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Publication Date

2015

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

The Radius of Loss:
Readings on Contemporary African American
and Iranian American Literature and Performance

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy

in

Literature

by

Allia Ida Griffin

Committee in charge:

Professor Sara E. Johnson, Co-Chair
Professor Babak Rahimi, Co-Chair
Professor Dennis R. Childs
Professor Nadine George-Graves
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2015

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The Dissertation of Allia Ida Griffin is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Co-Chair

Co-Chair

University of California, San Diego

2015

DEDICATION

For my grandmothers

Effat Mohammadi
and
Forough Lagha Sahabjamiee

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

From beginning to end, the process of writing this dissertation has been a journey that owes deep gratitude to many. I am immensely grateful for the generous Dissertation Fellowship granted by the Department of Literature at the University of California, San Diego. This financial support allowed me time to work solely on my research and writing. This fellowship also supported my travel to Iran, which was a significant influence on this project. Thank you to Kristin Carnohan and Patrick Mallon for all of their help with paperwork and timelines. I would also like to thank Director Anthony Haney for his time during the production of *The Mountaintop*. Thank you also to Mark Kitaoka for allowing me to use your beautiful photographs.

I have been consistently fortunate to be surrounded by inspiring mentors who continually encourage my progress. I am indebted to Aldo Billingslea, for his mentorship through each phase of my education. Thank you to Tracy Butts, for her continued support throughout the past seven years. Many of the thoughts and ideas present in this dissertation emerged during seminars in my first two years of the doctoral program. Thank you to Paige duBois, Shelley S. Streeby, Meg Wesling, Lisa Lowe, and Rosemary M. George for nurturing my project in its most nascent stages. Your feedback and optimism about the earliest versions of my work were extremely helpful. These first seminars were also productive

because of my peers, with whom I share special memories of when this all started. We spent hours together in seminar and also frequently engaged in some form of protest. Thank you to Lauren Heintz, Ash Kini, Davorn Sisavath, and Josen Diaz. I am especially beholden to my dear friend, Eunsong Kim. Thank you for your friendship and encouragement. The phone calls, meals, coffee, laughter and words have meant so much to me.

I am grateful for my committee for being both open and continuously supportive of the type of project I envisioned. Moving to the Bay Area was made possible by their willingness to converse on Skype, by phone and over email. Thank you to Dennis R. Childs, who first employed me as a reader for his undergraduate course. I was inspired by his engagement with his students and learned a tremendous amount by observing him teach. Thank you to Nadine George-Graves for her encouragement to work closely with a production. She challenged me to move beyond reading plays and instead focus on live performance. My third chapter is greatly influenced by her support. One of the most important moments in my growth occurred when I took a Persian Literature course at UC Irvine. The fourth chapter was started in this course and its development is due to the spectacular feedback I received from Nasrin Rahimieh. Thank you for making Irvine feel like home. Your mentorship of your students coupled with your scholarship is truly inspiring. I am deeply thankful for Roshanak Kheshti, whose exceptional generosity with her time and feedback is a

tangible component of this project. Thank you for always being present at my presentations of earlier versions of these chapters. Your encouragement throughout every stage of this program has been so important to me. Thank you to Babak Rahimi, whose enthusiasm for my pursuit of this project has been invaluable. I am grateful for your continual efforts to bring important conversations to campus. I was able to present early versions of my work because of events that you organized. My second chapter is a direct result of your bringing Shahla Talebi to campus. Much gratitude is due to Sara E. Johnson for her immeasurable support and guidance from the earliest stages of this project, through qualifying exams, and through each draft of every chapter. Thank you for your mentorship and kindness—both have been influential to my progress.

My extended family has been an enormous source of love and nourishment. Thank you to the Griffin family for being so supportive, especially when this felt like an impossible dream. Thank you to my extended Dabiran and Homayoun families for your hospitality while I was in Iran. I am grateful for my sister, whose sense of humor was a source of comfort. Dad, thank you for asking me nearly every day for the last two years: “how many pages are left?” Your daily reminders to stay focused on my goal helped me to see how this could become a reality. Mom, you have always been my model of radical feminism, even when I didn’t recognize it as such. Thank you for reading every draft of this along the

way. Finally, my gratitude to Kevin cannot possibly fit on this page. Your support as a partner goes beyond what I could even dream of.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Radius of Loss:
Readings on Contemporary African American
and Iranian American Literature and Performance

by

Allia Ida Griffin

Doctor of Philosophy in Literature

University of California, San Diego, 2015

Professor Sara E. Johnson, Co-Chair
Professor Babak Rahimi, Co-Chair

This dissertation navigates a space of intersection between literature and performance emerging from African and Middle Eastern diasporas. With a focus specifically on African American and Iranian American texts, this project identifies the potential for collaboration between cultural texts produced by artists writing about the afterlife of captivity and loss. My readings examine the separate

excursions into the past made by each artist in what I recognize as an attempt to disrupt a social forgetting that renders specific memories and experiences as historical excess. My project moves beyond the simple compilation or juxtaposition of voices by seeking to critically engage with the eruptions of haunting memory and inherited nostalgia. Furthermore, I argue that a specific form of melancholy figures hauntingly in African American and Iranian American cultural texts. Nostalgia for a site identified as home—whether it be Ghana or Iran—looms prominently in the literature as does the understanding that the home that is full of both meaning and identity has been foreclosed upon as the feasibility or prospect of a return is both treacherous and often dispiriting not necessarily because of the circumstances of the destinations, but because the home that would satisfy the yearning no longer exists. My readings of these texts pay close attention to how these types of traumatic memories specific to captivity continue to circulate, illustrating the afterlife of imprisonment and the radius of loss. I situate points of connection through how the texts perform loss, the centrality of captivity, the theoretical framework of black feminist writings, and lastly, through the tensions of home that erupt in the texts. The aim of my dissertation is to consider how these cultural texts create an archive that bespeaks the critical role women have performed in challenging state-sanctioned violence. While I am careful to not collapse or reduce the specificity of differences in

historical circumstances, my scholarship seeks to provide openings for discourses of collaboration that have yet to occur.

INTRODUCTION

Salaam, friends. I created these images to raise awareness about racist police violence in America and as an expression of solidarity. I experienced police brutality in my native Iran, and the struggle to confront that violence resonated with me.
—Shirin Barghi¹

Diaspora is continual; it is the unfolding of experience into a visual, aural, kinesthetic culture of performance.... In this reminding—this bringing into consciousness of the intangible experience of a mythic past—we wear memory on our bodies; we see each other in skins that go together or sometimes belong apart. The connective skin of diaspora offers us protection from the coldness of individual isolation... Performance becomes a dialogue between ourselves and others as we ‘make sense’ of diasporic journeys.
—Thomas F. DeGrantz and Anita Gonzalez, *Black Performance Theory*

Following the fatal police shooting of unarmed teenager Michael Brown, Shirin Barghi, an Iranian journalist, created a graphic image to offer the public an opportunity to mourn the life ended too soon. The black-and-white image was relatively simple, highlighting his last words as well as his name, age and date of death. By centering the focus on his final words, rather than the testimony of the police officer, Barghi reversed the dominant narrative that circulated throughout the media. Much of the dominant narrative favored the murderer and not the murdered, by sometimes subtly and other times overtly characterizing eighteen-year-old Michael Brown as a criminal. The criminalizing of the dead foreclosed

¹ This epigraph is taken from an online posting (tweet) by Barghi on August 17th, 2014 describing the motivation for her project.

the potential for mourning publicly because it orchestrated a defense for his murder rather than his life. In the continual pull to criminalize the dead, the dominant media coverage evidenced a refusal to value specific bodies. Inserting her project against this narrative, Barghi's artwork anticipated the absence of public mourning that would result from the criminalization of Brown, and by extension, the rationalization of his killing.

When Barghi circulated her art in response to this dominant narrative, she critically connected Brown's death to the far-too-many victims of police brutality and thus disrupted the perception that his death could be perceived as an isolated incident. Instead, her art forced a reckoning with the systemic injustices that perpetuate fatal violence against specific bodies². In the epigraph cited above, she explained that it was precisely her experience in Iran that reminds her of *that violence*. In this way, her move to act in solidarity illustrated how individuals "wear memory on their bodies" and also how "we see each other in skins that go together." She recognizes the violence in the Middle East as analogous to the police brutality responsible for the deaths of many young black men and women in the U.S. For Barghi, naming *that violence* disrupts the narrative that imagines the U.S. as free from the violent, state-sponsored violence that is associated with the Middle East. She interrupts the dominant American imaginary that circulates

²Her project creates a record by connecting the deaths of many individuals including: Trayvon Martin, Oscar Grant, Sean Bell, Eric Garner and Kimani Gray. I elaborate on Barghi's project further in Chapter Two.

the perception *that violence* is to be expected over there, but would never exist over here. I read this as a significant intervention and critique because the Middle East—and Iran specifically—is imagined always in opposition to the West—and the U.S. in particular. I cite Barghi’s project here alongside a section from *Black Performance Theory* as an entrance to a project that engages in a collaborative and complicated meditation on communities that experience loss as a direct result of state-sponsored terror. In what follows, I articulate the stakes of my project by citing the specific experiences that inspired this project before explicating the multiple layers that undergird my reading of contemporary literature and performance emerging from African and Middle Eastern diasporas.

My first year at UCSD shaped the type of project I imagined in many ways. During this year, my cohort and I spent arguably equivalent time within and outside of the seminar space. Behind closed classroom doors, we—in respectable, hushed tones—articulated our understanding of critical race theory and attempted to render familiar to ourselves complex terms and concepts. But outside of these spaces, on the pavement and on the concrete steps, our voices were made hoarse because of all the screaming. We were screaming because that seemed to be the only way to respond to learning that a student on our campus found an unclaimed piece of rope, reshaped it into a noose, and hung it in the library³.

³ In February 2010, a series of racist incidents occurred on campus that began with a student-organized, off-campus party called the “Compton Cookout.” Immediately following the party, students on a campus broadcast utilized a racial epithet targeting black students and then a noose

In the organized protests that followed the racist incidents on campus, I remember recognizing Iranian-American undergraduate students in those spaces, though unlike many of the other students involved in cultural organizations on campus, the Persian Club had not formally announced their solidarity with the Black Student Union. I knew who they were and could recognize their faces because I seen them before in an Iranian Film Studies course. Students from all majors crammed into this particular classroom not because they needed the course credit, but because they wanted to take a class with an Iranian professor in a space that did not demonize their culture. In some ways, this image recalls for me the dubious position of being Middle Eastern and American because while there is an exceptionally visual presence in the media, actual narratives of people of Middle Eastern descent exist on the periphery of the university space, if at all.

Thus, to be present in the space of protest and to physically support the BSU, but to refuse to name their bodies in those spaces was peculiar. When I asked about this, the reply I was given was that the individual Iranian students of course supported the BSU, but because of the bylaws of their organization—a social club—that stated their involvement remain firmly apolitical, they could not make any statements of official solidarity from their organization. In many ways, this unnamed presence stems from being distinctly first-generation and being

was found hanging in the library. The incidents on campus illustrated the hostility and racism towards students, staff, and faculty of color. Several protests, including a student-led occupation of the Chancellor's Office, were organized in the weeks following the incidents.

raised with a genuine fear of political involvement. Yet considering that their presence on this campus was always already political, the decision to remain unnamed when the larger critical conversation is on representation was problematic. It is for this reason that I read Barghi's art as well as the naming of her own body in solidarity as a critical moment of collaboration.

It was through this experience that I learned the scholarship I wanted to produce had to engage with messy and sometimes mundane, covert but sometimes calculated, eruptions of racism, of sexism, of violence, of hate, of exclusion and of hierarchical thinking that is pervasive and requires a keeping up with the current moment. The main argument of this dissertation is that there is an intersection between works emerging from African and Middle Eastern diasporas that requires serious study. I ground my approach by considering how knowledge about these two groups has been produced and circulated in the U.S. context. As I began to navigate this intersection, I recognized the presence of haunting memory and inherited nostalgia. When I dug further, I focused my attention on the afterlife of imprisonment and the articulation of radical feminisms within these two traditions.

The intersection my project seeks to illuminate between these two traditions is not an implied one. However, several scholars have been influential in already navigating this space. While not explicitly on both traditions, Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* was a foundational text that expressed a nostalgia

for a foreclosed homeland that speaks directly to a desire that exists in contemporary literature emerging from the Iranian diaspora. The narrative framing and the movement of that text, the grappling with being outside of place and time and also the search for the how, continue to be influential to how I approach my own writing. Scholarship by Angela Davis, Michelle Alexander, Toni Morrison and Hortense Spillers⁴ was also tremendously influential to the framing of this project. Within the sphere of Iranian studies, Hamid Dabashi's work was helpful, as was scholarship by Nasrin Rahimieh, Roshanak Kheshti, Roxanne Varzi, Nima Naghibi and Farzaneh Milani.⁵ In terms of staging the past in the present, Harry Elam, Jr.'s work was very influential as was Avery Gordon in thinking through the ghostly presence⁶.

This project is invested in cultural texts that disrupt the type of knowledge production that supports a singular, dominant narrative by invoking the voices that have often been silenced in the process of national history building. Although this archive is not a form of redress or healing, it is a form of creating evidence of survival and also of resistance. In what follows, I highlight the narrative threads that weave together the story I hope to tell through my readings of these specific texts that would not typically be read together. While other ways to organize these

⁴ See *Are Prisons Obsolete* (Davis), *The New Jim Crow* (Alexander), *What Moves at the Margin* (Morrison), and *Black, White, and In Color* (Spillers).

⁵ See *Iran: A People Interrupted* and *Brown Skin, White Masks* (Dabashi), *Warring Souls* (Varzi), *Rethinking Global Sisterhood* (Naghibi), and *Words, Not Swords* and *Veils and Words* (Milani).

⁶ See *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson* (Elam) and *Ghostly Matters* (Gordon).

texts remain, I situate points of connection through how the texts perform loss, the centrality of captivity, the theoretical framework of black feminist writings, and lastly, through the tensions of home that erupt in the texts. The aim of my dissertation is to consider how these cultural texts create openings and productively foment an archive that bespeaks the critical role women have performed in challenging institutions that are oppressive. In addition, when taken together, their works reveal much about how cultural memory continues to operate in the present.

PERFORMANCES OF LOSS

Black performance contains history and racism, but it is not about either of those things. Black performance injects itself into pertinent political discussions like those surrounding the death of Trayvon Martin, a teenager shot in 2012 while walking and wearing a hoodie within a predominantly white Florida neighborhood. The Martin tragedy demonstrates how markings associated with black performance—such as a hoodie—can be deadly. Clearly, theorizing black performance is imperative in the present moment.

—Thomas F. DeGrantz and Anita Gonzalez, *Black Performance Theory*

In the four chapters that follow, I closely examine artists that make critical interventions on the renderings of either personal or cultural histories through various performances of loss. While their individual engagement with memory differs, each of the texts works to bring cultural memories to the fore. Certainly,

the specific circumstances accounting for the buried histories differ. However, the artists studied in this dissertation actively resist the erasure that dehumanizes the stories they tell. Placing Sherley Anne Williams, Shahla Talebi, Katori Hall, Shahrnush Parsipur and Shirin Neshat and the memories their works perform within the same dissertation project is not meant to collapse their disparate stories into a category of sameness, but to suggest that a consideration of their interventions, when taken together, say much about the afterlife of captivity and loss that continue to haunt specific communities in the present. More specifically, I argue that these artists perform loss in their disparate texts to suggest that while the physical presence of African and Middle Eastern diasporas in the U.S. was pivotal to nation-building, their physical existence is treated as excess. In other words, all of the chapters in my interdisciplinary dissertation project stage an interaction with the past in order to magnify the vestiges of unfreedom, trauma and violence against specific bodies in the present.

The two fiction writers, the memoirist, the playwright and the filmmaker all resolve to birth their texts in the temporal space of the past to intervene upon the imagined distinction between the past and present. Rather, these writers illustrate how, for specific bodies, time does not operate in a linear way and the present does not equate to progress. While the specific temporal context differs, these writers examine how much of the past remains in the present. For example, in *Dessa Rose*, the text that occupies my first chapter and truly anchors my

project, Williams takes the stories of two actual women generally unknown in the pages of American history—a pregnant slave that was instrumental in a rebellion on a slave coffle and a white woman that provided runaway slaves with refuge on her farm—and then writes a story about what would have happened if these two women had met. When Williams, in 1986, writes her speculative historical fiction, she articulates a tension resulting from the failure within the feminist movement of the time to critically include and address issues of race and class. Read in this way, when Williams pens her novel and considers the necessity of being an ally, she is writing as much about 1986 as she is about 1829.

Considering the of a tradition of similar speculative writing, Theatre Studies Scholar Harry J. Elam, Jr. explains,

The emergence of this artistic return-to-the-past movement testifies to a present desire to reckon with unfinished business. Yet these artistic engagements do not simply offer a compensatory history for that which has been lost or omitted within the American historic lexicon. Rather, in keeping with the historic materialism expressed by Walter Benjamin in his ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History,’ they “brush history against the grain” not only to fill in gaps in historic knowledge but to expose history’s relativism, as they explore how history means in the present⁷. (xi)

Although August Wilson’s plays are not the subject of my dissertation, the stakes of his project are a tangible influence of my readings of other cultural texts that similarly exist against dominant erasure. His idea that ten plays—each about a different decade of the twentieth century—could say more about the lived

⁷ See *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*.

experiences of some African Americans than other documented histories is central to what Elam expresses above. Elam's analysis of Wilson includes variations of the words: (w)rite and (w)right. He explains, "This process of (w)righting history necessarily critiques how history is constituted and what history means. It reinterprets how history operates in relation to race and space, time and memory"⁸ (Elam 3). Elam suggests that in the process of writing, staging, and disseminating his words and perspectives, Wilson intervenes upon the forgetting of the injustices that influenced and continue to influence the daily lives of many individuals. Beyond tending to a social forgetting, these texts also gesture toward the continued presence of these historical events in the present. The chapters that follow articulate how what is imagined as the past has not begun, because the persistent violence against specific bodies in the present troubles that clear distinction between temporal divides. To imagine a past means to recognize the present as distinct. This study focuses on cultural texts that disrupt the imagined past by illustrating the difficulty in identifying that distinct difference in the lived realities of specific bodies. Furthermore, if history provides the distance that allows for the forgetting of lives that existed on the margins, the memories carried through these texts provide a critical nearness.

⁸ See *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*.

ON MEMORIES OF CAPTIVITY

While all four chapters reflect a connection to captivity in some capacity, the first two chapters examine memories of captivity most explicitly. In the “‘But the Girl’s Back was Scarless’: The Sight of Memory in Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose*” I argue that while Williams writes a neo-slave narrative to interrupt a social forgetting about the legacy of slavery in the U.S., she also returns to the temporal past to critique the contemporary crisis and massive growth of the Prison-Industrial-Complex in the mid-1980s. In Chapter Two, “Walking Dead”: Recollections of Captivity in Shahla Talebi’s *Ghosts of Revolution*, I articulate the loss that occurs when a portion of the population experiences captivity and how this loss is inherited by the future generations that come to feel this absence. I read Talebi’s novel alongside Sahar Delijani’s novel *Children of the Jacaranda Tree* to examine how the presence of children within the prison space reflects a foreclosure of a future post-captivity. Lastly, I expand upon Talebi’s observations of her move to the U.S. to illustrate a continuation of the prison space through a society heavily reliant on imprisoning the majority of its minority population. In this way, my reading of Talebi’s memoir serves as a critical point of connection with the other chapters in this dissertation. Unique about both of these texts—a neo-slave narrative and a prison memoir—is they are writing against their continual and active erasure in the public. In many ways, these narratives were never meant to exist. They occupy a space outside of dominant narratives of

history because both gesture towards a violence and torture enacted on behalf of the state. In this way they confirm what has been denied, and, to borrow from Sara E. Johnson, they exhibit “the critical role that cultural production plays in documenting, disseminating, and bringing the memory of these events to life”⁹ (44).

The centrality of the prison space to the argument I make about cultural memory speaks to the influence prison has on those beyond the individual prisoner. In other words, the separation of an individual from her or his community has long felt effects on both the individual and the community. Through the narratives present in my dissertation, I argue that the trauma experienced from a form of captivity is inherited and erupts over time. My reading of the prison is influenced by the work of Angela Davis and Michelle Alexander primarily, but I also pull from Orlando Patterson’s conceptions of “social death” and “natal alienation.”¹⁰ These theories specifically and especially inform my reading of the neo-slave narrative in Chapter One. While Patterson’s writing provided provocative openings for thinking about contemporary imprisonment, this project is careful to not extend those theoretical concepts beyond the specific experience of chattel slavery.

⁹ See *The Fear of French Negroes: Transcolonial Collaboration in the Revolutionary Americas*.

¹⁰ See Davis, *Are Prison’s Obsolete*, Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, and Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*.

ON A BLACK FEMINIST APPROACH

While my readings in all four chapters are influenced by a Black feminist approach, Chapter Three and Chapter Four most explicitly articulate the need for recognizing the presence of women in critical and radical moments of activism. In Chapter Three, “God Ain’t Gone Stop Cryin’ No Time Soon”: Resurrecting Ghosts in Katori Hall’s *The Mountaintop*, I argue that Hall revises a public understanding of Martin Luther King, Jr. by resisting the popular sanitized version of him. At the same time, Hall widens the stage upon which King is placed to include the voice and presence of female activists as well as to remind the public of the death of a teenager by the police as evidence of a violent stasis in the present. It is not simply the presence of a female voice onstage, but what she says in terms of the specific experience of gendered violence that must be accounted for as well as a radical restructuring of a white and patriarchal society.

In Chapter Four, “She Could Plant Herself into the Ground”: The Migration of Shahrnush Parsipur’s *Women Without Men*, I perform a close reading of both texts and argue that the shift that occurs in the telling of *Women Without Men* results from the move from Iran to America, not from the translation of paper to screen. This translation also creates a space to grapple with the tensions of being an Iranian-American feminist in solidarity with Iranian feminist struggles. In this way, Black feminist theory has served as a rich and critical

framework that shapes my approach to reading these texts. The significant writings by Angela Davis, Hortense Spillers, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Toni Morrison have been particularly helpful in establishing critical openings that situate the potential for a dialogue¹¹. Importantly, the dialogue I hope to highlight is not a comparative project that collapses the specificities of difference but seeks to provide an opening for collaboration. This perspective is directly influenced by Black feminist thought, and more specifically, the dire importance of recognizing the traditions from which art is produced. An intervention my project attempts to make comes from the awareness that texts are not produced in isolation, but rather are in conversation with their communities and an existing tradition.

