cultures in terms of religion and gender.

Agnes's perpetual experiencing and re-experiencing of mind/body collaborations makes her progression difficult to catalogue. Each bodily revelation is met in a circular fashion, and each experience resurfaces to encourage an understanding of the body in terms of artistic, sexual and gendered expression. Father Damien's harmonious, dualized existence provokes an enlightenment that is highly realized in terms of truth, clarity and freedom, and through her character, Erdrich offers the most evolved representation of body/mind interaction.

Woman Playing

Erdrich immediately reveals an urgent need for flesh with her first chapter's title, "Naked Woman Playing Chopin," and evokes a provocative image of the female body. Although in the prologue, Erdrich introduces her protagonist as Father Damien, readers

will know her first, in Part One, as Sister Cecelia. The convent she inhabits, “made of yellow bricks,” is a convent built of flesh, by flesh and with flesh—the flesh of the female bodies inside and the donated bricks that are covered with mortar to conceal the imprint of a secret physicality: “Fleisch” (Erdrich13). Only Sister Cecilia knows the secret of the bricks, and just as the convent must suppress the stamp of the “Fleish,” so must the sisters suppress their own flesh in terms of breast-binding and denied sexuality. Agnes senses that her innate, fleshly existence subverts the Catholic calling, and so she lives within the “secret repetition of [the] one word” that lies beneath the mortar on the bricks (13). Although her body is cloaked, breasts bound and head shorn, Agnes cannot completely deny corporality, for she must use her body, her hands, in order to play and teach piano. When her flesh goes to work on the keys, she enters into a state described in terms of holy transcendence, and early in the text she approaches enlightened existence. “She not only taught but lived music, existed in those hours when she could be concentrated in her being—half music, half divine light, only flesh to the degree she could not admit otherwise [...] she existed in her essence” (14). Through her art, Agnes can access a sense of freedom and clarity not afforded either Edna, Ella, or Consolata so early in their stories. Agnes’s body possesses a knowledge of its own, and releases that knowing while she plays. “Half light” speaks to her mind’s deeper understanding and although Erdrich evokes another-worldly existence during these spells, Agnes depends upon sophistication of flesh for the “half music,” as her hands are alive and thinking, “twitching drumming patterning and repatterning” different fingerings upon the keys (14).

Agnes's body is both agent and respondent in relation to the music. "One day, exquisite agony built and released, built higher, released more forcefully until slow heat spreads between her fingers up her arms stinging her bound breasts and shoots straight down [...] Such was her innocence that she didn't know she was experiencing a sexual climax" (15). Unlike Edna, Ella and Consolata, Agnes's first sexual experience is independent in nature; she does not experience gratification through sexual intercourse with a man or "other." Although she recognizes her "lover" as the dead composer Chopin, she achieves orgasm through her body alone, with fingers trembling over the keys. The inclusion of a ghostly "other," is mere fantasy. Following climax, Agnes experiences a "peaceful wave of oneness in which she enter[s] pure communion" (15). Agnes's body prompts this feeling of oneness, not unlike the oneness Consolata experiences at the height of her own transcendence. Immediately Erdrich writes a space for the body that is unrestrictive and uninhibited; she not only condones a love relationship with body, but markets that relationship as something desirable.

Agnes's body response to the music of Chopin, although more sexually explicit in its translation is not altogether unlike Edna Pontillier's response to Mademoiselle Reisz playing Chopin. Although Edna's experience necessitates another, the music stirs Edna, as a potential artist, and in that moment facilitates an ultimate sense of truth and progression toward enlightenment.

"The very first chords which Mademoiselle Reiz struck upon the piano sent a keen terror down Mrs. Pontillier's spinal column. [...] Perhaps it was the first time she was read, perhaps the first time her being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth. [...] She saw no pictures of solitude, of hope, of

longing, or of despair. But the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her” (Chopin 550).

Sister Cecelia experiences this same urgency, and her devotion to her art reflects a corporal bond and inherent need for bodily expression. She wakes in the night, with a “tightness in her chest. [...] Her throat shut. Her hands, drawn to the keyboard, floated into a long appoggiatura” (Erdrich16). When the Mother Superior witnesses the sister’s most passionate playing, she believes with certainty that it is the “very devil who manage[s] to find a way into [Agnes’s] soul through the flashing doors of sixteenth notes” (16). The Mother’s denunciation is directed by a somataphobic relationship with body that is encouraged by the Catholic tradition. Indulging fleshly pleasure is a particular abomination, a practice that threatens to contaminate the soul, but even as the Reverend Mother closes the keyboard and drags Agnes from the stool, Agnes knows she will not ultimately deny body, because in that quest for denial, she tells the Mother “there is no rest” (16).

Erdrich effortlessly conveys the significance of body within the context of the story. Like Consolata’s, Agnes’s mind and body are confined by the Catholic faith. The piano offers freedom from the oppression of the convent and Catholic service, and so the body wills her back to the piano, so that it might precipitate the mind’s realization of the body’s subjugation. Agnes is calm as she unpins her veil, “studiously dismantle[s] her habit,” and strips down to her shift (16). She exudes a mindful peace in this seemingly seditious act because she accepts her own realized truth that she cannot live a bodiless life. The feeling at the piano is right for her, and because the church will deny her that

feeling, she must seek spiritual fulfillment elsewhere. She echoes Consolata's sermon and instructs the Reverend Mother, pronouncing "bone [...] the only good thing" (Morrison 263). She sits down to play with finger bones upon the bone ivory keys. Just as Consolata's body pushed her beyond the confines of the convent and beyond the restrictive faith that denied body, so does Agnes's body, through artful expression, push her beyond the convent walls; just like Consolata, she will return later, to a new version of the faith. Agnes's inability to deny body informs the mind and necessitates her decision to leave the church for another calling.

Estranged from the convent, Agnes's new life is with Berndt Vogel in rural Wisconsin. She appears, "standing barefoot, starved, and frowzy in the doorway of his barn" (13). He accepts her into his home under the terms of a "temporary bargain," and under the assumption that he will marry her (Erdrich 13). She avows, however, that she "must never marry again," for she has "wed herself soul to soul to Christ" (13). When she finally convinces Berndt to purchase a piano, her artful expression stands to direct another phase of her bodily experience. When he asks her to play, she strips naked in order to communicate to him the "weight of feeling" she carries for her art. He looks on at her hands as they rise and fall "with the simplicity of water. [...] A snake of dark motion flexe[s] down her spine [and] her pale buttocks seems to float off the invisible bench. Her legs move like swimmers and [...] he watche[s] as her fingers spin like white shadows across the keys" (21). This scene at the piano recalls the movement of water, and the image of water sets the stage for a potential rebirth. Whereas for Edna and Ella, the water extends an invitation of freedom but also evokes a sense of foreboding, Agnes navigates the waters with ease. Through her playing, she unwittingly brings Berndt to

orgasm, and the piano serves again as a site of intervention, prompting a sexual phase defined by heterosexual consummation. The same virgin, who, “in the depth of her playing... had become a woman” while playing Chopin as Sister Cecilia, repeats the cycle. The virgin becomes a woman again. Only this time, having been afforded first, her own sexual pleasure, she goes on to experience her sexuality through another.

“Then followed their best times” (22). Agnes’s time with Berndt is wrought with “guilty” pleasure, only she feels no shame. She continues to deny him marriage, yet lives in full knowledge of her “mortal sin.” Although Erdrich seemingly adheres to a dualistic nature here, keeping the soul separate and purified according to Catholic law while the body remains restricted to sins of the flesh, she employs a careful caveat. The same body, denied communion and compared to the harlot Mary Magdelene is “incorporated into the holy body of [Jesus’] church [for] in her hands there is celestial music” (22). Even for all her willing transgression, the church cannot deny the tie to the faith that is in her hands, and so she continues to play the church organ. The church recognizes her artistry as a God-given gift, and appreciates her body for its ability. Erdrich links the body to something holy, rather than exclusively delineating it as a sinful bane.