ON NOSTALGIA

Obruni forced me to acknowledge that I didn't belong anywhere. The domain of the stranger is always an elusive *elsewhere*. I was born in another country, where I also felt like an alien and which in part determined why I had come to Ghana. I had grown weary of being stateless. Secretly I wanted to belong somewhere or, at least, I wanted a convenient explanation of why I felt like a stranger.
—Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*

There is a sense of misplaced memory about modern Iranian history, a collectively repressed notion of temporary allocation of a spot in history, where one did not really belong. It is as if there is a communal consensus among Iranians that history is happening

¹¹ Many of these essays are included in *The Black Feminist Reader*, edited by Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting. See also *Women, Race, & Class* (Davis), *Black, White, and In Color* (Spillers), *Sister Outsider* (Lorde), *Feminism is for Everybody* (hooks), *Black Feminist Thought* (Collins), and *What Moves at the Margin* (Morrison).

somewhere else, a place where we belong, while (in the meantime)
 we are stuck in the makeshift remissive space of somewhere else,
 somewhere we think
 we don't belong.

—Hamid Dabashi, *Iran: A People Interrupted*

Imagining a home is as political an act as is imaging a nation.

—Rosemary M. George, *The Politics of Home*

In the epigraphs placed above, both Hartman and Dabashi grapple with a melancholic appraisal of their physical relationship with their location. Both exhibit a disconnect or conflict with their surroundings. Although Hartman's scholarship is situated within African American Studies and Dabashi is an Iranian Studies scholar, my dissertation project imagines that if these two fields were placed in conversation, they would have something to offer each other. Both traditions of artists are writing against the enormity of dehumanization that occurs as a consequence of the fear grafted upon their bodies. If blackness is considered to be the site of fear domestically, then certainly the Middle East and more specifically the Islamic Republic—publicly referred to as a component of the “axis of evil”—is the locus of fear abroad. Furthermore, in these brief excerpts and elsewhere in both African American and Iranian American scholarship, there exists a desire to return, to connect, to grieve, and to perform an interaction with the past by returning to an ancestral homeland no matter how near or distant it may be. As Nadine George-Graves writes in “Diasporic Spidering: Constructing Contemporary Black Identities,”

the search for connections and the implications for black identity and subjectivity have always been part and parcel of the African diaspora. African Americans from Alex Haley to Oprah Winfrey have embarked on personal journeys to discover self through history. The roots are genealogical, geographical, biological, real, imagined, and performed.¹² (38)

The return is never simple, as Hartman suggests and Dabashi alludes to, and is always far more complex than anticipated. And as George adds, the naming or claiming of a space as home is itself a critical and political act.

My readings gesture towards a specific form of melancholy that figures hauntingly in the separate spheres of African American and Iranian American cultural texts. Nostalgia for a site identified as home—whether it be Ghana or Iran—looms prominently in the literature as does the understanding that the home that is full of both meaning and identity has been foreclosed upon. In other words, unlike many who similarly locate their ancestral homeland as outside of North America, the feasibility or prospect of a return is both treacherous and often dispiriting not necessarily because of the circumstances of the destinations, but because the home that would satisfy the yearning no longer exists.

During the process of writing this dissertation I traveled to Iran for the first time and learned, among other things, the vulnerability of memory. I learned how we are all engaged in a losing battle with forgetting and that the act of remembering is one of short lived resistance. This became most clear for me when in place of my name, my grandmother politely referred to me throughout my visit

¹² See *Black Performance Theory*.

as *khanoom*, because the space where her memories of me existed had eroded. The texture of this project is influenced by the performances of memory I witnessed on the streets of Tehran, specifically through the pervasive visual presence of martyrs that restricted the potential for social forgetting of the Iran-Iraq war. I learned about the eruption of buried memories in the way that my cousin began every story about his life with the imprisonment of his father. Though many years have passed the absence of his father influenced every story he could tell. I learned also about the limits of nostalgia through the frequent reminders of my own strangeness that tempered my search for belonging. The chapters that follow reflect the lessons of this journey and attempt to articulate the many openings that these artists create in their performances of memory.

CHAPTER ONE

“But the Girl’s Back Was Scarless”: The Sight of Memory in Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose*

Staged a decade after the publication of *Dessa Rose*, Robert O’Hara began his 1996 play *Insurrection: Holding History* with the lamentations of a graduate student attempting to complete his thesis on Nat Turner’s slave rebellion.

Complaining to his 189-year-old great, great grandfather,¹³ Ron bemoans,

for some reason i got it in my crazy head that Nat Turner was IT. i mean who the hell needs another paper on slavery....i can’t git it outta my head and i have nothing new to say about him or slavery there’s nothing new about the fact that he lost his mind and started slashin’ folks and okay we survived OKAY ALREADY i mean so what throughout history millions of people have survived horrible events and American slavery is MINUTE when you think about it in terms of what happened during the Crusades and even the uh i don’t know i mean turners’ revolt was NUTHIN compared to how those brothas and sistas were kickin’ up in Haiti okay nat turner/slavery BIG DEAL move on/ but it won’t let me Go!!
(O’Hara 21)

Certainly, O’Hara answers his own rhetorical inquiry on whether anything new can be said about slavery in the very existence of his play. What emerges from his grievances here is the haunting presence of the memory of bondage, to which Ron has a direct link in the body of his great, great grandfather, and also the larger

¹³ The significance of the 189-year-old great, great grandfather reflects the how memory is carried on by those who were witnesses. The memories of Turner’s slave rebellion are thus embodied in Ron’s living elder. Similarly, in his ten-play-cycle, August Wilson introduced the character of Aunt Ester, who may have been an allusion to Douglass’s Aunt Hester. For Wilson, Aunt Ester’s age, depending on the setting of the play, was representative of the years that passed from 1619, the first moment an African slave walked on North American land, and the present.

question of what the consequence or result may be of a continued conversation on slavery. After time traveling with his elder relative to the moments before Turner's rebellion, Ron impulsively expresses his desire to move from observer to participant so that he may aid in the planning of the rebellion and pursue his new love interest, Hammet, a slave on the same plantation as Turner. His great, great grandfather vehemently objects, articulating to Ron, "you./mine. you. mi. proof. you. mine.../PROOF" (O'Hara 104). Inverting a conventional understanding of proof, understood most often as evidence of something that has already occurred, O'Hara gestures here towards the future as evidence through his naming of Ron as "proof." Rather than identifying the ancestor as the evidence of origins, O'Hara locates the witness as the descendant.

Similarly, in the concluding pages of a newly published "contemporary narrative of slavery," writer Marlon James reveals that the narrator is the protagonist's child, telling the mother's story (Keizer 5). The narrator, speaking from the temporal space of Jamaica in 1819 shares, "me was but nine year in age when me mother start to teach me how to read....And she teach me how to write. That was the most forbidden of thing and it still be so, but there be no man, black or white, that can stop her now. But she didn't teach me for me but for her, for when the time come to write her song she have somebody true to be her witness" (James 426). Along the same lines, when Williams's final words in her novel depict her (re)telling her experiences to her son and grandchildren, she locates a

lineage of witnesses. Williams closes her novel with Dessa Rose confessing, “and my mind wanders. This why I have it wrote down, why I has the child say it back. I never will forget Nemi trying to read me, knowing I had put myself in his hands. Well *this* the childrens have heard from our own lips. I hope they never have to pay what it cost us to own ourselves” (Williams 236). In deciding to end their narratives of slavery with the witnessing that occurs from mother to child, James and Williams offer an alternative mode of knowledge production that disrupts the dominant narrative that Williams earlier satirized through the character of Nehemiah, referred to above as “Nemi”. To hear “from our own lips” distinguishes the story that is being told. Replete with brutal violence and trauma, some may conclude that “this is not a story to pass on” (Morrison 324). However, Williams contends that speaking her story to her son, and in turn, having him “tell it to his babies like the memories was his” (Williams 236) intervenes upon the silences that are created in the production of dominant historical narratives.

Moreover, during the decade between the late 1970s and late 1980s four significant novels that uniquely but also collectively revisit the time of slavery were published.¹⁴ Not only do *Kindred* (1979), *Dessa Rose* (1986), *Beloved* (1987) and *Corregidora* (1987) revisit the time of slavery, they all do so

¹⁴ Prior to these four, several other narratives of slavery were published. As previously mentioned, Wells Brown’s *Clotel* was the first. Most notable in recent history are Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966) and Ernest J. Gaines’s *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971). However, readers will notice that the tone and structure of these novels differ greatly from those of Butler, Williams, Morrison and Jones.

specifically from the perspective of a female protagonist and, I argue, they all speak back to original slave narratives composed by formerly enslaved women.¹⁵ Slave narratives were a very specific, choreographed and conservative performance that required tremendous restraint. This is particularly true when we consider the lives of female slaves and the details of their lives that remained silent.¹⁶ Through their respective novels, Octavia Butler, Sherley Anne Williams, Toni Morrison and Gayl Jones voice the untold, undocumented, unspoken details of the “interior life” (Morrison 70) from protagonists that history has forgotten. Morrison explains that this process of (re)membering “is critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic” (70).

Many literary scholars have explored this particular “surge of late-twentieth-century African American cultural production that centers on American chattel slavery” with differing perspectives (Tillet 3). Barbara Christian articulates that “as we move into another century when Memory threatens to become abstract history, they remind us that if we want to be whole, we must recall the past, those

¹⁵ See Jacobs *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Prince *The History of Mary Prince*

¹⁶ See Morrison “The Site of Memory” 70 Morrison writes: “Over and over, the writers pull the narrative up short with a phrase such as, ‘but let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate.’ In shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were silent about many things, and they ‘forgot’ many other things. There was a careful selection of the instances that they would record and a careful rendering of those that they chose to describe.” See also Starling *The Slave Narrative* and Davis and Gates, Jr. *The Slave’s Narrative*

parts that we want to remember, those parts that we want to forget” (340-341). Arlene Keizer similarly suggests, “the contemporary narrative of slavery began to take shape at precisely the moment that the last of those who had experienced New World slavery first-hand passed away. The questions of who would be a witness to slavery and how it would be remembered became critical at the moment this first-hand experience disappeared from living memory” (Keizer 5). While Salamishah Tillet writes, “these post-civil rights representations of slavery are neither antediluvian nor anticlimactic; instead they reveal an African American preoccupation with returning to the site of slavery as a means of overcoming racial conflicts that continue to flourish after the height of the civil rights movement in order to reimagine the possibilities of American democracy in the future” (Tillet 2). What these three scholars similarly suggest is that the desire to return stems from a desire to intervene upon forgetting, and also that their focus on this specific time period reflects a concern in the present.

Dessa Rose emerges from a long tradition of writing that formed a more complete and complex understanding of the history of bondage that began even before emancipation. Post-emancipation, and now over a century and a half later, “contemporary narratives about slavery” continue to return to this temporal space not as a form of redress, and not as an attempt to revise, but as an insightful disruption to structures in the state that deny the lived experiences of many (Keizer 5). Though this chapter explores only a handful of layers of this

remarkable text, I argue that Williams left behind a truly monumental project that critically articulates an engagement with cultural memory, revealing the continued necessity for narratives that complicate how a relationship with the present is to be understood. In the chapters that follow, I build upon Williams's critique of historical knowledge production as I continue to think through the archive that is created through cultural texts.

With her very first sentence on the very first page of her text—preceding even the page enumerating the “Contents” of *Dessa Rose*—Sherley Anne Williams alerts her readers that the tension between history and fiction, between what has been documented as fact and what has lived on only by the grace of memory, between the strict record of what is said to have happened and what might have happened, will be the subject that fills the pages to follow. Quite succinctly, Williams explains, “*Dessa Rose* is based on two historical incidents” (5). The simplicity of her first sentence strategically downplays the immensity of the chosen verb, based. Williams tells her readers that the basis, core, and foundation for the story she is about to tell is true. This tension between fact and fiction continues throughout the remainder of her “Author’s Note,” as Williams makes clear the very lack of clarity in what can be categorized as history itself. Williams commences her text with a note that troubles a popular notion or understanding of historical record as complete or comprehensive. She does this by citing two critical, yet unknown individuals and articulating the labor involved in

discovering their stories.¹⁷ Williams explains the historical inspiration for her novel, writing,

a pregnant black woman helped to lead an uprising on a coffle (a group of slaves chained together and herded, usually to market) in 1829 in Kentucky. Caught and convicted, she was sentenced to death; her hanging, however, was delayed until after the birth of her baby. In North Carolina in 1830, a white woman living on an isolated farm was reported to have given sanctuary to runaway slaves.¹⁸ (Williams 5)

History is widely defined as a study of events that occurred in the past and are very often centered on conflict. Individuals that are recalled or recorded in historical studies are often remembered because they participated in an event that disrupted popular sentiment, and thus caused some level of struggle or unrest. With that in mind, it would seem that the two women Williams cites would be well known in the pages of American history. And yet, as Williams explains, if not for an essay written by Angela Davis in 1971 and if not for “tracking Davis to

¹⁷ The usage of the word labor here implies that an action is required to engage with specific narratives, as it is not only the narratives of historically marginalized people but also the marginalized histories of specific people. Even more buried are the histories of marginalized people who resist.

¹⁸ This specific moment is critical also because it marked the publication of David Walker’s *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*. 1829 marked a significant moment because “by the late 1820s, antiblack ideology was becoming more aggressive and gaining greater favor among whites, and these key writings of Jefferson [*Notes on the State of Virginia*] only sanctioned this mounting racial antipathy” (Hinks xxvii). In his Introduction to Walker’s *Appeal*, Hinks writes: “Between the latter months of 1829 and probably sometime in the spring of 1830, three different editions of David Walker’s *Appeal* were published...None of the variations finally alters the essential message: that American slavery embodies one of the greatest moral abominations in the history of the world, that blacks must refuse to submit to slavery any longer, and that whites must abolish it immediately if they are to avoid the swift certain, and terrifying judgment of God” (xlv).

her source in Herbert Aptheker's *American Negro Slave Revolts*," their stories would remain entirely forgotten (Williams 5).¹⁹

While there are many theories in circulation about why certain histories are told and others are not, the most popular being the belief that victors write their victories, the reality is far more complex than that reductive saying allows us to imagine. Certainly, there exists a dominant narrative that triumphs the acts and conquests of empires as gallant and justified, because "canon building is empire building" (Morrison 31).²⁰ Regardless of the lives that become compromised for the larger pursuits of the state, the dominant narrative recalls these events with a nationalistic fervor. However, the dominant narrative cannot just be written originally, wood must always be replenished to keep that fire going. In other words, history requires tremendous devotion and attention. The special attention given to specific narratives results in a redundancy of moments and a privileging of certain perspectives. What lies beyond the redundancy are the histories that are carried on only orally because the circumstance in which they can be written and read does not yet exist. The labor required of Williams to locate Davis and

¹⁹ John H. Bracey describes Herbert Aptheker's 1943 dissertation as "the single most effective antidote to the poisonous ideas that Blacks had not a history of struggle or that such struggle always took the forms of legal action and non-violent protest. It provided Black youth with that link to our past that few even thought existed or were willing to help us find" (3). Williams's citation of Aptheker in her "Author's Note" is important because it draws upon a critical type of intellectual labor and historical unearthing.

²⁰ See Morrison, "The Afro-American Presence in American Literature." She continues: "Canon defense is national defense. Canon debate, whatever the terrain, nature and range (of criticism, of history, of the history of knowledge, of the definition of language, the universality of aesthetic principles, the sociology of art, the humanistic imagination), is the clash of cultures. And all of the interests are vested" (31).

Aptheker—and importantly, the stories living, waiting in their texts—is critical to note because it simultaneously alludes to the potential of never finding these stories as well as the existence of other stories that linger beyond the page of discovery.

Despite the continued maintenance of a dominant narrative, the perpetual unearthing of silenced histories creates an alternative archive that generates a more complicated version of events. Put differently, Michel-Rolph Trouillot explicates that the

play of power in the production of alternative narratives begins with the joint creation of facts and sources for at least two reasons. First, facts are never meaningless: indeed, they become facts only because they matter in some sense, however minimal. Second, facts are not created equal: the production of traces is always also the creation of silences. Some occurrences are noted from the start; others are not. Some are engraved in individual or collective bodies; others are not. Some leave physical markers; others do not. What happened leaves traces, some of which are quite concrete—buildings, dead bodies, censuses, monuments, diaries, political boundaries—that limit the range and significance of any historical narrative. (3)

In many ways, *Dessa Rose* speaks both to “the play of power in production,” as well as the theory that “what happened leaves traces.” Importantly, Trouillot extrapolates on the circulation of power both in what is recalled and also as a consequence of being remembered. Power operates both to remember certain facts, and within the category of history, it is what is remembered that gains or gives power. In addition, when Trouillot articulates that the “production of traces

is always also the creation of silences” he gestures toward a system or structure that always already privileges certain perspectives, giving them voice, while others remain silenced. In just one passage, Trouillot concisely explicates an entire field of scholarship that is invested in an exploration of historically created silences.

Dessa Rose begins with a pregnant slave imprisoned in a below-ground cellar, awaiting the death sentence that has been postponed until after the birth of her child. Dessa Rose escapes from prison and finds sanctuary on a farm populated with other runaway slaves. The slaves on the farm experience a semblance of freedom, as they are not legally under the ownership of any slave master. However, they must perform their servitude to the outside world, lest the neighbors begin to notice. The last remaining white resident on the farm is a woman whose husband has abandoned her and her young children. In the final section of the novel, the runaway slaves, with the help of the white woman, Rufel, develop a scheme to make a profit. In a series of choreographed performances, the runaway slaves step onto the auction block, sell themselves back into slavery, and escape days later, with the ultimate goal of moving out West. Even though Rufel becomes an ally, the cohort must disband because the circumstances in which this forged community can realistically exist and because of what white womanhood symbolizes. The primary tensions or conflicts in the novel include the tenuous

relationship between Dessa Rose and Rufel as well as the production of historical record.

In this chapter, I examine how Williams engages with a specific historical moment through the restaging of these women's lives. Much like the text itself, the argument in this chapter is layered. To begin, I articulate how Williams critiques and satirizes the production of official historical knowledge as specifically constructed and translated through the lens of whiteness and patriarchy through the character of Nehemiah. The latter section of this chapter explores the critique Williams issues through the challenge each woman faces in attempting to form an authentic relationship. Secondly, I argue that through sight and sound the opportunity to become allies is both hindered and created. Moreover, I suggest that Williams's return to this moment renders history as undead because her speculative fiction recasts contemporary issues in the temporal past. Thus, Williams's critique requires a return to the past that unearths stagnancy in the present. Finally, this chapter concludes by considering both the critical intervention this text makes, as well as the tradition of scholarship from which it emerges.

PRODUCTION OF HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

This section argues that through the gaping miscommunication between the writer and Dessa Rose, Williams illustrates how silences are made. As stated

previously, when the novel commences, Dessa Rose is imprisoned in a cellar on the margins of a farm. The first section of the novel begins with Dessa Rose speaking, “Was I white,” she says, “I might woulda fainted when Emmalina told me Masa done gone upside Kaine head” (17). This opening statement is critical because even in its simplicity, it is able to concisely highlight many of the tensions in the entire novel. In her first words of the novel, Dessa Rose juxtaposes the performativity of both whiteness and womanhood and relates it directly to the murder of Kaine.

When Williams begins her novel with a narrator who is denied access to the protagonist’s thoughts, she emphasizes how Nehemiah comes to perceive Dessa Rose and also simulates the public’s access to historical knowledge. Having just participated in an uprising on a slave coffle, Dessa Rose becomes an object of his research for his second book “and, throughout his chronicle (significantly entitled ‘Darky,’ a generic, gender-neutral classification of slaves), Nehemiah admits to being unable to ‘remember [Dessa’s] name’”(McDowell 149). Moreover, in “Negotiating between Tenses: Witnessing Slavery after Freedom—*Dessa Rose*,” Deborah E. McDowell argues that his “‘authority’ as an agent of white male law and rationality is aggressively undermined by the text. His section is a veritable parody of the ‘as-told-to’ device of gathering empirical evidence and documenting events to construct historicist discourse”(McDowell 148). While he has continual access to Dessa Rose at his own convenience, she is

powerless to move beyond the walls of her cellar. The power dynamic between the two is exemplified through their physical positions on the farm: “(he is *up* in the attic of Hughes’s farm house; she is outside it and *down* in the root cellar) [signifying] the physical distance and social inequality between Dessa and Nehemiah that goes far to explain his empowerment but inability to see and to name her” (McDowell 149). McDowell articulates both the parody and power occurring in this scene. To McDowell’s reading I add that the placement of this specific moment as an entrance to the novel is critical because it situates the type of knowledge that Williams will subsequently dismantle as the primary information the public consumes. It is important that Williams decides to have her readers enter through Nehemiah’s thoughts specifically and experience the complete absence of Dessa Rose’s interior emotions because it replicates the way knowledge is produced in public spaces. His fumbling of her story and his inability to genuinely see and hear her illustrate the type of role she will ultimately come to fill in the type of history he produces. Thus, the exclusion of her interior thoughts only further delineates that the rendering she will come to receive in the history he writes will be limited at best, and more likely than not, she will exist only as he is capable of seeing her: an object.

Moreover, Nehemiah serves an integral purpose in the text not because of what he is able to offer the protagonist, but because his point of view exhumes and explicates a process of knowledge production. Moreover, Trouillot argues,

“silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance)” (Trouillot 26). Through the character Nehemiah, Williams gestures towards the fallibility in this machine of production. As she narrates the first three steps in the “processes of historical production” she draws attention to how exclusive this process of fact creation, fact assembly and fact retrieval, is when in the hands of an individual like Nehemiah.