After Berndt’s death, the piano allows Agnes bodily expression that replaces the loss of expressed sexuality. The bodily pleasure of playing consoles her and restores a sense of calm. When she is ready, a sense of clarity finds her again, as it did in the convent. “Into her brooding there intruded an absurd fantasy, the possibility of escape, though it was to a place few would consider so—the mission and the missionary life” (37). The term “brooding” connotes female sentiment piloted by body interference, distinguished from the logical male mind, but in this female space of emotion, Agnes

conceives of the notion that will serve her ultimate freedom. The water imagery returns in the shape of a literal flood, necessitating those waters and the rebirth of Agnes as Father Damien. She is the woman on the lid of the piano (40). Baptized in that river, and born again to new life.¹¹

Transfigured

It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw our strength to live and our reasons for acting. Simone de Beauvoir

The “transfiguration” of Agnes, involves a progression of both mental and physical transformation. She is transformed from a nun, in the serving role of Sister Cecilia, to the more earthbound character of Agnes, who adopts the role of a lover. She is transformed from virgin to woman at her own hands and from virgin to woman again, at the hands of Berndt. Agnes is then transformed from gender performing female to gender performing male, and it is this transformation that dominates and informs the remainder of the story. Agnes’s male self is first revealed in the form of an apparition, similar to that of Consolata’s. When Agnes awakes after her flight downstream on the lid of the piano, a spoon is held to her lips.

“Then she saw a man’s hands [hold] the spoon and the bowl. She slid her gaze up his strong arms, his shoulders, to his broad and open face. Kindness was there, sheer kindness, a radiance from within him fell upon her and it was like a pool of warm sunlight. She felt the slight breeze of his breath along her throat and
“warmth along her thighs, hovering elation. Bands of rippling lightness engulf her (42).

¹¹ Reference to the Catholic sacrament of baptism.

There is the insinuation of flirtation, perhaps even intercourse, during which the two become one in the night. Agnes lies next to him—this nameless man—falling asleep only after he does. When she awakes again, he is gone and she is resolute in purpose. “Having met Him once, having known him in a man’s body, how could I not love Him until death? I should attend him as a loving woman follows her soldier into the battle of life, dressed as He is dressed, suffering the same hardships” (43). Although Agnes recognizes this male form as God in the flesh, this apparition represents the male form of herself, embodiment of the mirrored “other.” Immediately following her vision Agnes sets about her gender transformation and sheds the outward female self for an external male self. As she vowed to follow him, “her soldier,” she will accompany Father Damien as the loving woman “into the battle of life,” to attend to God’s will on the reservation of Little No Horse.

Whereas Toni Morrison poses the obvious gender connection by way of Consolata’s dramatic male apparition, Erdrich takes it a step further to allow her character incorporation of a literal male dimension that requires an altered gender performance. Agne’s “new self” is marked by independent decision to occupy a male sphere. Any attempt to understand Agnes’s transformation within the confines of Western terminology results in the application of labels that immediately become problematic. Random House Dictionary of the English Language first defines androgynous as being both male and female; hermaphroditic (“Androgynous,” def.). Clearly this is problematic because Father Damien is not a biological hermaphrodite, he is a born female. A looser definition labels androgyny as the possession and/or blending of both feminine and masculine traits, or on the opposite end, being unidentifiable as either. Father Damien

does not so much blend her male and female selves—although these two together form a whole self, both identities are distinct. She is identified as a man by her flock, and yet, she simultaneously identifies herself as a woman. So often androgyny was the Western answer for combating gender stereotypes, and so it seems necessary for Erdrich to avoid this association, as she battles Western perceptions.