The access readers gain from Nehemiah’s thoughts explicate his participation in knowledge production, importantly revealing all that becomes lost as a consequence of his inability to actually see, hear, or understand Dessa Rose. Williams writes,

he hadn’t caught every word; often he had puzzled overlong at some unfamiliar idiom or phrase, now and then losing the tale in the welter of names the darky called. Or he had sat, fascinated, forgetting to write. Yet the scene was vivid in his mind as he deciphered the darky’s account from his hastily scratched notes and he reconstructed it in his journal as though he remembered it word for word. (Williams 18)

The words “puzzled,” “unfamiliar,” “losing,” and “forgetting” collectively construct an image of certain distortion and misinterpretation. As the passage continues, the words “hastily” and “reconstructed” represent the haphazard process of research that Nehemiah conducts with a total disregard for veracity.

This passage outlines the simultaneous disregard for “every word,” “the tale,” and the “welter of names” in place of what was “in his mind,” what “he deciphered,” and what “he remembered.” And though he had not transcribed her words as they were spoken, Williams suggests that perhaps it would not have made a difference even if he had. Even though Nehemiah assures Dessa Rose with an ambiguous and vague claim that his project will “[help] others to be happy in the life that has been sent them to live” (45), his highly exclusive audience does not include her. This book, like the previous one, is written to aid an audience in controlling others. This book on slave rebellion, similar to his “*The Masters’ Complete Guide to Dealing with Slaves and Other Dependents*” (Williams 24), is solely invested in perpetuating the institution that imprisons the protagonist and her descendents. He will never be able to hear her story and transcribe it in a way that is meaningful because he refuses to see her as human.

Furthermore, although Nehemiah cannot profit from the bodies of slaves directly, he has found a way to indirectly profit from their condition. His first book brought financial success, and in toying with the great fear of slave uprisings, his second book promises even more monetary gain. His attention to Dessa Rose as a source of revenue is further displayed through his particular fixation on certain aspects of her story. Williams writes,

Nehemiah paused, the pen poised above his journal. He couldn’t bring himself to believe that negroes actually had some means of preventing conception, yet he could not keep himself from

speculating. The recipe for such a potion would be worth a small fortune—provided, of course, that one could hit upon some discreet means of selling it. A contraception root would be very like slave trading, he thought with a low chuckle, something from which every gentleman would profit but which no gentleman would admit knowledge of. (Williams 19)

Nehemiah's obsession with this detail of her story reveals his limited capacity for genuine comprehension of what she tells him beyond the shallow pursuits of personal fiscal benefit. In the story Dessa Rose tells him, the detail of the root is of tangential importance. The crux of the story—as with every story she tells him—is the love that she and Kaine share. Williams specifically juxtaposes her actual words with his consumption of them to illustrate how muddy the level of comprehension is. Dessa Rose tells him, “Masa ain't had nothin to do wid it. It Kaine what pick me out and ask me for his woman. Masa say you lay wid this'n or that'n and that be the one you lay wid....And we all be knowin that it ain't for nothing but to breed and time the chi'ren be up in age, they be sold off to anotha 'tation, maybe deep south” (19). The incidence of the root was another way to undermine the attempts of Vaughan to control the reproduction of his slaves, just as Kaine asking Dessa Rose subverted his ability to manage their sexual lives and potential to find love. The fact that Kaine asked her is immensely significant for the protagonist because it symbolized this space—however miniscule and fleeting—where she could be free.

Thus, Kaine's death signifies more than the death of a partner, as tragic and heartbreaking as that may be, because it simultaneously represents the eradication of the one place she could momentarily escape. She continues to relive this moment, describing to him her partner's fatal wound, telling Nehemiah, "Kaine jes layin there on us's pallet, head seeping blood, one eye closed, one bout gone." (Williams 20). His reply to Dessa Rose, in the form of a question belittles her grief and bespeaks his misreading. He responds to her, asking, "and what has that to do with you and the other slaves rising up against the trader and trying to kill white men" (Williams 20). Through the depiction of his inability to see the correlation between the reckless murder of her partner and her decision to act, Williams presents Nehemiah as a satirical character whose status in society is defined by his intellect which is revealed as limited.

Furthermore, Nehemiah's assessment of Dessa Rose's mental capacity aptly illustrates the level of masking that she performs in order to outwit him. He believes that she has difficulty understanding him and assumes that her replies to his prodding are incoherent ramblings. He thinks to himself, "it is obvious that I must speak with her again, perhaps several more times; she answers questions in a random manner, a loquacious, roundabout fashion—if, indeed, she can be brought to answer them at all" (Williams 23). The partially omniscient narrator explains, "the darky had led him back to the same point as the previous session and he had taken notes on nothing save the names she called in her first burst of speech"

(Williams 39). Here, “nothing save the names” stands as a larger allusion to the slight vestiges of individual slaves in historical record. Although the institution of slavery existed in the U.S. for nearly 250 years and consumed the lives of a number so large yet impossible to know, documents containing the life histories of individuals are rare when considering the vast amount of bodies that were held captive. For many, history remembers “nothing save the names” and perhaps the monetary amount attached to individual bodies as a majority of these documents were created and maintained as financial statements recording sales and purchases. When Williams acknowledges that Nehemiah has cited “nothing save the names,” she illustrates how he performs an act that is synonymous with a larger, societal rendering of historical practices surrounding slavery. In this way, Nehemiah exists less as an individual character and more as a trope that predictably is invested in specific facts and disregards what he determines as “random” or “loquacious.”

Through Dessa Rose’s insistence on telling her story rather than answering his questions as he demands them, she foils his attempts to use her to write his book. Finally, Nehemiah reconciles to admit: “these are the facts of the darky’s history as I have thus far uncovered them: The master smashed the young buck’s banjo/ The young buck attacked the master/ The master killed the young buck/ The darky attacked the master—and was sold to the Wilson slave coffle” (Williams 39). And concedes, “so, this incident with the buck was not wholly

tangential to the events on the coffle” (Williams 40). Thus, Dessa Rose succeeds as “she cleverly misleads him and mocks what he represents. And in the studied circularity of her telling (leading Nehemiah back to the same point of previous sessions) and her skill at ‘turn[ing] his...questions back upon themselves,’ Dessa sabotages his enterprise” (McDowell 150). In her reading of the novel, McDowell identifies this moment as a significant act of resistance. McDowell contends that

her refusal to ‘confess’ anything to Nehemiah that would facilitate yet another misrepresentation is an act of resistance against the adverse power of literacy and codification. At the novel’s end Nehemiah’s ‘book’ is incomplete; it has literally fallen apart and is nothing more than loose pages ‘scatter[ed] about the floor,’ unreadable scribbling that even the sheriff (another agent of the father’s law) cannot read. Further, Nehemiah’s own name has been abbreviated he is ‘Nemi’ and has *become* the reduction he would create. (150)

In the passage above McDowell additionally cites the conclusion of the novel as a critical component of the critique Williams makes and concisely articulates a compelling reading of the final moments of the text. But even before the pivotal scene McDowell alludes to, Williams foreshadows that in his failure to extract what it was he sought from the protagonist, coupled with her successful escape from the cellar and by extension—her escape from his unlimited access—Nehemiah’s collapse is impending. I argue that it is precisely his investment in her, both emotionally and financially, that leads to his demise. In this way, Williams utilizes the character of Nehemiah to illustrate how bondage was integral to nation-building though the bodies of individuals were defined as

excess. While Nehemiah is reliant on Dessa Rose, both financially and emotionally, because she is necessary to his book project and status.

For Nehemiah, his own status is contingent on his ability to perform a level of control over slaves and in foiling his attempts to write her, Dessa Rose simultaneously erodes the social ladder upon which he was planning to ascend. Being the son of a mechanic, and because “land, not learning, was the entrée to planter society” (Williams 25), Nehemiah does not have the material wealth that he desires. However, his first book on “slave management” granted him access and “had opened the doors of countless Great Houses to him” (Williams 25). His second book, “a book on slave uprisings, touching as it must upon the secret fears of non-slave holder and slave holder alike, should be an immediate success” and “would establish Nehemiah as an important southern author” (Williams 25). Thus, in both her refusal to participate in his project as well as her escape, she destroys his ability to exert control over her as a way to inflate his status. The reversal of power through her act is delineated through the final line of this first section. Nehemiah cannot conceal his rage, vowing (and foreshadowing): “but the slut will not escape me. Sly bitch, smile at me, pretend—. She won’t escape me” (Williams 71). In the final words of the section, Nehemiah—who had heretofore referred to Dessa Rose primarily as “darky”—becomes suddenly fixated on her gender, evident in his arsenal of degrading terms especially reserved for women. Perhaps when Williams places Frederick Douglass’s famous line: “you have seen

how a man was made a slave...” as an epigraph to this section,²¹ she was dually portending the protagonist’s eventual escape as well as Nehemiah’s demise. One of the many critical components of Douglass’s slave narrative is his illustration of the effects of slavery not only on those in bondage but those in the power to hold others captive. In choosing to reproduce only the first part of the Douglass’s quote, she gestures towards the way in which Nehemiah’s existence has become severely bound to the existence of slaves, and has become a slave himself.

NAMING MAMMY

After escaping from the cellar, Dessa Rose finds refuge on a farm occupied by Rufel, a young white woman, who allows men and women who have escaped from bondage to live on her land. Dessa Rose rests within Rufel’s home as she recovers from giving birth. As the novel progresses, Rufel’s reconstruction of the social dynamics of bondage within the space of the sanctuary incites a genuine and raw response of anger from Dessa Rose. While Dessa Rose rests and remains relatively immobile following the birth, Rufel begins an unsolicited monologue about her experiences with her personal slave, whom she refers to as “Mammy.” In this section I argue that it is precisely the closeness and even familial bond that Rufel recollects that enrages the protagonist. As she speaks, Dessa Rose silently imagines to herself, “no white woman like this had ever

²¹ See Douglass 47, “you have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man.”

figured in mammy's conversations" (117). And then, suddenly, her thoughts transform into audible words. Dessa shouts,

'Wasn't no 'mammy' to it.' The words burst from Dessa. She knew even as she said it what the white woman meant. 'Mammy' was a servant, a slave (Dorcas?) who had nursed the white woman as Carrie had nursed Young Mistress's baby before it died. But, goaded by the white woman's open-mouthed stare, she continued, 'Mammy ain't made you nothing!....Mammy ain't nobody name, not they real one....You don't even know 'mammy's' name. Mammy have a name, have children.' (Williams 118-119)

There are several layers to this moment, beginning with how the words "burst" from Dessa Rose as though they were operating beyond her control. As she lays physically motionless, her words do what her body cannot. Secondly, even as she speaks, she comprehends "what the white woman meant" but continues anyway because she is explicitly "goaded" by the "open-mouthed stare." Implicitly, Dessa Rose has moved beyond the point of sheer terror by the white woman's presence and is instead, even in her immobility, physically testing what social boundaries may exist in this space of gilded freedom. Thirdly, she associates names with a certain level of knowledge. To Dessa Rose, knowing Dorcas's name is important because it implies closeness. Conversely, the name "Mammy," in its generality, is completely void of this kinship Rufel attempts to claim. Thus far in the novel, naming or more specifically—misnaming—has figured as a central motif as Dessa Rose is continually being defined by others. In the passage above, Dessa Rose's outburst is a product of the combined discomfort resulting from the

proximity she suddenly has to this woman as well as the nearness this woman claims to have had with “Mammy”, but it also gestures to the strategic practice of naming that was widespread during the time of slavery.²² Importantly, post-emancipation, and often immediately, former slaves changed their names as an act of disassociation with their former masters. Here in this passage, Rufel’s usage of the name “Mammy” similarly reveals a false kinship that results in Dessa Rose’s visceral objection.

The name “Mammy” exhumes a legacy of markers that shape the way specific women are seen and thus able to experience the world around them. In her seminal essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers begins by articulating the myriad of terms utilized to name black female bodies. She writes,

I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name....Embedded in bizarre axiological ground, they demonstrate a sort of telegraphic coding; they are markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean. In that regard, the names by which I am called in the public place render an example of signifying property *plus*. In order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings. (Spillers 203)

²² Many slaves were named in relation to their masters. For example, a specific history is carried in poet Phillis Wheatley’s first and last name. She was named after the slaveship that transported her to America, and her last name was the same as her owner, John Wheatley. Whereas shared last names commonly express kinship, naming a slave after oneself as Wheatley did, illustrated ownership—or a false kinship.

Spillers expounds upon the meanings derived from and carried by one's physicality alone as defined by other. Being simultaneously nameless and yet always already marked suggests that one has a presence that preempts any real action on their part. The "markers so loaded with mythical prepossession" undermine the potential to be seen, understood or read as anything beyond the confined space previously determined by a categorical naming. Moreover, the terms that come to replace individual names gain power and meaning in their repetition. "Mammy" is a title that generates a specific status not for the individual being named but those in association—or really ownership—of that body because in its repetition, it has gained a specific status. In her rejection of the marking or coding that Rufel performs, Dessa Rose objects to the attempt to refer to a woman as "Mammy" and then claim a kinship to her. In other words, when Rufel recalls fondly her relationship to a woman and then refers to her with "a sort of telegraphic coding" she rejects her doing so. In articulating how "Mammy ain't nobody name, not they real one," Dessa Rose rejects Rufel's initial renaming of Dorcas as well as her fond recollections. Furthermore, Spillers's delineation of "buried beneath" alludes to the ways in which these terms predetermine an individual's power or status.

When extrapolating the layers of meaning that Williams points to in her novel, we see that to refer to an individual as "Mammy," and to do so fondly,

presents an oxymoron of values that becomes critiqued through Dessa Rose's vocalized objection. Deborah Gray White argues,

the uniqueness of the African-American female's situation is that she stands at the crossroads of two of the most well-developed ideologies in America, that regarding women and that regarding the Negro. Although much of the race and sex ideology abounds in America has its roots in history that is older than the nation, it was during the slavery era that the ideas were molded into a peculiarly American mythology. (27)

In addition to her rejection of Rufel's renaming of Dorcas, Dessa Rose halts the reification of the stereotyping of the "Mammy" figure. Although the name is used by Dessa Rose to refer to her own mother endearingly, and although the name itself bespeaks a form of motherhood, it becomes an oxymoron of values when used by Rufel because the position of "Mammy" to which she claims exudes not only a level of false kinship but also an absence of respect. Even more, when White associates the role of the "Mammy" to American mythology, with an inception that parallels the birth of the Nation, she illustrates how the "Mammy" figure circulates as an origins myth that is continually restored and thus continually confronted.

In the climactic moment of their confrontation, although aware that they are speaking about different women, Dessa Rose continues to shame Rufel's inability to recall Dorcas's name by bearing witness to her own mother's story. She explains,

‘Mammy gave birth to ten chi’ren that come in the world living....The first one Rose after herself; the second one died before the white folks named it. Mammy called her Minta after a cousin she met once. Seth was the first child lived to go into the fields. Little Rose died while mammy was carrying Amos—carried off by the diphtheria’....Remembering the names now the way mammy used to tell them, lest they forget, she would say; lest her poor lost children die to living memory as they had in her world....Even buried under years of silence, Dessa could not forget. She had started on the names of the dead before she realized that the white woman had gone. (Williams 119)

This passage is particularly critical because it serves multiple purposes both within and outside of the specific context of the scene. Primarily, her retelling of her mother’s story orally troubles the familiarity that Rufel covets. Thus, by expounding on the details of her mother’s life—who was a slave and was referred to as “Mammy”—Dessa Rose exposes the unimaginable pain and hardships that her mother faced as the record of a continual loss of children through illness or separation illustrates. In responding to Rufel’s monologue about the fancy dresses her Mammy would sew her in this way, the protagonist berates and chides the woman’s trivial memories. Secondly, now that she has become a mother, explicating her own mother’s experiences allows for a meditation on a new role she now fulfills. Moving from child to mother has perhaps given Dessa Rose a greater respect for the harrowing experiences of loss her own mother lived. Lastly, beyond the specific context of this scene, Williams alludes to the larger project of the novel *Dessa Rose* in creating a history that cannot “die to living memory.” In this integral passage, Dessa Rose performs the role of historian,

retelling her mother's story. The insertion of this here is critical because it seeks to document the lives and existence of individuals that might otherwise receive no historical mention. When Rufel attempts to confide in Dessa Rose about Dorcas, as though she would respond like her, the protagonist reciprocates instead with anger; a response that Rufel is not accustomed to and compels her to reflect upon the authenticity of her relationship with "Mammy." Moreover, opening this space allows Williams to critique a temporality that exceeds beyond emancipation as these issues arise technically outside the context of slavery, though not beyond the influence of racial prejudice. It is in this moment that Williams can best articulate the limitations of second wave feminism and "the political realization that comes from the seemingly personal experiences of individual Black women's lives" (CRC 262).

In the late 1980s, the same decade *Dessa Rose* is written, playwright and actress Robbie McCauley began performing what she referred to as a "work-in-progress" titled *Sally's Rape*. Part dialogue, part play, part improvisation, the piece refers to Sally Hemmings in the title "as the generic name for all women without social, economic, political, or physical power, who are therefore available to be raped" (Hatch and Shine 368). In an excerpt from her text cited below, McCauley performs an utterance that exudes historical silences, inherited ignorance and privilege as well as the complicated tensions between black and white feminisms:

ROBBIE In 1964 at the library job a U.S. history major who'd graduated from Smith College said—

JEANNIE I never knew white men did anything with colored women on plantations.

ROBBIE I said, "It was rape." Her eyes turned red. She choked on her sandwich and quit the job. (McCauley 370)

What moves in the space between "did anything" and "it was rape" is a legacy of loss and trauma that is simultaneously disavowed and denied as it is defined. In other words, the language used to detail much of the violence, but particularly rape, unearths a major gap in our vocabulary. The diction required to name rape in the time of slavery does not exist. In her exemplary text, *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman explains:

in nineteenth-century common law, rape was defined as the forcible carnal knowledge of a female against her will and without her consent. Yet the actual or attempted rape of an enslaved woman was an offense neither recognized nor punishable by law. Not only was rape simply unimaginable because of purported black lasciviousness, but also its repression was essential to the displacement of white culpability that characterized both the recognition of black humanity in the slave law and the designation of the black subject as the originality locus of transgression and offense. (79-80)

The definition of rape was illegible for enslaved women, as though marked with an asterisk to indicate a significant difference between the renderings of black and white womanhood. To acknowledge that rape was forcible would also require an acknowledgement of both will and consent. But as Hartman contends, the always already named promiscuity of black females denied the potential for white culpability. Although in Robbie's naming of the act as "rape," "her eyes turned

red. She choked on her sandwich and quit the job,” McCauley’s performance achieves an opening of a dialogue between two women, however minor of an opening it may appear. Her work here does not attempt to provide closure or healing, but instead provoke conversation that might matriculate into a more complex understanding of the past. Citing McCauley brings into conversation the moment in which Williams writes and the circumstance of and necessity for a dialogue of reckoning between Dessa Rose and Rufel. Even more, the linguistic exchange here exemplifies a critical disconnect at the level of language between these two women. Although they both use the term “Mammy,” the name has completely disparate meanings and values that are influenced by their own positions and perspectives.

When returning to the text, it is only after Dessa Rose’s outburst that Rufel begins to contemplate the accuracy of her memories of Dorcas. She remembers that

they called her Mammy because Mrs. Carson thought the title made her seem as if she had been with the family for a long time....She made Rufel stand up straight, rinsed her baby-fine hair in malt water and lemon, and arrange it becomingly about her childishly thin face. And love her. It was Rufel Mammy loved, Rufel whose heart she had stolen from the moment she smiled.
(Williams 123)

What is telling is that in the chamber of Rufel’s memory, the figure of her Mammy is as empty of detail as the generic name she has been titled. In other words, the memories Rufel associates with Mammy are actually laden with

images of herself, and moreover, the presence of Mammy is confined to her limited actions. “They called her Mammy” because doing so would perform a level of status for them; the title had little to actually do with the woman who it was used to name. She bathed Rufel and “rinsed her baby-fine hair” because this was a requirement enforced by her station as a slave. Lastly, she imagines that Mammy loved her, but she does not dare to consider the alternative for an enslaved woman charged with caring for a child who enjoyed more rights than she and would eventually come to own her. What is missing from this memory about Mammy is the woman behind that strategic naming. The omniscient narrator continues, recalling her memories:

Rufel had been lonely, had felt herself ugly and awkward. Mammy talked with her, admired her hair and rather full-lipped smile, showed her how to walk erectly. She praised where Mrs. Carson had criticized, hugged where Rufel’s own mother had scolded. Whatever Rufel had not taken to that pillowy bosom seemed insignificant to her now; and she had been taken to that cushion bosom, been named there ‘Fel, Rufel. To hear the names on Mammy’s lips was to hear, to know herself loved. (Williams 124)

Here, even in her memory, Dorcas occupies a subservient role as her usefulness is defined by what she is able to provide for Rufel. Within this excerpt of her memory, it is evident that Mammy provided an alternative to her own mother and became a source of comfort for Rufel. While this may be accurate, there is still very little revealed about the actual woman. Put differently, Rufel remembers Mammy fondly because she doted on her but fails to contemplate how her

behavior was dually influenced and enforced by her captivity. Through her experiences with Mammy, she came “to know herself loved” because for a child, receiving attention in addition to basic provisions equates to love. This was a simplistic love, a love that was defined and understood by a child. And even now, having a child herself, Rufel continues to exhibit a child-like approach to emotion, as she fails to consider how love must always become complicated when a power dynamic is uneven. It may be true that Rufel experienced some measure of love for Mammy, but it is also true that she had a legal claim and ownership over her. Critically, “Dessa forces Rufel to see that if she didn’t know Mammy’s name, she didn’t know Mammy. Even the most basic details about Mammy are unknown to Rufel” (McDowell 152). This becomes a complicated thought for Rufel because “considering Mammy’s supposed intimate involvement in all aspects of domestic life in the Big House, it is not surprising that she was thought of someone special, not just another house slave. Thus, in accounts of Mammy, her occupation is infused with great emotion” (White 48).