In “Unrestricted Territory: Gender, Two Spirits, and Louise Erdrich’s *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*,” Deirdre Keenan offers transgender as an “inclusive term for any individuals who transgress socially constructed gender norms,” and applies it to Father Damien, but the proposal of transgendered identity, like androgynous identity, remains problematic. Transgender identity is one “appearing as, [or] wishing to be considered as, a member of the opposite sex; deviating from the gender assignment of birth” (“Transgender,” def.). In Father Damien, Agnes successfully constructs a male identity with the hope that others will perceive her as such; her success as a Catholic priest depends upon it. However, she does not completely deviate from her gendered assignment of female. She maintains two gendered identities and keeps them separate: one male version of herself that she presents to the world, and one female identity that she upholds as a version of self. A less restrictive definition of transgender simply notes “having personal characteristics that transcend traditional gender boundaries and corresponding sexual norms” (“Transgender,” def.). In consideration of each of Father Damien’s gender assignments as distinct, there is little to suggest that within either role she transcends gender boundaries. In fact, more often than not, she answers to a common set of stereotypes. Transgender is further complicated by a social link (even explicitly in definitions) to the term transvestite. A transvestite is defined as a person,

especially a male, who adopts the dress and often the behavior typical of the opposite sex especially for purposes of emotional or sexual gratification” (“Transvestite,” def.). This application would be misleading for a variety of reasons. Agnes does not necessarily adopt the dress and behavior of any man—but that of a priest. And that role (as she understands it), is only human. Nor do her reasons for cross-dressing reflect emotional or sexual gratification, unless we understand her emotional needs fulfilled by commitment to the people of Little No Horse. Predominant social interpretations of both terms, “androgynous” and “transgender,” are nearly inextricably linked to the notion of a “deviant” sexual preference. Certainly to that end, Father Damien shows no signs of deviance. She is a heterosexual female, and she maintains that sexual orientation throughout the course of the text. Although these noted Western terms do address certain elements of Father Damien’s existence, none completely satisfies the identity of a woman who embraces two distinct gender performances under two different acceptable identities.

Experience of the transfiguration is essential to Father Damien’s complete mind/body knowledge. During her first operative moments as Father Damien, it becomes clear to Agnes that the transfiguration she has chosen is more than a mind decision; it will require bodily participation. The outward appearance she will maintain is not altogether unlike that of her previous Catholic identity as Sister Cecilia, (her breasts are bound, her head is shaved), but after her first meeting with the sisters at Little No Horse, Agnes composes a list of rules that will “assist” her transformation and she begins to replace the learned gestures of womanhood with those of the masculine. Her bodily decision incites an acting body that will inform her new existence. “Her thoughts become Damien’s thoughts. Her voice his voice, which deepen[s] as his stride lengthen[s] and grows bold”

(Erdrich 76). Her biological body cooperates as well. In terms of her menstruation, she asks the Almighty to stop the “useless affliction” in order to allow her a greater “freedom” in her role; and Agnes feels a “lessening then near cessation” and the result is an “eerie rocking between genders” (78).

In a letter to the Pope, Father Damien suggests that Agnes has “drowned in spirit;” he maintains that he has lost an old life (Agnes) and gained a new one. Agnes’s resolve to throw off her female self reflects the sincerity of her post, and in order to rightfully maintain that post she believes she must establish a conviction for her male self and communicate an identity that might ultimately be considered acceptable to the powers that be, especially in weighing her commitment and progress at Little No Horse. But even though Father Damien is forced to suppress the female form of Agnes, he cannot abandon her. As Agnes becomes familiarized with her male self, Father Damien clings to the female, and that allegiance is repeatedly evidenced throughout the text as Erdrich refuses to commit her character to the male pronoun. Erdrich champions for the female self through manifestation of her character’s continued sexuality that culminates in an affair with a visiting priest, Father Gregory Wekkle. Despite outward expression of gender, Agnes is aware of her position within the confines of a heterosexual relationship.

When Father Wekkle first arrives, “his presence startles her into an objective look at her house, and the clutter of it suddenly dismayed her” (195). Agnes’s reaction is the feminine gendered response of a woman anxious to prove her domestic capability. When she recognizes the threat of female attachment, Agnes prays that something will call Gregory away, “anything but risk again that jolt of pleasure in the immediacy of his presence” (195). As Father Damien fulfills his obligation to instruct Father Wekkle, the

couple's time together results in increased sexual tension, and when the wall of books between their beds finally collapses, Agnes's body rises toward Gregory's, "light, powerful and calm" (200). Both recognize the "strange and unexpected component of their passion—how safe, how ordinary, how blessedly normal it felt" (201).

Again, as with Berdnt, Agnes lives out her happiest days with full knowledge of her mortal sin. She continues to perform as a priest by day but with increased zeal, and as her body seeks sexual gratification, she retreats to Gregory's bed at night. Agnes's sexual consent reflects an independent decision, but also demonstrates an independent reality of sex that is not defined by the Catholic faith. Her new identity as Father Damien does not inform her sexuality; she is free to act with her body, and her holy purpose is unaffected. Gregory's initial willingness to acknowledge and accept his lover's unconventional gendered performance suggests the possibility of a Western capability to question conventional gender roles, but when he is finally called away from the reservation, he proposes that he and Damien both abandon the faith, and live together as a married couple, male and female. When Agnes denies Gregory because she cannot leave who she is, Gregory fails to accept her identity and her post as anything more than "sacrilege" (207). She is compelled to "leave the body they shared" because she knows that their relationship does not define her, and her ultimate commitment to him, as a wife, might inhibit her promise to God. In refusing Gregory, she does not deny the body; she simply chooses the greater love that she has for her self, for her commitment to God and the mission. She relates newfound clarity and she understands her love for the Ojibwe people as more lasting and ultimately fulfilling. In response to Gregory's attempt to demean her womanness, Agnes voices full knowledge of self: "I am nothing but a priest" (207). Her

active body, in response to a sexual affair, confirms her purpose, and directs her future there on the reservation.

Father Damien's decision to refuse Gregory does not indicate a final rejection of her female self. After Wekkle leaves, Agnes feels a "nameless and disturbing energy about the piano" (218). When she sits down to it, repressing and unsure, her hands "spring out of her sleeves and crash down in an astonishing chord" (219). Music pours out in a waterfall, and water stages another rebirth—this time, sexual celibacy. "God had taken the music away for a time to bring her closer, then returned it when removing the last sexual love she would ever have" (219). Agnes finds affirmation of her female self through revived musicality. The piano stays with her, as will her female self stay with Father Damien. When Father Wekkle returns years later, Agnes attends to him as a woman, nurturing and patient.

Keenan proposes the Two Spirit as a Native American alternative to the Western constructs of androgyny and transgender, and offers support for the term that may allow for Father Damien's freedom of female body on the reservation. Consideration of the Two Spirit is essential because, as Keenan points out, it reinforces the significance of Native American tradition, and demands readers' observance of a non-Western gender ideology. Nanapush comes to represent a people who can openly question gender without concern or prejudice. In claiming an identity that is both masculine and feminine, Agnes responds to a spiritual (not a religious) calling, and cultivates "the qualities that define [her] social role and spiritual gifts" (Keenan 2). Just as Consolata's male identity, although limited to the form of an apparition, leads to her realize her own spiritual calling and assume her position as a "Revised Reverend Mother," so does Agnes literally

embrace a male identity of herself to assume her own spiritual position. Keenan suggests that the term Two Spirit is not adequate in its translation because of an unintentional, implied dichotomy associated with the Western binary of gender (2).¹² The term itself is further problematic because it implies exclusion of body, and in Western dichotomous terms, sole identification of “spirit” promotes elevation of soul.