Dessa Rose’s critique of Rufel’s memory swiftly intervenes upon Rufel’s obtuse understanding of her own relationship to the institution of slavery by way of her participation. It is only through the protagonist’s enraged interjection that Rufel begins to question the possibility that a genuine and meaningful relationship can materialize when there exists an uneven distribution of power. She begins to review her recollections, as she considers, “but Mammy was my friend, she

thought. Embarrassed by her own recoil from the cherished memory, she said stoutly, ‘she loved me. And no darky can tell me different!’” (Williams 125). As she begins to question her own memories, she feels simultaneously drawn in defense of them. This tug she experiences, the pull to defend her relationship to the legacy of bondage, deftly illustrates the tempered task of supporting in one’s own mind an institution that is so clearly abhorrent, heinous and violent. Rufel thinks

it was as if the wench has taken her beloved Mammy and put a stranger in her place. Had Mammy had children, Rufel wondered, suckled a child at her breast as she did the wench’s, as she did with her own? And how had Mammy borne it when they were taken away—That’s if she had any. Rufel interrupted that train of thought. She had only the wench’s word for that. And they were not, she repeated, talking about the same woman. But mammy might have had children and it bothered Rufel that she did not know. (Williams 128)

Although Rufel expresses a feeling of loss over her memory of Mammy, when she articulates that “it was as if” Dessa Rose had reduced her relationship to that of a stranger, she confirms that her exchanges with Dorcas were never reciprocated. In other words, in never revealing the details of her own life, (assuming of course that they would even be legible to a child version of Rufel), Dorcas remained within the confines that the ambiguous and generic title of “Mammy” dictated. The loss that Rufel experiences is not for “Mammy” because that was not an individual person but rather a figure defined only by her ability to serve, and it is neither for Dorcas, because Rufel never knew her to feel her

absence. The loss that Rufel begins to experience, and will continue to feel as it develops throughout the novel, is the destruction of the romanticization of slavery and the ideology behind the racial hierarchy that was not only instilled in her at a young age, but came to be the very measure by which she defined herself.

What becomes evident in the excerpts that follow is the inner conflict that Rufel experiences in attempting to question an institution that was central in how she defined herself. When many consider bondage, the focus most often falls upon the ways in which the institution clearly defined black bodies. Much attention, importantly, has been centered upon the politics of naming specific values to specific bodies and the legacy of this process beyond the scope of slavery. However, Williams articulates how in defining another, one defines themselves reciprocally. Rufel's definition of herself is thus intrinsically linked to how she defined the bodies she viewed as opposite to her own. Put differently, the external (and internal) status that Rufel not only comes to enjoy but also understands as an integral component of her identity is a direct result of her relationship to slaves, and more specifically, her acquisition of them. Therefore, as she comes to question the institution, she also comes to question herself. She wonders, "had Mammy minded when the family no longer called her name? Was that why she changed mine? Rufel thought fearfully....How old *had* Mammy been?...Had she any children?" (Williams 129). Suddenly, and as a consequence of Dessa Rose's outburst, Rufel moves from an assumption of "Mammy's"

appreciation for her to a question of “had Mammy minded?” This move is significant because it illustrates a shift in awareness that not only did “Mammy” have thoughts of her own, but also that Rufel was not privy to them. As many literary illustrations that romanticize the figure of the “Mammy” show,

Mammy was of special importance to Southern perceptions, for she reflected two traditions perceived as positive by Southerners—that of the idealized slave and that of the idealized woman. For proslavery advocates, Southern apologists, antifeminist propagandists, and for those who genuinely loved their black nurses, Mammy was a Godsend. (61)

Thus, for Rufel to genuinely question the reality of slavery, and move to a position of challenging it, she must begin by constructing a more accurate understanding of Dorcas. As long as Rufel nurses the image of “Mammy” within the confining boundaries that the term dictates, she will not be able to move beyond the context of bondage as she sees it. The love she believes was shared between her and Dorcas becomes her greatest defense of the institution. In other words, so long as she maintains the enduring image of “Mammy” as a doting slave who was content with her status and circumstance, Rufel will continue to justify slavery in her mind.

THE SIGHT AND SOUND OF VIOLENCE

This section argues that through Rufel’s reading of a scarless back, and her subsequent decision that no violence occurred, Williams issues a critique of the production of historical record. Here, Rufel occupies the position to decide,

name, announce, measure and to record the scarlessness of her back. A component of Rufel's justification of slavery is embodied in her active refusal to genuinely acknowledge the extent of real physical torture, or even truly see pain and recognize it as such. For example, as Rufel continues to contemplate the realities of bondage, she ponders as well the validity of Dessa Rose's story of torture:

but the girl's back was scarless and to hear Ada tell it, every runaway in the world was escaping from a "cruel master." Ada herself claimed to have escaped from a lecherous master who had lusted with her and then planned the seduction of Ada's daughter, Annabelle. Rufel didn't believe a word of that. She could see nothing attractive in the rawboned, brown-skinned woman or her lanky, half-witted daughter.... "No white man would do that," she'd insisted. (Williams 91)

Rufel's protest that "but the girl's back was scarless" gestures to the need to concretely see in order to prove—a conflict that continues throughout the book and reflects a larger, continued reliance on empirical evidence or physical data to prove that injustice or violence occurred. "But the girl's back was scarless" suggests the demand for proof during a time when keeping records did not serve the purpose or position of those in power as it associates the absence of scars (on her back) with an evacuation of responsibility for torture and terror. It is in this moment that Williams strikes a major critique that pulls directly at the intersection of historical record, cultural memory and trauma. Ada's interjection represents the circulation of cultural memory, and the evidence of what is only carried through

the vocalized sharing of unmeasured, unseen, unrecorded experience. The trauma that lives in “lusted with her and then planned the seduction of [her] daughter” is illegible. It is swiftly rejected. Just as “the girl’s back was scarless” so was the invisibility of the trauma Ada experiences. Rufel’s refusal of the suggestion and her insistence that “no white man would do that” exemplifies the power of both whiteness and patriarchy as the ultimate sources of record.

Furthermore, the refusal to recognize pain alludes to a much larger denial of an ability to experience pain. Hartman argues, “this disavowal of the captives’ pain operates on a number of levels, from simple denial of pain to the stipulation of an excessive enjoyment. The terms of this disavowal are something like: No, the slave is not in pain. Pain isn’t really pain for the enslaved, because of their limited sentience, tendency to forget, and easily consolable grief” (Hartman 36). Here, Hartman associates the potential to feel, to experience pain with the ability to be conscious. The suggestion is that because a level of consciousness or awareness is denied, the assumption that follows is that the slave does not experience pain because of an inability to be conscious. Hartman further complicates the measure of pain, contending that

if this pain has been largely unspoken and unrecognized, it is due to the sheer denial of black sentience rather than the inexpressibility of pain. The purported immunity of blacks to pain is absolutely essential to the spectacle of contented subjection or, at the very least, to discrediting the claims of pain. The black is both insensate and content, indifferent to pain and induced to work by threats of corporal punishment. These contradictions are partly

explained by the ambiguous and precarious status of the black in the “great chain of being”—in short, by the pathologizing of the black body—this abhorrence then serves to justify acts of violence that exceed normative standards of the humanely tolerable, though within the limits of the socially tolerable as concerned the black slave. (51)

In beginning with the claim that this pain remains “unspoken and unrecognized,” Hartman points to the existence of this experience outside of the space of measure. In being “unspoken and unrecognized,” the pain is unrecorded, and disappears fully lest it leave a trace. The “denial of black sentience” theorizes that it is not the actual pain that is unaccounted for, but rather the capability of ever feeling pain. It is not then that the pain or the violence that precedes it is ignored, but rather the basic function of being conscious or aware to feel pain does not exist. Instead, the image and myth of the content slave circulates to deny consciousness. However, the presence of scars from whippings leaves traces of the usage of “corporal punishment” as a source of discipline and punishment. When Hartman articulates this paradox, she gestures to another: the expansive limit of what is socially tolerable in terms of pain and punishment exercised on the body of a slave, and the narrow boundaries of what is considered humanely tolerable. When Williams renders the girl’s back scarless, she engages with a critique of what goes unmeasured as a consequence of being unseen, but she also stages the refusal to see as a combined result of a denial of consciousness and the insistence that “no white man would do that.”

In *Dessa Rose*, Williams highlights an absence through the scarless back and the subsequent conclusion that pain did not occur. In a critical text published one year after *Dessa Rose*, Toni Morrison presents the reverse through an extreme presence of posterior scars in *Beloved*. In a drastic contrast to the scarlessness of the girl's back, Morrison's text features a heightened visibility and expression of violence and torture on the protagonist's body. Navigating the remains pain left behind, Amy traces Sethe's back:

It's a tree, Lu. A chokecherry tree. See, here's the trunk—it's red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here's the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if these ain't blossoms. Tiny, little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom. What God have in mind, I wonder. I had me some whipping, but I don't remember nothing likes this. (Morrison 93)

Both Williams and Morrison figure white women in the position of reading pain through either an absence or presence of scars on the protagonists' backs. In the space left scarless by Williams, Morrison responds with a back covered with a history of violence. Morrison's choice to imbue these scars with the image of a tree is interesting when the fact that trees most often resurrect meanings of fertility and lineage is considered. How could the scars left behind from such brutal violence represent anything so full of life—and even “in bloom”? In “Love and Violence/Maternity and Death: Black Feminism and the Politics of Reading (Un)representability” Sara Clarke Kaplan positions the

enslaved black female as the exemplary subject of social death [and argues that] it was on and through the black female body that social death converged with species life to transmute biological reproduction into the production of the socially dead, and where specific and simultaneous processes of gendering and degendering met the violent logic of property relations to produce sexualized violence, coercive reproduction, and forced labor. (Kaplan 112)

Read in this way, it is possible that Morrison suggests this metaphor as a way to translate occupying a position that exemplifies the intersection of social death as well as the production of life. As black women's bodies were utilized to fill the void through the closure of the slave trade, their wombs became the specific site of death as growing within them were new lives that would be transformed into commodities with their first breaths. This is certainly central to Williams's text as Dessa Rose is kept alive only for the usage of her unborn child as property.

Rufel's privileged ignorance of the violence of slavery is not limited to her visual blindness, but expands to include her auditory sense as well. She reflects, beginning with an oxymoron, "Bertie had become a good master. Why, she couldn't remember the last time a darky had been whipped at the Glen; certainly she would have heard the screams (*unless Bertie had taken to whipping them in the woods*) or Mammy would have told her—Wouldn't she?" (Williams 138). The reference to the sounds of slavery—the haunting shrieks—alludes notably to the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Douglass writes:

I have been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered

with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood clotted cowskin.²³ (15)

In his narrative, his description of the shrieks is immediately juxtaposed with sound of songs sung by slaves. Douglass recalls,

those songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my sympathies for my brethren in bonds. If any one wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd's plantation, and, on allowance-day, place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul. (19)

When Williams's reference to "the screams" is read alongside Douglass's narrative, it appears that both writers make an argument about the relationship of sound to that of memory and trauma. Put differently, their work raises the question of how sounds specifically speak to the presence (or perhaps absence) of slavery in U.S. historical record. Certainly, the metaphors of silences and gaps are often returned to when considering how dominant record narrates the existence of

²³ This passage has been the subject of some controversy. See Hartman, who writes: "I have chosen not to reproduce Douglass's account of the beating of Aunt Hester in order to call attention to the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave's ravaged body. Rather than inciting indignation, too often they immure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity—the oft-repeated or restored character of these accounts and our distance from them are signaled by the theatrical language usually resorted to in describing these instances—and especially because they reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering." See also Moten *In the Break*. The choice to reproduce Douglass's words here result from the position that both Williams and Morrison, in their fictional narratives on slavery, respond directly to original slave narratives, of which Douglass is a critical example.

slavery, thus rendering the interjection here of the haunting nature of sound provocative. Through the usage of sound, both writers articulate that the history of trauma and violence is carried through and made legible by sound. Moreover, to return to Hartman and the “disavowal of the captives’ pain” that she cites, it is evident that sound represents the singular expression of both pain and consciousness that cannot be denied.

Furthermore, Rufel’s transformation of her relationship to bondage, while certainly slow and not without its shortcomings, begins to develop most clearly when she preemptively defies her absent husband. With concern that the refuge they enjoy on the farm may be ephemeral, Nathan asks Rufel what will become of them if her husband does return. More specifically, he is concerned that the husband would with certainty sell them back into bondage. She considers,

He might, she knew; Bertie might do anything. Her stomach tightened at the thought. He would want to enslave them...He drove them hard and stinted on their food and clothing. Rufel knew this without ever having really seen it. Mammy had made sure that any darky who worked in or near the House was clean; Bertie had not encouraged Rufel to roam much beyond the House and yard. She had seen the hands from a distance when she rode out to the fields with Bertie now and then. They did look wretched, he had admitted, but then slavery was a wretched lot. And she had accepted this as long as she didn’t hear their screams. Rufel bit her lip. Could she be that blind again? (150)

For the first time, Rufel is able to announce her blindness and defines it as an active refusal of both sight and sound. Tellingly, the fact that “Mammy had made sure” and “Bertie had not encouraged Rufel to roam” explicates the layers of

protection that she experiences as a white woman during this time. Though “slavery was a wretched lot,” the wretchedness that is a direct consequence of her husband’s hands is kept beyond her line of vision. “As long as she didn’t hear their screams” Rufel could convince herself to be blind.

THE SIGHT OF VULNERABILITY

For both Dessa Rose and Rufel, the sight of complete vulnerability becomes the only occasion in which they are able to dismantle the categories they have separately constructed for each other. It is only when they witness the other at an immensely precarious moment that they are able to relinquish the barriers they once erected, originally blockading the potential of viewing the other as an individual existing beyond the “markers so loaded with mythical prepossession” (Spillers 203). For Rufel, this moment occurs when she enters the bedroom unannounced and finally sees the violence that has been writ on Dessa Rose’s body. Up until this moment she generally refused to consider that a white man could ever harm a woman in this way. Even when Dorcas tells her that “men can do things a *lady* can’t even guess at,” she acknowledges that she “knew that was true but could not bring herself to concede this openly” (Williams 92). It is the direct confrontation with Dessa Rose’s nude body that compels her to understand:

barely managing to suppress the quick grasp of sympathy surprised from her by that glimpse of the dark body, and acutely

embarrassed, Rufel closed the door. The wench's loins looked like a mutilated cat face. Scar tissue plowed through her pubic region so no hair would ever grow there again. Rufel leaned weakly against the door, regretting what she had seen. The wench had a right to hide her scars, her pain, Rufel thought, almost in tears herself. (Williams 154)

In what Williams calls “the quick grasp of sympathy” Rufel finally sees what she had refused to believe from words alone. The usage of the word sympathy here marks Rufel's reaction as exuding both an emotion of sorrow and pity as well as the potential for the presence of understanding. Certainly, Rufel cannot understand the brutality and physical violence that Dessa Rose has experienced, but through Williams's diction, she appears to arrive at an understanding of the severity of Dessa Rose's former treatment. To precede “sympathy” with the combined description of “quick” and “grasp” illustrates how this emotion is both immediate and visceral, clutching her body before the decades of learned racism and defense of the institution can set in. Put differently, her response to Dorcas's statement noted above succinctly depicts between what she “knew” to be true as a conscious individual, and what “she could not bring herself to concede” because of her life-long education in performing white womanhood in the time of slavery.

In “‘The Quick Grasp of Sympathy’: Trauma and Interracial Witnessing in Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*,” Jennifer L. Griffiths includes a reading of this moment in the text. Griffiths argues,

distressed at what she has just witnessed, Rufel must acknowledge that Dessa's scars, and the story they tell, belong to her. The scars

serve as a text inscribing the violence of racism over the black female body, her sexual autonomy, and her ability to reproduce. As an extreme text, these inscriptions compel readings that force their audience to own or disown a position in relation to the ideology marking her body and thwarting its efforts to write its own meaning, trapped in a permanent childlike state of dependence symbolized by the impeded growth of pubic hair. Her body, once viewed as public property available to any white person's proprietary gaze, becomes her own, finally "private" in Rufel's sight. To gaze at Dessa's scars without her knowledge signifies another violation, another attempt to steal Dessa's control over her body, its physical and psychic meaning, and it would appear that Rufel recognizes this violation, feeling ashamed at her own behavior. (27)

Although Griffiths interrogates this scene in a way that contributes useful interpretations, I want to trouble specific contentions in her reading. In the first sentence, it is ambiguous and unclear for whom the "belong to her" is meant. Initially, it would seem that the scars obviously "belong to" Dessa Rose as they are permanently affixed to her body. However, as Rufel figures as the subject in that sentence, "belong to her" would appear to be in relation to Rufel. In addition, a few lines down, Griffiths explains that the scars "compel readings" that force an "audience to own or disown a position in relation to the ideology" responsible for the violence. In other words, Griffiths suggests that one is always already placed in the binary of either being responsible for or innocent of the violence of slavery. While I would certainly agree that silence in the face of oppression is not apolitical and ultimately reflects a position that allows violence to continue, I do not think that this particular moment expresses that type of binary nor would I

argue that this binary allows for the complexity of the role Rufel occupies. If “belong to her” is in fact referring to Rufel, that argument actually reconstructs her in a position of ownership over Dessa Rose’s body.

Rather than read Dessa Rose’s mutilation as “a permanent childlike state of dependence,” I would consider instead how this type of marking gestures to the rendering of her body as a commodity such that even in the brutality she endures, her position in the realm of commerce influences the physical area of violence. Put differently, it is important that Dessa Rose has “no scars or marks of punishment except on her rump and the inside of her flanks” because these were “places only the most careful buyer was likely to inspect” (Williams 21). Thus, she experiences violence that marks her body permanently but is still able to function as a commodity with little impact on her monetary value because just as the physical scars remain hidden to the unknowledgeable buyer, “neither the attack [she led] nor scars were mentioned in her description in the coffle manifest” (Williams 21). The way in which a particular portion of her body becomes the locus of assault, similarly reflects how when captured after the revolt, she is kept alive solely for the purpose of giving birth to her baby, who is claimed by her captors as an unborn commodity. Through these two separate but related events, Williams identifies how the bodies of slaves were continually dissected as commodities. Spillers explains how the physical separation, the compartmentalizing of body parts reflects a form of total domination, writing,

this profitable ‘atomizing’ of the captive body provides another angle on the divided flesh: we lose any hint or suggestion of a dimension of ethics, of relatedness between human personality and its anatomical features, between one human personality and cultural institutions. To that extent, the procedures adopted for the captive flesh demarcate a total objectification, as the entire captive community becomes a living laboratory. (208)

Read in this way, the specific violence and violation Dessa Rose endures reflects not a permanent state of childlike dependence” but instead a mode of “total objectification” that translates into a terrifying process of commoditization.

Lastly, Griffith argues that Rufel’s “gaze” “signifies another violation” that results in Rufel “feeling ashamed.” However, the specific context of this moment in the text troubles the reading of Rufel’s movement as a violating gaze because unlike the previous incidents when she actively pursues information about Dessa Rose’s past—including her attempt to “draw back the covers” (Williams 139)—“Rufel walked backed to the house in a daze” (Williams 153). Admitting to herself for the first time that her husband “Bertie was dead,” “Rufel entered the House quietly, deep in thought” (Williams 154). For the interruption of the undressing that results in her accidental sight to be understood as a violating “gaze,” we must assume that Rufel’s act is carried out consciously and with the intent of intrusion. However, Williams describes with great care that in the seconds leading up to Rufel’s confrontation with Dessa’s nude body, she is both “in a daze” and “deep in thought.” Besides, still recovering, Dessa Rose “was not supposed to be on her feet yet” (Williams 154). Dessa Rose’s nudity in

this moment reflects a specific measure of power and status between the two women. One stands completely vulnerable, unprotected by clothing as the other enters fully dressed. However, although Rufel has power over Dessa Rose in this space, she does not act upon that power but instead becomes aware of what she has seen and also regretful of her previously reiterated belief that “she must have done something pretty terrible” (Williams 139) to receive the whipping. Rather than shame for the incident of the “gaze,” Rufel feels remorse or regret for the countless ways in which she did not see, or convinced herself otherwise. Williams illustrates how this remorse or regret has its limitations through the insertion of the word “wench” in Rufel’s description of Dessa. Her usage of this term at the very moment reveals the boundaries or limitations of sisterhood²⁴.

For Dessa Rose, it is not until she witnesses Rufel cry out for help when being attacked by a drunken man that she begins to understand the white woman beyond the context of an enemy. She recalls their combined efforts, explaining, “we managed to push him out the bed, tried to stomp him to death with our bare feet. He crawled cross that floor and got out the room somehow. I slammed the door and we pulled a chest cross in front of it. We leaned against it, panting a little now” (Williams 201). The sleeplessness that follows their collective resistance against this man symbolizes how transformative this specific moment became for Dessa Rose’s understanding of Rufel. She elaborates:

²⁴ Gratitude is owed to Dr. Dennis Childs for drawing my focus to the usage of this term in this moment.

The white woman was subject to the same ravishment as me; this the thought that kept me awake. I hadn't know white mens could use a white woman like that, just take her by force same as they could with us. Harker, neither Nathan help us there in that House, any House. I knew they would kill a black man for loving with a white woman; would they kill a black man for keeping a white man off a white woman? I didn't know; and didn't want to find out. (Williams 201)

In the passage above, Dessa Rose gestures to the paradoxical position of a black man in this time as only legible in the role of an aggressor—but never savior. She considers how even if Harker or Nathan had been present or in a position to help, doing so would result in their certain death. Dessa Rose explains why she keeps this incident a secret between them, articulating,

but really, what kept me quiet was knowing white mens wanted the same thing, would take the same thing from a white woman as they would from a black woman. Cause they could. I never will forget the fear that come on me when Miz Lady called me on Mr. Oscar, that *knowing* that she was as helpless in this as I was, that our only protection was ourselves and each others. (202)

When Williams relies on this moment of vulnerability to unearth Dessa Rose's compassion for Rufel's circumstance, she suggests again how sight is often relied heavily upon as primary source of evidence, but also how the direct confrontation with fear releases the potential for a working through of otherwise unwavering issues. McDowell argues that recognizing aspects of themselves in the other's story allows for the possibility of understanding, as "both are separated from their families; both are mourning personal losses; both are raising children; both live under a system that denies either full control over her body. But these

commonalities are produced by radically different material circumstances and thus engender radically different effects” (151). It is not until Dessa Rose recognizes that she and Rufel share a similar fear or a similar circumstance of vulnerability as women that she is able to identify with Rufel on an individual level. Moreover, the repetition of the phrase “cause they could” figures as a motif throughout the novel, often as the only explanation for the terror wrought on Dessa Rose, her partner Kaine, and many of the other slaves whose stories unfold in Williams’s text. Although, “cause they could” extends to Rufel both as a source of oppression through her indirect owning of slaves and also as victim, as even a white woman was subject to a similar—though different—form of sexual abuse.

PERFORMING, STEALING AWAY AND MOVING OUT WEST

A critical component of Williams’s text is the challenge of moving “out of the text of slavery” as even in the space of performed freedom and sanctuary of the farm, the presence of the institution outside the boundaries of the refuge continually penetrates their acts within. I use the phrase *performed freedom* to describe the farm because while Dessa Rose and the group of former slaves find respite on Rufel’s property, they are always conscious that at any moment they may be reenslaved. Thus their experience of freedom is tempered by their precarity. It is with this knowledge and fear that the group decides that they will resell their own bodies into slavery. Preempting the potential profit of others, the

group collectively performs the transaction of slavery; advertising and selling their bodies to the highest bidder, escaping shortly afterward, and combining their capital to fund their eventual move out West. In this section, I also engage in a close reading with Charles Chesnut's short story, "The Passing of Grandison," to gesture towards the presence of entering bondage again elsewhere in the tradition of African American literature.

Through their collective and repeated act of placing themselves on the auction block and then running away shortly after, Williams's characters perform an exemplary reimagining of what Hartman refers to as "stealing away" in a way that troubles the notion of both property and theft during the time of slavery. Borrowing also from Spillers, Hartman notes, "the very phrase 'stealing away' played upon the paradox of property's agency and the idea of property as theft, thus alluding to the captive's condition as a legal form of unlawful or amoral seizure, what Hortense Spillers describes as 'the violent seizing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire'" (Hartman 66). Even more, Hartman argues, "stealing away was the vehicle for the redemptive figuration of dispossessed individual and community, reconstituting kin relations, contravening the object status of chattel, transforming pleasure, and investing in the body as a site of sensual activity, sociality, and possibility, and, last, redressing the pained body" (Hartman 66). Critically, it was "through stealing away, [that] counterclaims about justice and freedom were advanced that denied the sanctity

or legitimacy of rights of property in a double gesture that played on the meaning of theft. Implicit within the appropriation of the object of property was an insistence that flew in the face of the law: liberty defined by inalienable rights of property was theft” (Hartman 69).

When Dessa Rose articulates the perimeters of performance, a set of codes that would secure whatever safety was possible when “flirt[ing] so close with bondage again” (Williams 194), she delineates the ways in which modes of behavior are socially constructed. She explains:

Miz Lady would tell some story about her husband being laid up with the fever or a busted leg; a couple of times, I think [she said] he was dead. We was to meet at such-and-such a place, by such-and-such a day after the sale; we’d wait two days at a meeting place, then we’d all go on to so-and-so. We was not to come back for no one. We was not to talk. We had to be as careful with slaves as we was with the masters. Our life depended on no one speaking out of turn. We was slaves; wasn’t posed to know nothing nor do nothing without first being told. She was Mistress; wasn’t no Mis’ess, no Miz Rufel to it. If they was caught, they was to act dumb and scared and show the pass from Miz Lady, which they all had hid in the toe of they shoes. She was to act high-handed and helpless if she was in a tight spot. (Williams 194)

In the passage above, Dessa Rose explicates how their existence was only understood through an assumed absence of a husband (white male) figure. The absent husband always fulfills a presence, even in his nonappearance. He must always be “laid up with the fever or a busted leg” because Rufel traveling alone would defy social—and business—standards. The danger was always tangible, as being left behind was a very real possibility. And of course, their success

depended on their silence and their ability to perform, to “act dumb and scared” and if necessary “show the pass.” For Rufel, her own survival demanded a performance as she was to “act high-handed and helpless.” When Williams engages her characters in performing the “text of slavery” in this way, she dismantles the structures that undergird the institution itself. To reenter “bondage again” and affirm the roles they must each play, Williams suggests that the longevity of slavery relied heavily on the performances of participants. When her characters articulate their specific modes of performance, she also exposes how a performance was always already required of them not only in the names they speak and respond to but also in their expression of status. Heavily present in pro-slavery rhetoric was the firm position that the behavior exhibited by slave owners was natural and necessary. To deconstruct this by displaying how both the slaves and slave owners must perform to participate issues a direct and layered satire.

Moreover, what Williams pursues in these scenes of reentering “bondage again” is congruent to the central argument made by Charles Chesnut in his short story “The Passing of Grandison.” Written in 1899, Chesnut’s short story reenters “bondage again” post-emancipation to probe issues of the color line that persist beyond the time of slavery. Through a brief comparative reading of Chesnut’s story, I want to illustrate how dramatic irony functions in cultural texts to engage the reader in dismantling social constructs. The story follows Dick Owens’s attempt to impress a young woman by performing an honorable act.

More precisely, Owens wants to win her favor by helping a slave—belonging to his father, and by extension, himself—escape. Under the guise of taking a vacation in New England, Owens suggests that he take a specific slave with him. His father expresses that the particular slave in question is “too smart to trust among those low-down abolitionists” (Chesnutt 192). Chesnutt explains that the father, “had pronounced views on the subjects of negroes, having studied them, as he often said, for a great many years, and, as he asserted oftener still, understanding them perfectly” (192). The son thus takes the slave of his father’s choosing, Grandison, who the father declares is “too fond of good eating to risk losing his regular meals,” on a journey North, stopping at several points to allow Grandison ample opportunity to escape (Chesnutt 193). With each opportunity to escape, Grandison returns proving to be the loyal, obedient slave the colonel suggested. Even after he is abandoned in Canada by Owens, Grandison makes the trek all the way back to the plantation. Much like Williams’s characters’ reentrance into “bondage again” by way of selling themselves, Chesnutt’s Grandison similarly performs the role of loyal slave, by returning to the plantation, so that he may better aide in the escape of others. A few weeks after Grandison’s return, he “was missing. And not only Grandison, but his wife, Betty the maid; his mother, aunt Eunice; his father, uncle Ike; his brothers, Tom and John and his little sister, Elsie, were likewise absent from the plantation” (Chesnutt 204). Through the dramatic irony present in this story and also in the

final section of *Dessa Rose*, the necessity of performance is illustrated as central to one's survival. Moving also beyond the content of the story, Chesnut's decision—as an author—to reenter “bondage again” speaks both to the continued legacy of social constructs beyond the temporal space of slavery as well as the many vestiges of the institution that remained unsettled post-emancipation.²⁵ *Dessa Rose* thus emerges from a tradition of literary texts that engage with temporal space of bondage to (re)address the continued presence of social constructs that haunt the present.

HISTORY AS UNDEAD

In the “Author's Note” that precedes her historical novel, Williams locates a personal stake in what the past has to tell by explicating her own relationship to it. Williams confesses, “I loved history as a child, until some clear-eyed young Negro pointed out, quite rightly, that there was no place in the American past I could go and be free. I now know that slavery eliminated neither heroism nor love; it provided occasions for their expressions” (Williams 5-6). In her reflection, Williams speaks to the relationship between the past and the present through her desire to find points of connection with history. In this way, she gestures towards the value of the past in giving meaning in the present. There is a personal stake in what the past has to tell. As for heroism and love, Williams specifically

²⁵ Even prior to emancipation, another author, William Wells Brown, utilized dramatic irony in his novel *Clotel; or The President's Daughter* to consider more critically the institution of slavery.

concentrates on these two words because it is critical to perceive individuals as capable of both. However, heroism and love are not always the two words that arise in a reimagining of chattel slavery as much of the foundational theoretical work on human bondage examines the sociological perspective of the pervasive trauma. Most notably, Orlando Patterson cites “natal alienation” as a “constituent element of the slave relation” (Patterson 5). He argues,

not only was the slave denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations but, by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants. He was truly a genealogical isolate. Formally isolated in his social relations with those who lived, he also was culturally isolated from the social heritage of his ancestors. He had a past, to be sure. But a past is not a heritage. (Patterson 5)

This critical passage explicates a slave’s social position in terms of his or her relationship to other individuals on both a direct and simple level as well as a more complex, philosophical level. While physical separation from family members did not always occur, a slave was void of any formally recognized connection by any relation marked by blood. In this way, while slaves may have remained on plantations with those related to them, the constant fear of possible separation was a near reality. The trauma that results from this type of separation, or the pervasive fear of possible separation, is unimaginable. On a more abstract level, a slave would also be alienated or bereft of the dead because if they are separated from the carriers of their own history—their parents and grandparents,

aunts and uncles—their ability to make a meaningful connection with the past is challenged. Thus, when Williams makes the choice to focus specifically on the possibility of heroism or love in the time of slavery, it is with an understanding that the existence of either or both is tremendously complicated. When she says, “it provided occasions for their expressions” she alludes to the formation of alternative kinships that took form in response to the circumstances of natal alienation in addition to the extreme conditions that rendered the incidents of heroism or love as extraordinary. Moreover, when she invites the ghosts of “a pregnant black woman [who] helped to lead an uprising” and a white woman who was said to have “given sanctuary to runaway slaves” to inhabit the pages of her story because she finds it tragic “that these two women never met,” she reveals a history that is both critical and necessary (Williams 5). And although *Dessa Rose*, Williams confesses, “is fiction; all the characters, even the country they travel through, while based on fact, are inventions. And what is here is as true as if I myself had lived it” (Williams 6).

When Williams returns to the time of slavery from the vantage point of the mid-1980s, she makes a move that reveals a continuum between the past and the present in two very specific ways. The first relates to the rapid growth of the prison population by the 1980s and the second pertains to the failure of second-wave feminism to genuinely address issues of race as well as the beginnings of black feminist thought as a formal ideology. This act of returning to a time and

space that appear drastically in contrast to the present—at least on the level of context—masks her critique of the turbulent present in the safety of the past. In what follows, I move through a brief overview about the climate in which Williams is writing to better address how the genre of speculative fiction serves to invoke the past in a reading of the present.

In her critical text, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander explains how mass incarceration legalizes systems of oppression that are not unlike the racial segregation of the Jim Crow era. Her work thoroughly articulates how our nation's system of justice has (re)produced significant disparities through old forms of discrimination under new guises. Alexander explains that formally incarcerated individuals “are confined to the margins of mainstream society and denied the ability to obtain employment, housing and public benefits—much as African Americans were once forced into a segregated, second-class citizenship in the Jim Crow era” (4).

Moreover, Alexander continues,

the racial dimension of mass incarceration is its most striking feature. No other country in the world imprisons so many of its racial or ethnic minorities. The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid. In Washington, D.C., our nation's capitol, it is estimated that three out of four young black men (and nearly all those in the poorest neighborhoods) can expect to serve time in prison. Similar rates of incarceration can be found in black communities across America. (6-7)

Alexander evaluates the demographics of prisons to illustrate how the disproportionate number of young black men that are incarcerated unearths an extreme bias in our system of justice. Her citation of statistics dismantles any misconception that the prison population is anomalous or aberrant in any way. Instead, she argues that the population is a result of a legal system that polices specific bodies. Certainly, to imprison “so many of its racial or ethnic minorities” speaks volumes about justice in America. In addition, it is critical that she highlights stagnancy in other cities across America and specifically uses the term communities, as a central element of Alexander’s argument is the effect this type of legal discrimination has on not only specific individuals but the communities that are made to feel their absence. When the immediate events occurring during the time when Williams composes *Dessa Rose* are considered, surely the most compelling or critical policies that affected the circumstances of many specifically poor and specifically black Americans living in major cities across the U.S. was the political agenda of President Ronald Reagan. Alexander expounds upon how Reagan’s presidency sponsored a police-state in specific areas, targeting specific bodies, explaining,

President Ronald Reagan officially announced the current drug war in 1982, before crack became an issue in the media or a crisis in poor black neighborhoods. A few years after the drug war was declared, crack began to spread rapidly in the poor black neighborhoods of Los Angeles and later emerged in cities across the country. The Reagan administration hired staff to publicize the emergence of crack cocaine in 1985 as part of a strategic effort to

build public and legislative support for the war. The media campaign was an extraordinary success. Almost overnight, the media was saturated with images of black ‘crack whores,’ ‘crack dealers,’ and ‘crack babies’—with images that seemed to confirm the worst negative racial stereotypes about impoverished inner-city residents. The media bonanza surrounding the ‘new demon drug’ helped to catapult the War on Drugs from an ambitious federal policy to an actual war. (5)

In directly highlighting the practices of the Reagan administration, Alexander significantly delineates the circulation of narratives emerging from the state. On a linguistic level, she illustrates how the propaganda machine of this administration sought support for extensive policing. In portraying specific bodies as threatening objects to be feared, the Reagan administration positioned themselves in the role of savior and protector, and thus the means by which they operated were unnecessary to question. Alexander contextualizes her argument by illustrating a legacy of imprisonment through the family tree of a young man, showing how systems of control and punishment have transformed over time while still maintaining an oppressive refusal of citizenship to specific individuals. She shares,

[Jarvious] Cotton’s great-great-grandfather could not vote as a slave. His great-grandfather was beaten to death by the Ku Klux Klan for attempting to vote. His grandfather was prevented from voting by Klan intimidation. His father was barred from voting by poll taxes and literacy tests. Today, Jarvious Cotton cannot vote because he, like many black men in the United States, has been labeled a felon and is currently on parole. (Alexander 1)

This family tree reveals that citizenship remains elusive for a particular portion of society. As citizenship is something that is created, in that it is not a status imagined to be inherent, it is also something that can be revoked. The instability of citizenship restores and maintains a hierarchy that refuses those without it any possibility of ever moving beyond extreme poverty and powerlessness. This relates directly to a critique Williams makes in *Dessa Rose* because there is no place these former slaves can go to be free. Being labeled a felon directly informs one's physical, social, political and economic mobility once outside of prison. Just as Alexander draws a lineage of captivity that harkens back to bondage, so does Joy James in her introduction to the anthology, *The New Abolitionists*. James succinctly explicates the many connections between the modern day prison and the slave plantation of the past.²⁶ James writes,

Prison is the modern day manifestation of the plantation. The antebellum plantation ethos of dehumanization was marked by master-slave relations revolving about sexual terror and domination, beatings, regimentation of bodies, exploited labor, denial of religious and cultural practices, substandard food, health care, and housing, forced migration, isolation in “lockdown” for punishment and control, denial of birth family and kin. That ethos is routinely practiced and reinscribed in contemporary penal sites. Physical, emotional, sexual, and economic exploitations and violence are visited upon bodies with equal abandon and lack of restraint in sites disappeared from conventional scrutiny. The old plantation was a prison; and the new prison is a plantation. Both reconfigure the (white) rural landscape, receiving and processing bodies forcibly transported, at times from “black” spaces into often

²⁶ See also Davis *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Oshinsky *“Worse than Slavery”*: *Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* and Blackmon *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*

culturally unfamiliar territory. In alien terrain, isolated captives witness and participate in a condition in which their civil or human rights are reduced to the rights of slaves. (xxiii)

Through the act of beginning her novel with the protagonist confined and chained in a below ground cellar, Williams simultaneously reflects on the contemporary moment as one that continues a tremendous disregard for life. In other words, though situated in the temporal space of bondage, I argue that *Dessa Rose's* emergence in the 1980s gestures toward the critical need to contemplate the place of captivity in the present because of the ways in which “the old plantation was a prison; and the new prison is a plantation.” Furthermore, I invoke James’s work here because she explicates the multifarious exploitations that occur in captivity. While historical record narrates the emancipation of slavery occurring, in the U.S. context, in the nineteenth century, James articulates that the contemporary prison illustrates a legacy of the institution of slavery through its total and complete control over as well as exploitation of inmates. Moreover, the disproportionate representation of black and brown bodies that exists today occurred as a direct response to the emancipation of slavery²⁷.

Disparate from the research on the massive growth of the prison industrial complex, and more specifically, the bodies recruited to populate that space, thinking through how *Dessa Rose* responds to a failure in the feminist movement demands a more nuanced investigation. In other words, while studies by

²⁷ See David Oshinsky *Worse than Slavery?*

Alexander and Davis reveal an overwhelming presence through mass imprisonment,²⁸ the second critique Williams speaks to cannot be told in numbers or statistics because it reveals an absence. Furthermore, by considering what might have happened had “a pregnant black woman” and “a white woman living on an isolated farm” met, and then exploring their separate anxieties and challenges in the process of becoming allies, Williams creates a space in which the potential for sisterhood can be questioned. In what follows then, is a series of voices that were pivotal in the development of black feminist theory, as well as Williams own perspective.

For example, in 1977 the Combahee River Collective announced the need for a new theoretical approach that refused the exclusive practices of previous liberation movements. Although lengthy, this excerpt from their statement speaks directly to the need to form a set of politics that spoke to the disparate experiences of women. In their own words,

a Black feminist presence has evolved most obviously in connection with the second wave of the American women’s movement beginning in the late 1960s. Black, other Third World, and working women have been involved in the feminist movement from its start, but both outside reactionary forces and racism and elitism within the movement itself have served to obscure our participation....Black feminist politics also have an obvious connection to movements for Black liberation, particularly those of the 1960s and 1970s. Many of us were active in those movements (civil rights, Black nationalism, the Black Panthers), and all of our lives were greatly affected and changed by their ideology, their goals, and the tactics used to achieve their goals. It was our

²⁸ See Davis *Are Prison’s Obsolete*

experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was antiracist, unlike those of white women, and the antisexist, unlike those of Black and white men. (262)

I begin with this statement because it expresses a collective experience of seeking liberation in movements that articulated restructuring the dominant mode of existence only to recognize that their priorities were not considered the priority. In other words, in both spaces of women's rights and civil rights movement, women involved in the CRC expressed their experiences with being pushed to the margins when their concerns gender and race or race and gender. Through the recognition that these movements did not accommodate intersecting aspects of identity, such as: gender, race, sexuality and class, the collective reasoned that a separate movement with a language that could articulate these intersecting aspects of identity was necessary.

Similarly, Audre Lorde writes about how a rejection of voices extended beyond the space of organizing, and into the space of the classroom. Lorde shares,

as white women ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define *woman* in terms of their own experience alone, then women of Color become "other," the outsider whose experience and tradition is too "alien" to comprehend. An example of this is the signal absence of the experience of women of Color as a resource for women's studies courses. The literature of women of Color is seldom included in women's literature courses and almost never in other literature courses, nor in women's studies as a whole. All too often the excuse given is that the literatures of women of Color can only be taught by Colored women, or that they are too difficult to understand, or that classes cannot "get into" them because they

come out of experiences that are “too different.” I have heard this argument presented by white women of otherwise quite clear intelligence, women who seem to have no trouble at all teaching and reviewing work that comes out of the vastly different experiences of Shakespeare, Molière, Dostoyefsky, and Aristophanes. Surely there must be some other explanation. (117)

Situating her own experience as a student in one of the courses Lorde details just a few years before *Dessa Rose* was published, bell hooks reveals, “in 1981, I enrolled in a graduate course on feminist theory where we were given a course reading list that had writings by white women and men, one black man, but no material by or about black, Native American Indian, Hispanic or Asian women. When I criticized this oversight, white women directed an anger and hostility at me that was so intense I found it difficult to attend the class” (142). But because this anger, hostility and exclusion occurs in a specific space it is challenging both to name and measure. Moreover, hooks explains,

attempts by white feminists to silence black women are rarely written about. All too often they have taken place in conference rooms, classrooms, or the privacy of cozy living room settings, where one lone black woman faces the racist hostility of a group of white women. From the time the women’s liberation movement began, individual black women went to groups. Many never returned after a first meeting. (141)

Similarly, in “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought,” Patricia Hill Collins issues a cogent argument that speaks also to Williams’s larger project of dismantling the processes of knowledge production for dominant narratives. Collins argues,

if the epistemology used to validate knowledge comes into question, then all prior knowledge claims validated under the dominant model become suspect. An alternative epistemology challenges all certified knowledge and opens up the question of whether what has been taken to be true can stand the test of alternative ways of validating truth. The existence of an independent black women's standpoint using an Afrocentric feminist epistemology calls into question the content of what currently passes as truth and simultaneously challenges the process of arriving at that truth. (199)

Deconstructing the ways that experiences become facts and then facts become knowledge, with special attention paid to all the sifting of experiences and facts that occurs along the way, is central to the opening of *Dessa Rose*. What Collins argues here is critical to thinking through history and knowledge production because she directly cites a hierarchy of knowledge that simultaneously reinforces certain perspectives while suppressing others. Moreover, I cite this series of reflections ranging from experiences in spaces of organizing to the classroom to public knowledge as a framework for examining the tensions that arise in Williams's text in relation to the conflict between Dessa Rose and Rufel.

Finally, in her essay "Some Implications of Womanist Theory," Williams extrapolates on her perspective on feminist theory as a productive point of entry to invite dialogue and discussion. In her words, feminist perspectives "offer us vocabulary that can be made meaningful in terms of our own experience. Feminist theory, like black aesthetics, offers us not only the possibility of changing one's *reading* of the world, but of changing the world itself. And like black aesthetics, it

is far more egalitarian than the prevailing mode” (Williams 68-69). Moreover, Williams writes “Black women as readers and writers have been kept out of literary endeavor, so we had, and have, a lot to say...but literature as Chinweizu and Walker remind us, is about community and dialogue; theories or ways of reading ought actively to promote the enlargement of both” (74). When read together, the Combahee River Collective, Lorde, hooks, Collins and Williams gesture toward the necessity of speaking to specific silences not only to be heard, but also for survival, as well as the precarious process of attempting to do so. In referencing the spaces of organizing activism and the classroom as hostile, they articulate how even in places assumed to be inclusive, there exists a failure to genuinely address differences that have a real and tangible influence on lived experiences. For Williams, this is not about just including voices, but also maintaining a critical position against narratives that ignore histories of violence and suffering. Similarly, I read Williams’s illustration of the conflict between Dessa Rose and Rufel in the interior space as an allusion to the challenges and limitations occurring within the rhetoric of feminism that fails to account for intersecting identities.

My reading of her text argues that when Williams returns to 1829—by way of the mid-1980s—she disrupts the concept of a linear history because *Dessa Rose* unearths aspects of the present that remain unresolved and unsettled. Certainly, as a consequence of brevity, the insertion of both the Prison Industrial

Complex and the failure of second wave feminism here do not fully speak to the complexity of both as a consequence of brevity. I gesture to these two critiques that emerge from Williams's text to provide context for the work that *Dessa Rose* is able to do as it circulates. It is through the medium of speculative fiction that she is able to remove the specificities of the present. Her return to a different time period illustrates an investment in a time past and complicates the idea of history as dead. History becomes undead through her return and she resurrects these ghosts because they have something to offer the living.