As it applies to both Father Damien and the larger Native American construct of gender, the term “Two-Spirit” fails to acknowledge an acting body that informs identity and ultimately serves to illuminate potential enlightenment. Under the Western construct that recognizes male and female, we can understand Agnes/Father Damien acting a full range of gender defined by male and female—being gender-full. “The job of becoming Father Damien had allowed the budding eccentricities of Agnes to attain full flower” (344). Agnes’s physical employment of the male self precipitates a full blossoming of her femininity. When these two, male and female, are forced to exist as separate entities (as defined by the binary recognition of sexes), the Western tradition recognizes the complementary nature of the two, as exemplified in the form of heterosexual coupling. Erdrich proposes that this binary can co-exist within a single individual. For the Native American tradition that recognizes a plurality of genders, a “gender-full” existence comes to be defined by a wide range of gender performance that is not limited to the realms of

¹² Keenan notes that the implications of “Two Spirit” within the confines of the English language assume an association with sexual identity, made up of both male and female, so that having both (two) genders provides the basis for assumption of the role, “Two Spirit.” However, many Native American subcultures recognize distinct third and fourth sexual identities that are not simply male/female deviants. See Sabine Lang’s *Men as Women, Women as Men : Changing Gender in Native American Cultures* (1998) and also *Two-spirit people : Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality*, edited by Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang (1997).

male and female. Within the same person, points of gendered performance can overlap, blurring the assignment of any given action as either male or female and creating a shifting identity that marks the fluidity and range of every gender in between, and beyond a dualistic nature. As male/female duality collapses, it is increasingly difficult to assign mind/body distinctly between genders. In that constant shifting, acting Agnes, Father Damien, and any point of gender in between, Agnes embraces a gender-full role that allows her to find ultimate freedom and clarity.

As a genderful being, Father Damien exudes repeated recognition of her fully human existence. When Father Damien holds a newborn Lulu, Erdrich alludes to the denied motherhood Agnes' position requires, but with no implied sense of female lack. Nanapush incorporates Agnes into a family that is not defined by gender roles. "She was overcome with strange contentment not maternal so much as fully human" (Erdrich 184). She relates to the child not only as Agnes, but also as Father Damien and that fullness of experience is not defined by a lack. In one of many letters to the Pope, Agnes invites sympathy for her seemingly blasphemous decision on the basis of humanity. "My hand is a human hand. My heart a human heart. My feet walk the earth to which our bones return" (232). Bones are not reduced to meaningless extensions, but are glorified as enduring symbols of humanity.

Father Damien's movement throughout the story is not dominated by a journey toward self-discovery. With each new identity is newfound clarity, but whether Agnes, Sister Cecilia, or Father Damien, she never exudes a sense of insecurity or uncertainty. She maintains an unwavering sense of self, even as it is an evolving sense of self. Her final body transformation incites new understanding of the human experience. "Both

Sister Cecilia and then Agnes were as heavily manufactured of the gesture and pose as was Father Damien. And within this, what sifting of identity was she? What mote? What nothing?" (76). This "sifting" refers to a multiplicity of genders and the recognition of an inherent equal capacity to perform either, or both, or any. Agnes's epiphany suggests that beneath the surface of a gender performance that adheres to a birth assignment, the opposite performance is suppressed. Father Damien would be "Agnes's twin, her masterwork, her brother" (77). As she embraces a genderful existence, Agnes's body remains significant to her understanding of self. Only instead of being identified by what her body is, she identifies herself based upon what she has done with it.

Enlightenment

Keenan suggests that Father Damien's response to Nanapush's question of gender reveals a "suppressed anxiety and emotional residue from the deviance of passing" (Keenan). This assumption is seemingly unfounded, as Father Damien directly denies any guilt related to her chosen position; rather, she concludes that "God sent none (guilt)," and so she will not invent any" (77). However, an affirmation of guilt need not imply indictment of her acting body or shame that revolves around a "deviant" gendered identity. Nor must it signify guilt that is warranted. If we can understand guilt as an imposition associated with the fixed tradition of Catholicism, then we can identify it as a constant reminder of the "truth" that will not accept Father Damien's "false" self. As with every other binary proposed within the text, the line between truth and duplicity is similarly blurred. The truth that Agnes resists is worse than the lie, because the truth threatens to remove her body from its holy purpose. In order to achieve enlightenment, she must come to terms with her bodily violation of the Catholic faith and declare an