CHAPTER TWO

“Walking Dead”: Recollections of Captivity in Shahla Talebi’s *Ghosts of Revolution*

Traveling to Iran and meeting for the first time my twenty-five first-cousins meant that many hours were spent drinking tea and listening to stories. As my sister and I were the only cousins raised in America, my many cousins—and in particular, my oldest male cousin—felt obligated to fill me in on every layer and detail of family gossip that I had missed in all of these years. And every story he told began the same way. Whether his story was about an argument he had with our uncle or about the building our grandmother lived in or even about poetry, somewhere buried and tucked into his telling was always his father; and more specifically, the years of his childhood marked by his father’s imprisonment. For my cousin, his father’s imprisonment shaped every relationship and experience he had. Having read many of the prison memoirs published predominantly by Iranian women living in exile, I was familiar with the pervasive arrests that occurred in the beginning of the revolution²⁹. Yet, unlike the many memoirs I had read, his stories and the way that his chronic anger was tempered only by his fear, revealed the longevity of captivity. In other words, though my cousin frequently made me laugh the kind of deep, unshakable

²⁹ Some of these titles include: *My Life as a Traitor* (Gharamani), *Between Two Worlds* (Saberi), *Prisoner of Tehran* (Nemat), and *My Prison, My Home* (Esfandiari).

laughter that makes my eyes water, there was always sadness not far behind. His father's absence as a result of his imprisonment had marked his life so heavily that even many years later, it was a tangible presence.

Listening to his stories shaped the texture of this particular chapter because I was able to recognize in a singular memoir the type of story he was telling. When I first read Shahla Talebi's memoir, *Ghosts of Revolution: Rekindled Memories of Imprisonment in Iran*, I immediately saw her story as more intimate than the others I had read. In other words, as a reader, I noticed how Talebi's memoir engenders a far different response than the other memoirs that easily fall into the political trap of being sweepingly reductive and err on the side of propaganda.³⁰ In her own words, Talebi acknowledges the paradox of living in exile in the U.S., but chooses to live as an activist whose primary agenda is the foreclosure of state-sponsored captivity, violence, and torture. I posit this concern as a critical tension throughout her text. In this way, her memoir makes a statement about the experience of captivity that is not exclusive to the practices of one government, but about the specter of prisons on a larger scale.

This chapter builds upon the last chapter in thinking through the vestiges of captivity. In this chapter I argue that the experience of captivity has a radius of

³⁰ One of the most famous memoirs to emerge from this market is Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Many scholars have been highly critical of Nafisi's political motivations for writing her book because it posits the only opportunity for freedom for Iranians and women in particular, through Western culture while also denying the existence of an Iranian literary tradition. See Dabashi, *Brown Skin, White Masks*.

influence that reaches far beyond the individual prisoner. I begin with a reading of Talebi's memory of the Massacre of 1988, and more specifically, I connect the inability to bury the dead as an inability to mourn that is resurrected through contemporary protests against the regime. I place Talebi's text in conversation with Sahar Delijani's novel, *Children of the Jacaranda Tree* to articulate how loss is inherited. Secondly, I trouble the term "Lost Generation" to suggest that generation(s) to come continue to experience loss as a consequence of the prison structure. Moreover, I read the presence of children within the prison space as a metaphor for the lack of futurity post-captivity. Lastly, I also consider how Talebi's reflections on writing in the diaspora reveal a connection to the expansive growth of the prison-industrial-complex in the U.S.

MASS GRAVES AND THE PROHIBITION OF MOURNING

When Talebi reveals her connection to the Massacre of 1988, she brings to the fore a history that has been largely undocumented and swept to the margins of public consciousness. I begin with a reading of the prohibition of mourning for captive bodies alongside the heightened, public grieving for martyrs. I then move to a coterminous reading of Sahar Delijani's novel to articulate the eruption of memory and loss that become inherited by the future generations.

Talebi writes, “the massacre of political prisoners in the summer of 1988 marked a turning point in the history of political suppression in Iran” (25). She continues,

it was during this summer that my Hamid and about five thousand other prisoners were executed. The journalists did not perhaps stay long enough to see how night after night during those two months, meat trucks carried the bodies of hundreds of political prisoners and hastily dumped them into the ditches that were clumsily dug in the dark of night. They would have nevertheless noticed the freshness of the soil and the restless dogs. The families learned about those horrifying nights, only in fragments, from some immigrant Afghani men who worked and lived in the area and whispered to them what they witnessed night after night, while scared revealing these ugly secrets of the government might jeopardize their own lives. (Talebi 33)

As the passage reveals the details and circumstances of the prison massacre, Talebi articulates the layered violence occurring both to “[her] Hamid and about five thousand other prisoners” as well as the violence directed at the potential mourners. The primary violence, the brutal and massive killings of the prisoners, initiates a secondary violation through the refusal to allow for mourning to occur. This disavowal is evident first in the treatment of the bodies, as they are transported in “meat trucks” before being “clumsily” and “hastily dumped.” This refusal is supported secondly by an absence of witnesses. Talebi locates the “journalists [that] did not perhaps stay long enough to see” and “some immigrant Afghani men” as possible witnesses to the massacre. However, both groups exist as tenuous outsiders, marking their ability both to see and record as impossible.

While there can be no possible redress for the enormity of the lives lost during the prison massacre, Talebi's memory highlights how the disposal of physical remains additionally disavowed the possibility for loved ones to mourn. What becomes lost in the denial of a burial and the performance of rituals that accompany that process? And how would witnessing attend to the unimaginable suffering experienced by "the families [who] learned about those horrifying nights"?

In her attention to the treatment of the bodies, in the specific way that they were collectively carried and dumped, her words reveal that the actions that followed the mass murder mattered. Rituals and traditions matter. The rites performed following one's passage from the living to the dead are full of meaning and significance. It is worth noting that her memory lingers most heavily on the details that occurred post-execution, suggesting that while the murder can never be undone, the inability to perform a burial results in an inability to mourn, or a persistent grief. Put differently, "a mourning without end, melancholia result from the inability to resolve the grief and ambivalence precipitated by the loss of the loved object, place, or ideal" (Eng 3). Certainly, the "inability to resolve grief" is influenced by the impossibility of witnesses. Similarly, the denial of burial rituals and the absence of witnesses refuse to acknowledge that a life that once existed is no longer there. The absence of witnesses extends the melancholia created by the inability to mourn because there is no tangible record.

Whereas the whispers told “only in fragments” testify to the bodies of prisoners buried beneath the ground in mass graves, elsewhere in Iran at the very moment of the massacre, other deaths became exceptionally pronounced for public mourning. The portraits of soldiers who were killed in war became the primary focus for mass mourning. Roxanne Varzi explains,

in the wake of literally hundreds of thousands of deaths in the Iran-Iraq war, the Islamic republic aimed to emphasize uniqueness over quantity by painting billboards of specific martyrs, with real names, from real pictures. While these martyrs are not reproduced mechanically and in mass quantities like Khomeini’s photograph, photography plays an important role at the inception of these images by arresting the real at the moment of its death in order to replicate it in a less-than-real form for public consumption. (Varzi 62)

That specific deaths were primed for public consumption while others were deftly omitted from public knowledge delineates the disparate value of life through the treatment of the dead. It is not that the dead are void of meaning or significance in their absence of life, as the shrines dedicated to soldiers exude the elevated respect that became manifested through their deaths. It is instead that the circumstance of the death, as an extension of the disparate stations in life, defines the public’s potential for mourning. Furthermore, Varzi explains, “the space of death needs two things in war-era Iran: a martyr and a photograph. Martyrdom is meaningless without memorialization, and memorialization is not possible without a photograph” (Varzi 62.) In order for the public to mourn, an image was required. Thus, “photography is vitally important in bringing the dead back to life,

or rather bringing death to everyday life, by providing an image that can be replicated by someone who never knew or ever saw the dead soldier” (Varzi 62). Through her reading of the shrines constructed to honor the soldiers, Varzi draws a critical correlation between sight and memory. To be capable of being remembered, as witnessed in public spaces in war-era and also contemporary Iran, requires a visual presence.

Nevermind a photograph or portrait, for prisoners executed during the massacre of 1988, “there were no tombstones, no markers, no name to signify [their resting place] as graveyard” (Talebi 35). Rather, Talebi recalls their erasure, marked by “a few bumps on the ground and some broken stones here and there told the story of different periods of brutality but also the story of the struggle of those families whose loved ones were executed in the early 1980s to make the deaths of their loved ones visible” (35). She continues, reflecting on the moment when this refusal to recognize became most tangible for her, remembering, “suddenly, I was horrified as I realized that my Hamid and other loved ones had been denied not only their lives but also their deaths. They were being lost to the world, denied having ever existed in this world. I felt like I was losing them not simply because of their death but because their death was a forced erasure from the face of this land, from the face of life, and from history” (Talebi 36). The denial of a death juxtaposed with the refusal to recognize life results in an aching void, a tension between the inability to grieve as a completed act, and the pull of

the pronounced erasure. The second loss is the refusal to mark their deaths. Moreover, “what returns to haunt the victim, these stories tell us, is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known” (Caruth 6). Hamid has already been executed, but experiences a second execution when his remains are rendered homeless. In disposing of his life in this way, he becomes invisible, and thus, unreal. The erasure is not just the clumsy burial that denied his body any respect, but the erasure of ever having been present. For Talebi, this erasure of the desired subject of mourning becomes unbearable.

Further insight into this loss is gained through a coterminous reading of Sahar Delijani’s *Children of the Jacaranda Tree*.³¹ Delijani’s novel speaks directly to the tension Talebi delineates in Hamid’s erasure. Revealed through the

³¹ Delijani’s debut novel explores the generation born immediately before, during, and after the Islamic Revolution. More specifically, her novel is comprised of a series of interconnected short stories observing how different characters engage with their inherited memories and how the circumstances of their parents’ past have come to shape their present lived experiences. Marina Nemat, author of *Prisoner of Tehran* (2007), has publicly criticized Delijani’s novel for not being real enough. Nemat writes, “Ms. Delijani was born in Evin in 1983, and, from what I could gather, spent a few months as an infant in the prison with her mother. Ms. Delijani has no memory of Evin, and, according to a Q&A on her website, her description of the prison has originated from her parents, who, like most ex-prisoners, were too traumatized to write their own experiences” (Nemat). I cite Nemat’s critique here because it problematically assumes that having been born in prison and spending “a few months as an infant in the prison with her mother” would not have a lasting, traumatic influence on one’s life. There is also a sort of hierarchy at play in Nemat’s words, a sort of privileging of memories. So much becomes lost in the attempt to define one’s memories or experiences as inauthentic, which is precisely what Nemat does here. Delijani’s text critically gestures to the longevity of trauma that occurs as a consequence of captivity. Her story, and her perception of what the world has shown her, reveals much about the experience of imprisonment and offers a critical voice at a time when prisons globally continue to expand at a terrifying rate. To say that she “has no memory of Evin” operates with a myopic definition of memory and fails to conceive how deeply connected children can be with the experiences of their parents.

shifting perspectives of a mother and daughter, Delijani extends the absence created by the mass killings and refused ritual. Rather than become a witness to her husband's murder, a mother invents a different cause of death, raising her daughter with the belief that her father was taken by cancer at a young age. Delijani narrates as the mother receives a phone call from a prison official, notifying her of her husband's execution, writing, "she had not seen her husband in months. All the visits had suddenly been canceled. No one knew anything, and everyone was dreading the worst. Later, she heard of families who went to visit someone in prison and instead were handed belongings. They were told the person was no longer there" (Delijani 157). When she arrives at the prison, the woman is told that her husband no longer exists. She was told,

he was no longer anywhere. There was a piece of paper on the desk. First the piece of paper was silent. Later, it spoke. Of death, although silently. They were told to write as their hands trembled: *My husband is no longer anywhere. My wife is not longer anywhere. My son, my daughter, is no longer anywhere.* That was how death was handed to a family. On a piece of paper with a bag half full of splinters of life, asking for their signature. (158)

With the phrase "no longer anywhere," the prison officials initiate a beginning of non-mourning. Without a location, without a body, and without an image, the family is unable to mourn in a way that allows grief to be ephemeral. Conscious of what this might mean for her young daughter, the young widow resolves

then and there she decided she would never tell her child about her father's death; about how he died. Even if it were the last thing she did, she would never let her daughter know this suffering. She

didn't care what lies she had to tell, what secrets she had to keep. All she knew was that she had to keep history at bay, to keep her child safe, sheltered behind iron walls where the blood could not seep through. (Delijani 159)

As she attempts to protect her daughter from the circumstance of the death, the young widow and mother illustrates a secondary loss. Through her decision to erase the way in which he died, and the reason for his death, the widow reveals the many layers of loss. In the inability to mourn in a way that satisfies tradition and culture, as mourning in Iran is generally public, communal, vocal and visual, the woman in Delijani's narrative attempts to refuse also to live with his death. Beyond her inability to mourn, the specific circumstances of his death render his memory publicly illegible. She leaves Iran out of a desire to begin again and to forget. Delijani writes,

Maryam firmly believed that if they just went over the border, they would both be safe, that taking her daughter so far away would be the ultimate step in safeguarding her against the past, the death, the blood. That far away from Iran, they could live peacefully, Sheida's happiness would be guaranteed, and somehow everything would be easier... She had not thought his death would chase them, chase her, so far. Soon she realized memories were heavier than her will to move on. A part of her was still there, right in that cemetery, rotting along with Amir's lifeless body. (Delijani 163)

Her attempts to leave the country as a way to forget are ultimately futile. Despite the physical distance, "Maryam dreamed about the cemetery she had never visited that had become a nightly haunting vision. Such nightmares had never happened, not even in the beginning. Maryam was suffering away from prison, away from

that cemetery. She needed to be close to him. She couldn't leave him alone in that hostile land; she had to go back to him" (Delijani 163). Here, Delijani illustrates the inability to move on in a way that is emotional and intangible but ultimately becomes manifested physically. To the mother's disappointment, "the silence hasn't worked. It's only made everything more difficult to bear. They have been left with nothing but a handful of unspoken words, insidious like poison, progressing a little more every day, encroaching upon everything, spoiling every last remnant of the honest intimacy they used to have" (Delijani 167). The silence becomes toxic because the murder of her partner and the father of her child influences every aspect of her life. She chooses silence for the sake of a future, yet one is not possible. The silence itself contests its possibility because it limits her words, her actions and her thoughts. In this way, her silence condemns her to continue living the past again and again because it restricts the production of a future unencumbered by the past.

When the daughter ultimately learns of her father's death through an organization seeking redress for the prison massacre, Delijani's text can be dually understood as an extension of Talebi's memoir and also as a contestation of the potential for a future. When confronted with her father's name and age on a compiled list of prisoners known to be executed during the prison massacre, Sheida discovers the truth her mother vowed to protect her from. Delijani describes, "there in front of her, right in the middle of the page, is the name of her

father: Amir Ramenzanzadeh, 27....His first name, last name, age. They all correspond accurately with the truth. Tears drift back into her eyes....She swings back and forth, reaching for the most impossible places. She cannot grab on to anything. Her hands grope around in the void” (174-177). The void becomes symbolic of the enormous absence created not only by the death of a parent but the specific conditions that led to his death and resulted in the trauma her mother attempted to bury. Furthermore, Caruth writes, “it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is otherwise not available. The truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language” (Caruth 4). For Sheida, suddenly knowing also initiates a vast impossibility of knowing.

In finally knowing the circumstances of her father’s death, Sheida begins to recognize her mother’s relationship to the past. As she attempts to understand her mother’s reasoning for the secrecy,

Sheida stares at her mother, dumbstruck. It is as though he has just died, as though decades have not passed. Maryam is still there in that old house, still watching her husband being blindfolded and taken away. She has never left that house, never left that moment. She has buried herself alive in everything that failed, everything that ended in annihilation. (194)

Maryam “is still there in that old house,” having never left, because being told that her partner “was no longer anywhere” was too much to bear. Considering

primarily how the bodies were “clumsily” disposed of, making a ritual burial impossible, the metaphor Delijani selects for describing the mother through the daughter’s perspective is striking. “She has buried herself alive” despite the inability to bury her partner. She has neither been able to live nor die. Through the exchange of mother and daughter, Delijani extends Talebi’s narrative because she examines the generational influence that imprisonment ultimately on those connected to the prisoner as well as “the peculiar and sometimes uncanny way in which catastrophic events seem to repeat themselves for those who have passed through them” (Caruth 1). Moreover, both Maryam’s silence and Sheida’s discovery contest the possibility of a future, as all words and acts are directly related to the nearness of the imprisonment.

When Maryam finally responds to Sheida, rather than explain her reasoning for selecting silence, she resituates the present in direct relation to the past. While the mother’s experience of being unable to mourn her partner in the past has influenced her inability to fully exist in the present, she articulates how the present is beginning to reek of the past through the continuity of violence as though there is a “repeated inflicting of a wound” (Caruth 3). Maryam argues, “look at what is happening now. Twenty years and nothing has changed. They’ve started it all over again, putting people’s children in prison, killing them out on the streets. Haven’t you seen it?” (194). Tellingly, Maryam refers immediately to sight as a form of evidence despite her own experience that all evidence of

imprisonment and torture is customarily erased and blurred from the vision of the public.

Furthermore, through Talebi's recollection of Hamid's erasure and a widow's inability to fully grieve the loss of her partner, these two writers illustrate how the disavowal of burial rituals manifests in present melancholia. The melancholia experienced by individuals who are unable to mourn resurfaces by the continual resurgence of the past in the present, evident in the arrests of Tehran's youth. Delijani contributes to Talebi's reflections on loss by deepening the perspective on the reach of the radius following loss. This void is echoed in Delijani's narrative when she illustrates the experience of relatives who must cosign on the official evacuation of both the physical remains of their loved ones, as well as any visual memorial.

LOST GENERATION

There is so little milk, Aghajaan would say to Maman Zinat, berating her, pleading with her, and there are so many babies. The children of the revolution, they were, the generation of powdered milk.

—Sahar Delijani, *Children of the Jacaranda Tree*

It seems like no one wants to take pictures in wartime. Who knows? Maybe they prefer not to keep records of themselves; maybe they want to forget. Or maybe they're afraid of remembering later. If that's the case, it means they're already looking ahead, thinking they're going to come out of this war alive.

—Sahar Delijani, *Children of the Jacaranda Tree*

While much of their individual texts, particularly Talebi's, reflect on the inner space of the prison that the public has been unable to witness, both Talebi and Delijani additionally meditate on the experience of individuals outside of the walls, whose lives have been affected by the imprisonment of their loved ones. Delijani narrates a scene of a child witnessing the arrest of his parents, illustrating the violent separation that many endured. Delijani describes,

The guards came in and simply took his parents away. Omid was left at the table with the meal in front of him. Parisa had touched his face fleetingly, her fingers cold as ice. His father had placed a kiss on his forehead and told him not to be afraid, that they'd come right back. But his voice was so thin that something inside Omid made a quiet plop and vanished forever. The guards had been looking for documents, letters, leaflets, poems, forbidden books. They left with their hands full. There were so many pieces of life that had to be carried away. Those papers were now going to decide who went and who stayed. His parents, with their love and their fight and their papery lives. Were gone. (Delijani 54)

Delijani begins this scene with a sentence that exudes a casual tone, underscoring the flippancy with which lives were dismantled. This scene gestures towards a central component of Delijani's larger project. Specifically, her novel examines the experience of imprisonment through the lens of the children that were left behind. Through a piecing together of memories of absences during their childhood, Delijani's characters reveal the impact prison had on the children of those held in captivity. Read in this way, *Children of the Jacaranda Tree* can be understood as speaking to the scope of damage prisons create. Beyond the trauma

resulting from the absence of parental figures and the challenges that orphaned children might face, Delijani particularly explores the long-term aftermath of these specific circumstances. She describes, “They left with their hands full” because they took everything that was able to be taken. “They left with their hands full” of the physical, material evidence of political involvement, but also took with them all that had meaning and significance to this young child. His parents and the entirety of their lives that are reductively described as “papery” no longer exist. The last line of the scene is poignant, standing alone as a fragment, void of a subject. Thus, “Were gone” becomes an enormous reality in just two words. In constructing this final line without a subject, Delijani’s writing reflects on the immediate and sweeping erasure of their life. What both Delijani and Talebi articulate in the moments when their focus remains beyond the prison walls is the long-term influence the prison structure has on those closest to the prisoners. For Omid, it not just that he is orphaned, but also that he forever has a pronounced relationship with the prison and the government it serves.

Similar to the scene of Omid being left behind, Talebi includes a reference of a child distressed by the absence of his relatives in prison. In the epilogue that follows her narrative, Talebi writes, “Mohsen, my nephew, was one and a half years old when my sister and my parents brought him to prison for my first meeting with the family in 1977” (Talebi 217). In what follows, Talebi narrates a striking scene of a young child witnessing the inner horrors of prison during a

family visit. As the first child from a new generation in Talebi's family is exposed to the prison space, the visit ultimately becomes prophetic as he is later imprisoned as an adult. Talebi quickly moves through time and shifts to their reunion at her release. She continues,

When I was released from my second term of imprisonment in 1991, he was already sixteen years old and no longer a child so attached to his maternal aunts and uncles, almost all of whom, including me, left him at about the same time in the early 1980s because of the crackdown on the opposition. They were either imprisoned, had fled the country for exile in Europe or the United States, or lived as fugitives. I tried hard to reconnect with him after I returned from prison, but one day in the middle of a frank conversation, he told me that during all those years while growing up, when he had needed us the most, none of us were there for him. (Talebi 219)

Her nephew underscores the oft unseen influence of imprisonment on the family and the surrounding community that must cope with the indefinite absence of a loved one. He speaks to the physical absence of his aunts and uncles that left him without support that he needed from adolescence to adulthood. Unlike his initial visit to the prison as a child, Talebi divulges, "now he is really in jail, arrested in relation to the events following the disputed presidential election in Iran in June 2009. He is no longer a child; he is now married and imprisoned along with his wife" (Talebi 218). In some ways, the proximity to prison through the experiences of his family members increased the potential for his own future in prison. Considering the political circumstances surrounding of the captivity of his relatives, Talebi's nephew would always already be considered affiliated.