independent truth that results from melding her Western religion with pagan practice. In doing so, she embraces a Native American sense of spirituality. Independent freedom allows Agnes to assert and fully exercise her non-dualized existence. Just as she traversed gender boundaries, she finds herself “wandering mightily through heaven and earth. [...] exploring worlds inhabited by both Ojibwe and Catholic” (211). Finally she reveals her self-revelation during a confrontation with the dog and “converts to the pagan she is at heart” (310).

Father Damien’s struggle with “guilt” is personified by repeated confrontations with the talking black dog. Whether the dog embodies imposed Catholic guilt, or a Catholic sentence to eternal separation, Erdrich reinforces the imposition of an evil force by naming the section “The Mighty Tempter,” and compares the dog’s role to that of Satan, who tempted Jesus just before his death. Agnes must overcome the dog and everything it represents, in order to experience a full knowledge of self that is essential to enlightenment. She names the dog Death and describes it as “what she dealt with and she knew it, dreaded it, hated death’s intimacy and the strange greed with which it pursued every living thing. Agnes screamed, bent her fingers into wire hangers around the mange-bald throat, locked her knees, squeezed harder, harder, harder, until the god yelped, gave up, and disappeared” (311). She has conquered death and whether the dog appears as an apparition or reality, Father Damien employs a genuine physical force, and it is that exertion of bodily power, paired with mental strength that allows her to overcome.

In her final days, “Agnes live[s] fully and intimately in a state of communion” (307). Erdrich brings her character’s enlightenment full circle, back around to the original state of communion she knew as Sister Cecilia on the piano bench at the convent. The

death Father Damien faces in her old age, the death she goes on to willingly, alone on Spirit Island, and away from the reservation, is a different death. It is not a Death that pursues her, but a death she welcomes. She knows we are “ever betrayed by our bodies” and in order to evade the “gaping and examination she would suffer at the hands of the curious,” she resolves to drown herself (342). When she drinks alone to “the huge life she had known at Little No Horse,” Agnes restates her full existence; and when it is time, the spirits do not require that she surrender her body. One moment, she is laughing, “at the foolishness of all design,” and the next,

One side of the world went dark. She sank to her knees and with an amused wonder watched as slowly, with an infinite kindness, darkness covered up the other side as well. Sightless, now, she sank to earth [...] Underneath her and before her, a wide utter emptiness opened. Trusting, yearning, she put her arms out into that emptiness. [...] With a yank, she was pulled across (350).

Erdrich presents the death as kind, and as Agnes crosses over, readers envision a final transcendence that necessitates body—a hand on hers that pulls her over. Perhaps inspired by Nanapush’s concept of time, Father Damien’s death is a simple passage from one life—one purpose—to the next. Perhaps she will simply “fall off the fish,” and retreat into the dark water to reclaim the “feminine depths below” (351).

CONCLUSION

As American women writers address issues related to the female body they communicate an attitude toward body that either adheres to the patriarchal construction of corporal rejection or pioneers new paths for positive embodiment. Writers who conceive of a strong female body, a necessary female body, effectively chip away at the pervasive dualistic ideal.

Despite their differences, the characters of Edna, Ella, Consolata and Agnes are united in a common struggle for freedom. Each character's specific terms of oppression and freedom, however, denote a range of female possibilities, and distinguish various roles for the body. Although, in death, Edna ultimately rejects the possibility of embodied independence, she was free to access and process feelings of discontent. As Ella seeks to break free of the domestic space, resisting the roles of wife and mother, she expresses resentment toward the female body, and attempts to establish a self that values reason over bodily experience. Both Consolata and Agnes oppose a patriarchal structure that extends beyond the domestic sphere, into the realm of religious traditions. Neither accepts the role of either wife, or mother, and so their body experience supports a rebellion that is not defined by sexual freedom or characterized by maternal legacy. For these women, a call for corporal rejection threatens realization of an individual purpose. While the philosophical tradition of attained enlightenment insists upon corporal rejection, Morrison and Erdrich claim the body as part of the whole self that their

characters must find, and that self is essential to individual enlightenment. As these literary characters are freed to know and experience a full self, they construct a new version of enlightenment that is not restricted by a somatophobic ideology.