Certainly, as Talebi elaborates elsewhere, the stigma of imprisonment in Iran severely influenced the reputation of a family. Out of fear of this shame, many family members concealed, to whatever extent might actually be possible, the imprisonment of their relatives. Delijani writes about one woman, who “whenever asked, she was supposed to say that her sisters had gone abroad for work” (60). She writes also about a father struggling as “the more time passed and the less he knew of his daughters, the more afraid he grew to ask, the more afraid to speak, the more afraid to let anyone know of their seething, blazing, devastating world of the unknown, the unspoken. It was as if the silence were burying him alive, burying them all alive” (74). In this way, the negative influence on Talebi’s nephew’s ability to grow in his community can be understood. Secondly, as an adult that had been individually affected by the state sanctioned violence, his own activism against that government is to be expected. Put differently, Talebi’s choice to reflect on her nephew’s current experience in prison articulates a sense of predetermination insofar as his nearness to the prison structure through his family members led to his own future imprisonment. Talebi’s nephew is an example of how the circumstances of the past are (re)presenting themselves again.

Upon her release from prison, Talebi reveals her disorientation with the world around her. Even more disorienting than the material reality of the outside world are the experiences writ upon the facial expressions of her loved ones who

grew familiar to her absence. She describes her reunion with younger brother, writing,

the man who was standing in front of me was my little brother, who I had left behind when he was only fifteen years old, whose brilliance and outspoken attitude I so adored. I had not seen him in about nine years, and here he was, in his early twenties, his hair already grayed around his forehead. He was among those lost generations of young Iranians who were born and raised in particularly disjointed times. Although my brother was brilliant, the opportunity for attending the university was denied to him when the regime rejected his admission, despite having passed the competitive national entrance exam, merely because his siblings were considered dissidents of the government. He thus had to register as a conscript for two and a half years of military service, which coincided with one of the worst periods of the Iran-Iraq War, from 1985-1988—the conscription service had been increases from two to two and a half years during the war. (Talebi 31)

Through the sight of her brother, Talebi illustrates how those related to prisoners were greatly affected by both the physical absence and the socially constructed stigma of imprisonment. Her usage of the phrase, “lost generations” speaks to individuals who were imprisoned as well as to those who were left to feel the absence of their loved ones, to the individuals who left the country in a mass exodus following the revolution and also to those who were left to rebuild. Both in Iran and scattered throughout cities elsewhere dwell individuals whose connection to this specific time period become summarized in this phrase. The term “lost generations” bespeaks a legacy of separation that characterizes a melancholic feeling of disconnect. Talebi recognizes the ways in which her brother’s circumstances in life have been severely influenced by the actions of the

state. She reflects on the physical evidence of what they had individually endured, carried in their facial features, recalling, “it was as if we each were looking for traces of significant moments of Iranian recent history, revolution, war, and political violence on the other’s face and body, imagining their carvings on each other’s soul” (Talebi 32). In “looking for traces” in the wrinkles carved into their faces and bodies, Talebi suggests the inability to exist outside of the “history, revolution, war and political violence.” In other words, through the observation of their physical remains, Talebi reflects upon the ways that, both her and her brother experienced a pervasive marking that relegated their lives to continually tied to acts of the state. Their existence, their ability to move freely, to think freely, was so confined by acts of the state that their bodies have become living witnesses to the restrictions on their freedom.

In his text, *Iran: A People Interrupted*, Hamid Dabashi complicates this concept of “lost generations,” writing,

There is a sense of misplaced memory about modern Iranian history, a collectively repressed notion of temporary allocation of a spot in history, where one did not really belong. It is as if there is a communal consensus among Iranians that history is happening somewhere else, a place where we belong, while (in the meantime) we are stuck in the makeshift remissive space of somewhere else, somewhere we think we don’t belong, we don’t deserve. (5)

The movement evident at the level of language through “misplaced memory,” “collectively repressed notion,” “temporary allocation,” “history happening somewhere else,” and “makeshift remissive space” reveals tensions that are

passed on generationally. This is to say that in reflecting on Talebi's memoir, this description speaks not only to her experience as a prisoner, but also to her brother, and her nephew. Certainly, this also connects to Delijani's novel about the generation of children born during the revolution, whose entrance into the world has been heavily marked with temporal specificity. In addition, this tension is embodied in the individuals who left Iran and also those born elsewhere as their location in the diaspora is marked by a relationship with history.

Most recently, the phrase "lost generation" circulated throughout the art world as a site of controversy. Iranian photographer Newsha Tavakolian refused an award when the founder of the organization attempted to edit the title of her exhibit. The idea for her project emerged from a glaring absence in the personal histories of Iranians. "As she pursued her project," writes David Gonzalez in a *New York Times* feature, "Ms. Tavakolian noticed a pattern when she paged through her subjects' family picture albums: After a flurry of snapshots from their childhood, most pages went blank soon after her subjects reached their teenage years. Those were times that coincided with the revolution and, later, the Iran-Iraq war" (Gonzalez). She wanted to call her album: "Blank Pages of an Iranian Photo Album" but the founder of the organization, Mr. Carmignac "wanted to title the project 'The Lost Generation.'" To Tavakolian, the insult was not only an invasion on her autonomy as an artist, it was also the usage of what she imagines to be an "overused and loaded title" (Coste). That there appears to be a sort of

redundancy to the phrase, from Tavakolian's perspective, suggests that the tangibility of this naming is especially heightened, and I would argue more so for individuals who, like Tavakolian, were born in the early years of the revolution. For many Iranians, time is undeniably split between a before and an after. It would seem then that the limitation of the title "The Lost Generation" is not located in its apparent redundancy, but rather in its inability to recognize how generations continue to experience loss in the present.

CHILDREN IN PRISON

A section of Talebi's memoir is devoted to the potential to produce within the space of captivity. Creating art, sometimes for a partner but most often for a child, required a tremendous amount of patience and the ability to see possibility in something as mundane as a date pit. But even the maintenance of life, the ability to live, is described as an art. Talebi writes, "the art of living in prison becomes possible through imagining life in the very presence of death and observing death in the very existence of life" (Talebi). But how does one come to imagine life while surrounded by constant death? This section considers how the insertion of life within walls associated with death critiques the prison structure in a way that differs from the depiction of extreme violence. More specifically, I argue that the presence of children within the prison sphere articulates a sort of inhumanity. In its oxymoronic image—a child within prison—the writers expose

the ways in which prisons are not only not suitable for children, but they are not suitable for anyone. If children represent life and a future, then prisoners represent, in some capacity, death and the absence of a future.³²

During the revolution, imprisoning a mother and her young child was not an uncommon experience. Talebi explains how children entered the prison space, as well as the role they fulfilled, citing,

Children were a conflicting aspect of prison life, simultaneously a source of joy and pain. In the early 1980s, there were sometimes more than thirty children in a ward. In 1983, for instance, in the ward where I lived, there were twenty-eight children from a few months to eight years old. These were children whose parents did not have anyone outside to take care of them and did not want to give them up. Later the regime made it mandatory for these children to be sent out of prison. (Talebi 79-80)

Talebi's mention of children living with their mothers behind prison walls enters her narrative in the final section preceding the epilogue, titled "Maryam: A God Who Cried." Maryam, a young theatre student who had been arrested for distributing anti-government pamphlets, embodies the juxtaposition between madness and performance through her sporadic and seemingly impromptu monologues through which she tells the stories of characters ranging from Moses to her father to herself. The move Talebi makes in the juxtaposition of madness and performance in the prison space transitions into the comparison between

³² In thinking through the prison structure and the status of prisoners with respect to their families, Orlando Patterson's theory of social death is especially helpful insofar as how space, status, and access are navigated. Social death and natal alienation specifically refer to the condition of chattel slavery, and it is important to not the critical differences here. However, his work is useful in providing a language for thinking through what this means.

death and life that becomes most visible through the image of children in captivity. Put differently, when Talebi recounts how children were “simultaneously a source of joy and pain,” she highlights how their presence in the specific space of captivity illuminated a type of death around them in a way that differed from the constant and daily torture and violence.

Delijani’s novel opens where Talebi’s ends, with a scene of a prisoner giving birth. In beginning her novel with this specific scene, Delijani immediately juxtaposes the images of life and death. Delijani narrates,

Azar sat on the corrugated iron floor of a van, huddled against the wall. The undulating street made the car sway from side to side, swinging her this way and that. With her free hand, she clasped on to something that felt like a railing. The other hand lay on her hard, bulging belly, which contracted and strained, making her breathing choppy, irregular. A heat wave of pain spouted from somewhere in her backbone and burst through her body. Azar gasped, seizing the chador wrapped around her, gripping so hard that her knuckles turned white. With every turn, she was thrashed against the walls. With every bump and pothole, her body was sent flying toward the ceiling, the child in her belly rigid, cringing. The blindfold over her eyes was damp with sweat. (Delijani 1)

Delijani’s opening scene immediately delves into the violent chaos that the pregnant prisoner experiences. Without directly noting that the woman in labor is also in captivity, Delijani narrates the dual nature of the pain occurring both within and outside of her body as the labor contractions are intensified by the rigid physical movement occurring outside of her body. The “undulating street” thus mimics the “wave[s] of pain” as her body contracts in preparation of the

birth. The treatment of the pregnant women exemplifies a disregard for both her life and her child's life as she is blindfolded and thrown in the back of a van where she must place one hand to steady herself and another to hold her belly. While the occasion of giving birth is certainly most often associated with the concept of a future, the violence wrought on her body illustrates a disregard for the future she could potentially produce. By beginning her novel this way, with this scene, Delijani articulates a tenuous future.

After giving birth, the mother is left with an overwhelming feeling of death as the child is taken away from her. The guards separated her from the baby and "after nine long months of living with the child inside her, feeling it grow, protecting it, surviving with it, it seemed impossible that she still had not seen it, had not held it in her arms, did not know if it looked more like her or Ismael, did not even know for sure if it was alive" (Delijani 21). Again, the presence or absence of the child here reflects a juxtaposition of life and death. The removal of the newborn from the mother's arms immediately awakens notions of death. As her newborn reappears in her line of vision, the mother momentarily relinquishes thoughts of her captivity only to be immediately reminded through the sight of her daughter. Delijani writes,

She stretched her arms out toward her child, trembled with the prospect of holding her. But as Sister got closer, Azar saw more clearly what kind of blanket the child had been wrapped in. It was a rough prison blanket, and her child was naked. Azar winced at the sight of her child unprotected against the coarseness that

clamped its teeth into the fragile newborn skin. She stood with her arms outstretched but could not speak. She knew if she opened her mouth, nothing would come out but a shrill, twisted wail. (29)

The sight of her newborn wrapped in a rough fabric demonstrates the mother's powerlessness. As a prisoner belonging to the state, her child is not entirely under her own care. While the state does not claim direct ownership of the child, as it does with the mother who is imprisoned, it does not feign concern over the welfare of the child either. In other words, while the mother belongs to the state, her child cannot belong to her and thus belongs to no one. The child is allowed to stay with the mother, but it is made clear that she has no power over whether the child will remain with her in the prison. When the newborn enters a space most often associated with death, the prisoners experience rare feelings of celebration and joy. Delijani writes,

There was an effusive buzz in the cell, with its walls that glistened because so many heads and backs had rubbed against them. The buzz that could happen only once—when life was about to change shape. Seething with excitement, the women awaited the arrival of the newborn. They had cleaned everything, scrubbed the walls, washed the carpets. That day, no one had been allowed to exercise, lest they raise dust. (Delijani 32)

Within a space constructed specifically to arouse discomfort and unease, the women strive to create a space appropriate for welcoming a newborn. In suggesting that excitement was a “buzz that could only happen once,” Delijani echoes the fleeting nature of joy within the prison. Associated with death, from

literal death through execution to the death of freedom and mobility through captivity, the occasion of life and more specifically, joy is uncommon.

Structured to reflect the non-linear nature of memory, Delijani's novel shifts frequently between years and locations as noted at the beginning of each new chapter.³³ However, an unnoted occasion when the present erupts in a retelling of the past occurs when Azar names her newborn daughter. The process of naming her child gains significance because the state essentially denies her ownership of her daughter. In naming her daughter Neda, Azar articulates a level of resistance, as the name translates to "voice." Secondly, when the publication date of the text is considered, Delijani's selection of a name for the newborn whose birth opens her novel reveals a critical statement. Delijani writes,

Azar took a deep breath. 'Neda,' she said, and involuntarily clasped her hands together. She mouthed the name a few more times. Each time, the child grew more solid in her reality. Each time, the memory of that severe gaze faded further away. Each time she said the name, the child became more hers, entirely hers. There was a magical hand at work that reconciled her with the child, with her surroundings, with time, with herself. She felt no longer to blame. Instead, she was filled with a feeling so empowering, so unwavering, that it could only be called love. (Delijani 35)

"A feeling so empowering [and also] so unwavering" aptly describes Azar's attempt to seize responsibility of her child despite the totalizing control the prison guards maintain over her. Moving beyond the specificity of the story and

³³ Talebi's *Ghosts of a Revolution: Rekindled Memories of Imprisonment in Iran* follows the same format of shifting temporalities. In this way, both text resist a linear structure that would assume closure.

widening the vantage point to also consider the move Delijani makes in this naming critiques the possibility of a future. What I mean to suggest here is that the naming of a child born in prison as Neda post-2009 is deliberate. Considered a symbol for the brutal violence issued by the government, Neda Agha-Soltan's murder was captured on video and viewed by over six thousand people within the initial days following her death by a sniper in broad daylight. By naming a child born in prison Neda in 1983, the same year Agha-Soltan was born, Delijani articulates a prophetic contestation of a future outside of violence and torture.

Throughout the remainder of the section narrating the birth in prison, Delijani repeatedly returns to the juxtaposition of life and death through the proximity of the newborn. She writes, "everyone dreaded being transferred to another cell or prison. They did not wish to leave this cell, where a child's voice rang like a siren of life" (Delijani 37). There is a desire to remain near the newborn because she is associated as the singular source of life in the prison. And as the newborn continues to visibly grow in size,

the anxiety had caused everything around her to slip away like sand. [Azar] felt she was beginning to lose her faculties. She could no longer see, no longer hear. Her milk had a strange, immaterial feel. Things had begun to lose their reality. She could no longer hold on to them. The only thing she held on to was every new day. She clung to each one as if it were the last day of her life. As if she were awaiting death with one arm around her child, the other wrapped around herself. She continued to breathe while her life was coming to an end. (49)

As Delijani narrates the growth of the child, the measure for when she will ultimately be removed from the prison, the mother begins to experience a loss of her senses, illustrating an approach towards a simulation of death. When Neda finally is taken, her fellow inmates carried her and “she was heavy like a corpse. Her milk streamed down to her stomach. The milk that was supposed to be her child’s. It now belonged to no one. Orphaned milk. Warm, sticky, disgusting milk....A voice rang out through the cell. A song, quavering, broken. The voice echoing of memories and of being uprooted, torn apart” (Delijani 52). Here, Azar is described as embodying death, as she is physically unable to stand on her own. In associating the newborn as a source or symbol of life within a space reeking of death, Delijani imagines the prison space as not only a place of torture and violence but also a place that rejects the potential of life.

When the mother considers the reasoning for her child’s eventual removal, she reflects, “it was no place to keep the child, but it was a perfect place to keep them. To keep them small. Because one remained small where there was no sky to look at” (Delijani 47). In these lines Delijani strikes a critique of the prison through the determined unsuitability for children. The image of a child held within prison wall may generally evoke an expression of concern. The image itself appears oxymoronic, as it would appear to be widely inappropriate for a child to be imprisoned. If the child is representative of a future and the prison represents a sort of death, the writer then articulates how the prison space contests

the possibility of a future. These writers include stories of children within the prison to critique the inhumanity of the prison space in a way that differs from the stories of torture and violence.

WRITING IN THE DIASPORA

Throughout her memoir, Talebi questions not only her imagined audience but also the temporality and appropriate vocabulary to express her story. She asks, “but for whom am I writing? Is it possible to find a space and a language that are faithful to the experience?” (49). As Talebi continues, she explores the complex positioning of her memoir, asking, “How might I avoid essentializing the particular experiences of political prisoners in a specific moment of Iranian history yet also avoid reducing the experience to the act of cruelty of an Islamic state, as has often been done by the West and even many Iranians?” (49). Central to this question is whether the reader influences the telling of the story or the telling of the story influences the reader. Talebi’s first question suggests that the writing be for someone other than herself. Thus the question implicitly suggests that the memoir be productive insofar as it reaches the desired who. Secondly, the questioning of locating a space and language brings forth additional questions about what it would really mean to find both a space and a language through which a “faithful[ness]” to the experience could be maintained. Furthermore, as her experience of imprisonment occurs in Iran, one might assume that the attempt

would be to reach other Iranians, yet the choice of English for the composition of her memoir excludes a Farsi-reading population. Pivoted then towards an English-reading audience, a specifically Western audience, a secondary anxiety about her text emerges. “An act of cruelty of an Islamic state” seems redundant in a Western context, where the labor of knowledge production that renders an Islamic state as literally evil has always already been inscribed on the public psyche, making her anxiety about potentially reproducing this understandable. However, I argue that her writing maneuvers to avoid this type of reduction through her articulations of concern and also as a result of the circumstances of her imprisonment.

Unlike the other Iranian writers to whom she tacitly refers, as they are spared their names, Talebi’s experience of captivity includes prison time served during both the Shah’s reign as well as during the early years of the Islamic Republic. This proves to be a critical difference. Many other memoirs, whether they delineate the experience of living in prison or graft the concept of prison to general life in an Islamic Republic, ultimately succumb to sweeping reductions because their limited perspectives isolate the Islamic regime as the primary source of violence and injustice. By centering exclusively on the Islamic state alone, their works sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly position the era of the monarchy as an ideal time period in which freedom and justice existed for Iranians. Yet to make that argument writers have to ignore the historical context

of the prison structure itself, as Evin Prison was erected in the early 1970s by the Shah. Moreover, many of these writers fail to make a larger connection to experiences of captivity and imprisonment that persist around the world and occur outside of an Islamic regime. Certainly, the failure to address the fact that the U.S. currently imprisons the largest percentage of its minorities renders the discussion these memoirists can actually have on the function of a prison structure in a modern society as limited.

Talebi directly addresses how she specifically locates herself as a former prisoner in the U.S. and also how she approaches the legacy of injustice. She writes,

I came to tell my story in the United States, a place with its own history of violence and suffering, from the earlier genocide of Native Americans, to the enslavement of African Americans, racism, its wars on other countries, and an increasing divide between the haves and have-nots. It, too, had its inspiring stories of resistance and incredible achievements in creating new possibilities for a better world. (211)

While the U.S. becomes a refuge for her insofar as she can express her story, she recognizes how the location is complicated by its continued injustice and inequities. Her move to the US marked a secondary loss, as she continued to experience being outside of time. Talebi writes,

Here, in the United States, which has now become my second home, I came to relive my trauma through another kind of loss and a new sense of estrangement and humiliation, which I experienced in a different place, time, and language. This new wound, however,

opened the old, hidden ones, slowly and painstakingly, as if with a dull knife. (211)

It is through the persistent unease of feeling continually outside of “place, time, and language” that allows her to write. Rather than the comfort of a sanctuary, it is precisely the discomfort she is made to feel in the U.S. that keep her memories of prison accessible to the point of repetition. Furthermore, Talebi explicates the ways in which her move to the U.S. triggered specific memories for her. She explains,

When I initially began to write this text in 1999, I realized that my memories of my imprisonment were particularly triggered by my experiences in a new country, the United States, where I had simultaneously found myself a stranger yet at home...I had nearly forsaken the very basic principle of a creative life, to make the remaking of myself the task and the goal of my life in the face of death, and to be present to death and remember the dead. This remaking of oneself is an art of living and hence dying, eventually possible in the very act of reconnecting with, thus re-creating, others and the world within which one lives. (206)

The reflection that living in the U.S. “triggered” memories of her time in prison is revealing. I want to posit two disparate reflections on the potential for “triggered” memories. The first draws a critical correlation between prison in the U.S. and other countries. Davis writes, “The global prison economy is indisputably dominated by the United States. This economy not only consists of the products, services, and ideas that are directly marketed to other governments, but it also exercises an enormous influence over the development of the style of state

punishment throughout the world” (Davis 100). Using the example of Turkey,

Davis explains,

One dramatic example can be seen in the opposition to Turkey’s attempts to transform its prisons. In October 2000, prisoners in Turkey, many of whom are associated with left political movements, began a ‘death fast’ as a way of dramatizing their opposition to the Turkish government’s decision to introduce ‘F-Type,’ or U.S.-style, prisons. Compared to the traditional dormitory-style facilities, these new prisons consist of one- to three-person cells, which are opposed by the prisoners because of the regimes of isolation they facilitate and because mistreatment and torture are far more likely in isolation. (Davis 100-101)

I cite Davis here because the connection she delineates between the expansive growths of prisons in the U.S. to global adoptions of US-style prisons illustrates how theories pertaining to the function of a prison space are able to permeate borders. Moreover, Turkey stands as an interesting example of this type of ideological permeability of borders because of its location in the Middle East. The fact that theories regarding the disciplining of prisoners through a shift in the organization of space becomes the mode through which the US and countries like Turkey is quite revealing of the sphere of influence the US has in shaping prisons globally.

The second reflection on how the U.S. may have “triggered” memories of captivity from Talebi comes from an Iranian journalist living in the US.

Following the murder of a young, unarmed black teenager by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, many Americans voiced their outrage both their physical

presence at protests and also on social media. The images distributed throughout the days that immediately followed the killing of this young, unarmed teenager—images of police in full riot gear, of police dogs, of tear gas, of military tanks—appeared in severe contrast with what many would assume to witness in the center of the U.S. More specifically, the overwhelmingly white police department and their military-style response to the predominantly black community echoed images of the past. In response, Shirin Barghi developed a series of art pieces titled “Last Words.” Her project documented the last words of black teenagers who had been killed by police. Barghi explains her project, writing, “Salaam, friends. I created these images to raise awareness about racist police violence in America and as an expression of solidarity. I experienced police brutality in my native Iran, and the struggle here to confront that violence resonated with me” (Barghi). Barghi’s thoughts illuminate how the police brutality that is most often exercised upon the bodies of black youth resurrect images of violence against protestors in the Middle East. Certainly, for those within the predominately black communities that do experience routine and daily confrontations with the police, legalized through policies such as “Stop-and-Frisk,” the suggestion that police operate with a racial bias or utilize a disproportionate amount of force is neither a deeply revolutionary argument nor is it a new revelation. However, for Americans who live outside of this experience, outside of a daily interference with one’s ability to live freely as a consequence of the racial profiling that occurs, the

suggestion that streets in middle-America recall memories from the streets of the Middle East would be an alarming notion.