In his discourse on the subject of enlightenment, which he defines as a “mature ability to access knowledge,” Immanuel Kant argues that “nothing is required for this enlightenment, [...] except freedom; and the freedom in question is the least harmful of all, namely, the freedom to use reason publicly in all matters” (2009). Like Plato, Kant calls for “reason” as the highest faculty and ultimate human experience, with no mention of bodily knowledge. His androcentric definition of enlightenment is informed by the dualistic philosophy that necessitates a mind freed from body. Feminist reconsideration of enlightenment calls for freedom to employ and appreciate the body without shame or reservation. “Independent freedom” encourages women to free themselves from patriarchal oppression that forbids the body’s participation. A “freed” mind that rejects dependence upon conventional wisdom is not a mind that leaves body behind. A female enlightenment then is an embodied enlightenment that not only invites bodily participation, but demands it. Embodied enlightenment does not seek death as the ultimate transcendence, nor does it celebrate an eternal separation that finally emancipates the soul from its bodily confinement. A female enlightenment is the aspiration of a woman embracing her earthly, corporal element.

Throughout this study, a theory of embodiment outlines each individual female protagonist’s progression toward embodied enlightenment, while simultaneously demonstrating the larger evolution of embodiment. Unlike Edna and Ella, who fail to attain enlightenment, the enlightened characters of Consolata and Agnes do not deny

body, but employ it, together with mind to fulfill their final purpose and acquire greater understanding. For Edna Pontillier, death, at best, offers final passage into the realm of conventional enlightenment, but there is no realization of bodily freedom throughout her journey, or at its culmination. For Ella Price, the realization of full self remains elusive and without proof of her ultimate commitment to shed the mistrust and distaste she harbors for her own body, her progression is interrupted indefinitely. For both Consolata and Agnes, enlightenment does not require transcendence to another spiritual realm; each woman realizes a fullness of self and purpose before death. Their ultimate mortality does not necessarily inhibit the perpetuation of both mind and body. Death implies a potential “loss” of the physical body, but if traditional enlightenment allows the soul to transcend the body, then perhaps a female enlightenment allows a new version of the body to accompany the soul on that journey. The hopefulness with which Morrison and Erdrich portray their characters allows for the possibility of an afterlife, where these women appear, not as shapeless souls but as women with newfound purpose, possessing meaningful bodies.

In terms of literary application, the construction of a female enlightenment must be continually evolving, informed by a theory of embodiment that seeks to unveil a broad range of celebrated bodily expression and experience. Women writers who acknowledge and incorporate a diverse cultural identity, can serve to model a new experience of the female body this is not only and always defined by patriarchal prejudices. The fact that we are all women does not mean that our lives are all “open books,” nor that our stories are the same, but as female authors like Morrison and Erdrich chart new territories, they open up their own books, and the rest of us can take a peek.

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VITA

Ashley Carol Bourgeois was born in Franklin, Louisiana on August 17, 1980, the daughter of Kathy Anne Bourgeois and John Lawrence Bourgeois. Following high school graduation in 1998, she attended Baylor University and received her Bachelor of Arts in English in May 2002. After graduation, she was employed in Houston for nearly five years before entering into the graduate literature program at Texas State University-San Marcos in August, 2007. She will graduate in May, 2009, and she has accepted a teaching assistantship at the University of Kentucky, where she will pursue a doctorate in Literature.

Permanent Address: 719 Winchester Bend
Huffman, Texas 77336

This thesis was typed by Ashley Bourgeois.