To return to Talebi's decision to not write in Farsi, but instead in English, provided distance from her memories. Rather than feel the potential "agony of linguistic loss" (Elahi 469) this space was productive for Talebi because she was able to reflect more critically as a result of the time translation mentally and emotionally required. She recalls,

As though to protect myself from being burned by the flame of those gushing memories, my fingers typed the words after the blaze died down. Furthermore, writing in English, I had even more difficulty pouring my emotions instantly from my heart into words. Hence, they were digested, examined, and finally consumed cautiously. It enabled me to think over what I was writing while cooling the blaze of my emotions. English, however, was not 'the language of forgetting' for me; instead, it offered me a distance from which I was able to reflect on my past. (211)

In her description of her writing process, Talebi imagines the act of writing to be an evacuation of memory. Through writing, she was able to "protect" herself from the uncontrollable stream of "gushing memories." Writing in English allowed Talebi to remove herself slightly from the nearness of her experiences. Elahi explains that "for those who are displaced, the ontology and epistemology of language suffer a kind of trauma. The most comfortable and comforting sounds and senses of a mother tongue become marginalized and impotent. The performativity of language becomes self-conscious and awkward. However, this kind of trauma can also be the source of creative power" (Elahi 463). Echoing

Talebi's description of the distance, Elahi suggests that producing in a language other than a writer's primary "tongue" can inspire the creative process. Elahi provides a second purpose for writing in English. He writes,

In popular journalistic and media representations of Iran, the nation and its people appear ahistorically—either as a backward nation outside of history-as-progress, or as a timeless and abstract nation either positively represented as "Persia" or negatively presented as part of an "axis of evil." To reclaim a language is to reclaim that history, but to make that history understandable to an American readership requires the use of English. These writers face a dilemma. For themselves they want to reclaim a language that is like a family heirloom, a lost treasure, a tactile thing. On the other hand, to make their stories and histories accessible to an American readership, they must use the medium in which they now travel publicly. They carry fragments of Persian on the vehicle of English—fragments of personal memory in a publicly represented history. (Elahi 478)

I argue that Talebi's text, in stark contrast to the many prison memoirs that seem primed for consumption as propaganda, complicates the sweeping reductions of Iran as a "backward nation" as the erection of a specifically American-style prison was a component of the Shah's continued modernization and westernization of the country during his reign. In this way, a critique waged through her text moves beyond the myopic focus of the Islamic Republic as a singularly oppressive government, and instead articulates a reading of a prison structure that is not unique to Iran, but instead present and pervasive globally. Thus, to return to Talebi's question, "but for whom am I writing?" I want to suggest that she writes with a growing Iranian diaspora in mind.

Talebi expounds upon the limitations in attempting to “speak about and speak through the traumatic experience” (Caruth 4). Highlighting two specific limitations, she asks first,

what would be the best way to personalize the event without ignoring and detaching it from the larger sociopolitical and historical context within which each person has come to experience it? In what form and style might I relate my own story along with those of others, wherein their voices could be heard as powerfully as but distinct from mine? Is it even possible for others to have a voice of their own while their experience has to pass through the filter of my subjective memory and my writing? These questions will continue to haunt this text. (49)

Talebi works to contextualize the events leading up to both of her arrests as well as her disorientation with the world around her upon both of her releases from prison. The form and style of her text is markedly different from what many readers might come to expect from a standard memoir. This is perhaps where the influence of imprisonment shapes the text most noticeably. Rather than follow a linear model of a memoir, beginning with birth and moving through adversity before reaching the destination of a breakthrough, Talebi’s memoir is scattered. The non linear structure of her narrative reflects the way in which her memories reveal themselves chaotically.

The second limitation involved with writing about trauma and specifically prison is the difficulty in actually translating the mental and physical memories into tangible words for others to understand. She explains,

writing about prison is not an easy task. It is challenging to attempt to describe these intense emotional and physical experiences in a non-sensual and abstract piece of writing. Such writing often turns an intimate personal experience into a public matter, into objectified evidence, one more document, to prove the state's atrocity. (50)

Embedded in her explanation of a secondary limitation—the potential for it to be consumed as another statistical reference “to prove the state's atrocity”—is the implicit suggestion that reading her text in that way would be reductive of its larger connection to similar captivity occurring in the present globally.

Furthermore, Talebi's naming of her memories as haunting and her process of writing as a way of speaking to the ghosts reveals the tangible presence her past has in her life. In speaking to these ghosts, Talebi locates meaning and purpose for her writing. She proclaims, “I hence write today for the sake of all those friends—whom I either knew personally or my soul knew of their spirit of resistance and desire for justice—whose refusal to submit to the power of money and violence cost their lives. It is in the spirit and for the sake of these always present friends—ghosts of justice and freedom—that I live” (11). Throughout her text, Talebi inserts her own critique of the purpose and impossibility of composing a memoir about the experience of prison. In addition to articulating potential tensions that exist in her work, such as haunting or the inability to exactly recreate an image of what occurred in prison, she shares her perception of writing as a form of tempered liberation. A tangible hopefulness exists in Talebi's

writing that seems firmly focused on the possibilities in what lies ahead. She writes,

I was hoping to achieve a new relationship between myself and my writing, one that could be liberating rather than imprisoning. I needed to establish a relation to my own writing that could open passageways to re-creating myself and envisioning new possibilities and new horizons of the imagination. Being alive, I was subjected to constant changes, not willing to be chained by the objectified words, even my own. This means to seek a way of living that redefines oneself on a daily basis yet is never unfaithful to one's humanity, to one's dignity. (213)

By her own admission, the potential to “give voice” or speak for others is troubled and thus not the primary focus of her work. She writes, “I was not writing because I felt the obligation to give voice to those who had been silenced. In fact, I could never have been able to do justice to those voices. If my writing has shed some light on their experiences, it is mostly due to the fact that we do not live isolation, and others' voices and experience are always intertwined with our own” (213). Put differently, Talebi recognizes that she is limited to her own perspective. The ability to speak for others or “give voice” to her fellow inmates is not possible. However, the influence individuals had on her experience—noted in the admission that “we do not live in isolation”—does become a way through which she is able to share the perspectives of others. While she forecloses the potential to “give voice,” she similarly balks at the conception that writing becomes a process of healing or forgetting. Talebi writes,

Moreover, I was not writing to be healed or to forget, for how is it even possible to forget if one is trapped so that one cannot move beyond it? When one is haunted by an infinite moment, the possibility of having memory vanishes, since memory belongs to the past as history. There will be no past when one is frozen in an illusory present. But if one is no longer caught, why would one be willing to forget? How can one be willing to forget about history when history is what makes us who we are? (213)

Talebi's admission that she was "not writing to be healed or to forget" speaks to the complicated relationship one has to an experience of captivity. It is not simply that healing or forgetting are not the desired outcomes of her memoir, it is rather that those two pursuits are impossible. There exists no form of healing that can actually undo the trauma she experienced as a prisoner, nor is there the potential for her forget what existing completely under the control of other was like for her. Furthermore, she articulates a distinct separation between memory and haunting insofar as when one is haunted by trauma, what it is that they are experienced cannot be defined as memory because it persists in a way that it appears to be the present. In this way, Talebi illustrates how limiting our vocabulary can be in expressing specific types of trauma such as captivity.

In each of her reflections on the purpose and potential limitations of her writing, Talebi further clarifies how her writing operates in relation to memory and trauma. For Talebi there is no way to forget. She writes,

Thus, I am writing not to forget, but to remember and to understand; though in order to remember in this new way, one has to also learn how to forget. This forgetting somehow recalls the essence of the experience. It is this kind of remembering my

experience as a history that allows me to step back in order to look at it and think critically about it. I want to remember the moments of resistance to discover those sides of myself I have forgotten. I want to remember the humiliation, the pain, and the suffering to be able to live every joyous moment of my life as a moment to treasure, as if it were the last moment before death knocks on my door. (213)

In qualifying and clarifying the forgetting that must occur for her to remember, Talebi centers the moments of resistance as critical to her survival in the present. With a tangible awareness of death, Talebi values the moments she has lived through—“the humiliation, the pain, and the suffering—so that she can recognize a greater appreciation for her life. Thus, writing, rather than a form of healing or forgetting, is for Talebi a mode of reviving resistance and also an awareness of death. She continues,

Free agency is an illusive modern liberal concept, true. But rethinking it in a context of the other and within a collective notion of human existence concerned with an ethics of living responsibly and responsively in relation to others is the ideal that, no matter it may be, it is worth pursuing. As long as one is alive, confrontations will continue. Being kissed by death so closely, I remind myself that life is not a given, nor is freedom, so that tasting life in all its flavors is my desire and mission. I am, of course, well aware that the wolves are waiting behind the door. I am, however, still ready to take up the challenge of fighting the chains that may bind me to the totalizing regimes and to myself. Free from these chains, I want to fly. (213-214)

Within these lines exist the critique Talebi makes that moves beyond the specificity of Iran, beyond the Islamic Republic, and into temporality where an “ethics of living” and in particular, a way of living “in relation to others is the

ideal.” Importantly, the “wolves are waiting” are not given a specific image other than as a threat to a method of living that is “worth pursuing.” Despite her thorough reflections on her writing, a question that remains unasked is related to the potential work Talebi’s text can do in a public space, and in particular, in a specifically US context. I cite this series of passages in which Talebi reflects on the purposes of writing to illustrate how she moves beyond a simplistic understanding of her experience as a prisoner in Iran, and instead pursues a critical position that engenders a serious dialogue on the experience of captivity globally.

PRISON-MUSEUM

One of the most significant contributions Talebi’s memoir makes to a conversation on trauma and memory occurs when Talebi recalls her return to Iran and more specifically, her return to a prison that had been transformed into a museum. It is in these recollections that Talebi is able to narrate the simultaneous erasure and creation of history as an integral component of nation-building. She describes the experience of visiting a museum dedicated to historicizing the prison she inhabited after her first arrest during the reign of the Shah. She writes,

With an eerie feeling, I thus read my name on the wall of this once horrific dungeon, along with the names of many others who had inhabited this place under the Shah’s regime. To visit this museum, I had to make a reservation in person—I had to write down my name and the time and date of my visit. Hesitantly, I signed my name, fearful that the guard might check the records and realize

that I had been a prisoner of both regimes. In this place only a few years earlier the interrogators of this very government had ushered many of their opponents into 'unity with God.' These detainees were either eradicated or were forced to live a 'bare life,' as walking dead. It was partially a result of this brutal suppression of dissidents in the first ten years following the revolution that, in the early 2000s, the Islamic Republic felt confident enough to make a spectacle of the Shah's torture chamber while remaining entirely silent about the death, suffering, and destruction that occurred there by its own hands. (9)

Although she enters the museum as a visitor, once inside its walls, she recognizes herself as an object, an artifact of the space. While her name is utilized as proof of the Shah's oppression she must simultaneously sign her name as a guest of the museum, thus becoming a patron of the rhetoric that the space circulates.

Critically, Talebi identifies how the erection of the museum illustrated a level of "confidence" in the eradication of any opponents who would testify against the type of history. The construction of the museum and the exhibits that fill it illustrate how museum-building is an extension of nation-building, as it serves a significant function in the framing and distribution of the national narrative.

Talebi highlights the specific type of knowledge production occurring in this space, writing, "the bitter taste in my mouth from witnessing the nearly absolute erasure of the history" and also "an exaggerated predominance of religious clergy presented in this museum became unbearable when Ferdous recalled the different spots where she had been interrogated and beaten" (9). The creation of the

narrative that the museum sponsors marks also an erasure of a history of resistance. She continues,

now here we were, walking around this prison-museum, whose opening to the public felt like a slap in the face, considering that both Ferdous and I had lived through the torture chambers of this regime. I was dumbfounded by the cynical depiction in this prison-museum, not merely in its blunt silencing of some experiences while highlighting others but also by the way it continued to exercise violence in other prisons when turning this one into a museum...Preoccupied by the sufferings and resistances of the past, I vaguely heard the whispers of the ghosts of the future whose cries have just recently shaken the entire world. The new wave of horror was near, waiting just around the next corner, perhaps to claim even these playful [school] boys, who seemed so oblivious to the to the shrieks of the ghosts that haunted this place, demanding to be seen, to be heard, and to be remembered. (10)

The presence of the young boys visiting the museum with their school brings to the fore the ghosts and the shrieks that remain unseen for visitors unlike Talebi, whose only interaction with the history is through the narrative depicted on the walls. In this way, the students allude to a type of state-sanctioned education that peddles a specific history while erasing others. Her physical presence in this space operates as evidence against this erased history, though she cannot speak and remains in fear of being recognized. The act of entering the prison-museum stands as a metaphor for the project of her memoir and the resistance she enacts by telling her story.

CHAPTER THREE

“God Ain’t Gone Stop Cryin’ No Time Soon”: Resurrecting Ghosts in Katori Hall’s *The Mountaintop*

The quote makes Dr. Martin Luther King look like an arrogant twit....He had no arrogance at all. He had a humility that comes from deep inside. The 'if' clause that is left out is salient. Leaving it out changes the meaning completely.³⁴
—Maya Angelou

And I got upset because you don’t play with Martin Luther King Jr. and you don’t play with his people. And by his people what I mean is people of good conscience, fundamentally committed to peace, and truth and justice. And especially the black tradition that produced him. All the blood, sweat and tears that went into producing a Martin Luther King Jr. generated a brother of such high decency and dignity that you don’t use his prophetic fire as just a moment in a presidential pageantry without understanding the challenge he presents to all of those in power no matter what color they are. No matter what color they are. So the righteous indignation of a Martin Luther King Jr. becomes a moment in political calculation and that makes my blood boil.³⁵
—Cornel West

On August 22, 2011, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial in Washington D.C. opened to the public and welcomed its first visitors. The most prominent element of the memorial is a thirty-foot statue of King that was carved from of an enormous block of white granite. In addition, several quotations taken from King’s speeches and writings have been carved into stone. Shortly after the

³⁴“Maya Angelou says King Memorial Inscription makes him look ‘Arrogant.’” *The Washington Post*. 8 August 2011.

³⁵“Cornel West on MLK Bible.” *C-Span Video Library*. C-Span, 18 January 2013.

unveiling ceremony, whispers of critique began to echo. Some of the more circulated complaints included: the disappointment that an African American sculptor was not commissioned for the project, frustration about his facial expression as well as the absence of a genuine resemblance, and also many questioned the choice to omit King's feet. The critique that garnered the most attention came from Maya Angelou, who objected to the problematic editing of King's words in one of the quotations. She argued that there was a tremendous difference between the original and the edited version and moreover, the latter actually made King appear, in her words, "arrogant" (Weingarten). The artistic team responsible for the monument and the editing cited logistics, lamenting that there was simply not enough room to include the quote in its entirety. Ultimately, Angelou's perspective reached enough ears to foment change and it was resolved that the paraphrased quote would be removed entirely. I will call this Act One.

In January 2013, Martin Luther King Day coincided with the presidential inauguration ceremony and as President Barack Obama was inaugurated for a second term he honored the man behind the holiday by placing his hand on King's personal bible as he took his oath to office. For some, this move to honor in this way by this specific President felt right. The two men receive favorable comparison relatively frequently and for some, President Obama's election is evidence of the realization of King's dream. For others, a comparison between the two emerges as lazy or ill-informed. Even more, some objected to the usage of

King's bible in the inauguration space because, some argued, the administration's actions remain incongruent to King's perspectives. Especially vocal about his disdain, Cornell West articulated his deep frustration with an act that appeared frivolous and trivial. To use the physical object of the bible in that moment appeared less concerned with rousing King's activism and more about what West called: "just a moment in a presidential pageantry without understanding the challenge he presents to all of those in power no matter what color they are" (West). To utilize a possession that King held dear was an honor, West contended, and required specific responsibility. This will be Act Two.

Although Angelou and West articulate disparate frustrations over contemporary handlings of King, their weariness, when taken together, comprises two separate acts in a play about the contestation over how King is to be remembered. When Angelou and West engage with the popular memory of King, they reveal the tensions between those who seek to protect the material evidence of his existence through his words or sacred objects and those who are more concerned with the symbolic King, the saint King, the hero King, the "I Have a Dream" King, the thirty-foot monument King. King has been dead for nearly half a century, but his body and ghost become frequently resurrected in the moments when progress in America is to be measured. The conflicts over King's legacy aptly illuminate the way that time and memory have transformed him into a holy,

sacred, divine figure that is not to be fooled with³⁶. It is amidst this contestation, and very much in response to it, that playwright Katori Hall inserts her play, *The Mountaintop*, that critically “[re]negotiates the legacy of [King’s] civil rights leadership” and as Soyica Diggs Colbert writes, “purposefully repositions King as a costar in the civil rights movement rather than its leading role” (Colbert).

Put briefly, *The Mountaintop* begins on the evening of April 3, 1968 in Room 306 of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee after King has given what would become his final speech. The temporal specificity is critical because as Hortense Spillers explains, “something so awful crystallized in 1968...[that] the year irrevocably split time around it between a ‘before’ and ‘after’” (Spillers 429). The play features only two characters: King and Camae. Without question, anyone placed alongside Martin Luther King, Jr. would be potentially upstaged upon arrival. The description of the two characters acutely highlights the initial balance of power between the two players. The first describes King by sharing his specific age as well as his highest accolade: “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Thirty-nine, Nobel Peace Prize-winning civil rights movement leader” (Hall).

Contrastingly, Camae’s age is left ambiguous, given an entire decade rather than a

³⁶ It should be noted that Hall’s candid portrayal of King negatively influenced its reception domestically such that she could initially not find a home to stage it and instead traveled abroad to London for its premiere. James Dacre, the director of the London production explains, “nobody wanted to risk producing a play about one of America’s most revered heroes by an unknown writer born fourteen years after he was assassinated” (Dacre 65). Though Hall was considered then an unknown writer whose youth did little to garner credibility, many failed to consider how this playwright, born and raised in Memphis not far from the site of his assassination grew to experience a unique form of haunting around the memory of his death.

specific age and her occupation, simply put: “Camae Twenties, Lorraine Motel maid” (Hall). The juxtaposition of these two descriptions is important because it illustrates how Hall begins with a drastic difference in socially constructed and socially given power and status on stage, and then works through a dismantling of the status that gives one the occasion to speak and denies the other.

In this essay I perform close readings of two critical but often overlooked moments in the play that disrupt the conception of King’s activism as singular in an effort to unearth circumstances of resistance that have not received the same mention or notice in historical record. The first locates the bodies of female activists in the spaces of protests and the second recalls the memory of a teenager that was murdered by Memphis police just one week before King’s assassination. By removing the pedestal, I argue, Hall’s play seeks to disrupt the deification of King, and instead recast him not as a singular leader, but rather in collaboration with countless individuals whose activism has not been recorded or remembered. Put differently, I argue that Hall’s task is layered: she compels us to revisit and revise our memory of King, and secondly, she expands the spotlight to include individuals whose daily and perhaps ordinary acts of resistance greatly contributed to the progress of the movement.

THE IMAGE OF A PRESS N' CURL

To better illustrate the political conflict and more specifically, the battle for power the two actors stage, I begin with an analysis of a scene that occurs mid-way through the play and engages a role reversal, leaving King as representative of the congregation and Camae as the orator³⁷. The moment begins with two disparate lamentations on the current state of the movement. King reveals his insecurity with what he recognizes as a dwindling physical presence at the sit-ins, marches and speeches. Camae's response articulates that while a presence still exists, the movement he leads will only prosper for so long. She retorts, "Oh, they listen. They go out and march. Then they get they press 'n curls ruined by fire hoses. Folk done got tired though, Preacher Kang. (*Sighs.*) Like I say, walkin' will only get us so far—" (Hall 22).

I am most interested in the work that this particular image of "press 'n curls ruined by fire hoses" achieves not only in articulating state sanctioned violence, but also in the way that it archives the presence of female activists and disrupts the notion of leadership as located in the body of a singular male figure. When Hall selects the image of "press n' curl" styled hair juxtaposed with the violent force of fire hoses, she powerfully cuts directly to the violence that was publicly exercised upon their bodies and thus speaks to the social position many black women occupied that was distinctly connected to the disparately socially

³⁷ My reading is specific to Director Anthony Haney's 2013 TheatreWorks Production in Palo Alto, California.

constructed ideologies of white and black womanhood. At the same time, she announces their presence in these spaces.

In other words, the image that Camae summons succinctly tears at the ways in which women of color were subject to a type of state terror that exposed their existence outside the margins of protected womanhood. It is through this image that Hall names the bodies of female activists, as Colbert writes, “Camae not only draws attention to the essential role of women in the movement and the particular gender violence they suffer, but she also foregrounds the necessary collaborations that sustain battles for civil and human rights” (Colbert). Moreover, Colbert continues, Hall “answers the call of black feminist critics who challenge the exclusion of women from the history of the civil rights movement” (Colbert). When Camae responds to King with this specific image and also begins to articulate a potential strategy of her own by arguing that walking may not be the answer, Hall shifts the power onstage such that the space of dialogue and leadership transforms into one that is not centered on a singular male figure but instead a collaborative effort. In this specific moment, and also elsewhere in this historical play, Camae engages King in conversations about the movement that continually allude to the multitude of voices involved.

This move by Hall does not deny King’s role but instead widens the angle of vision so that rather than imagine King as a divine figure alone behind a podium, we see him in conversation with many individuals who, like him,

devoted their lives to social, political and economic change in courageous ways. In this way, I argue that Hall's play speaks directly to what Erica Edwards highlights in *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership*. Edwards contends that "scholarly and popular histories alike have privileged charismatic leaders from Frederick Douglass to Martin Luther King, Jr. over the arduous, undocumented efforts of ordinary women, men, and children to remake their social reality" (xv). Significantly, Edwards articulates the draw to this specific narrative as

the charismatic leader fills a void, dares a dream, brings national identity into florid articulation, and redeems the past while ushering in the new. But when longing for charismatic leadership takes the place of social movement history and women activists are conjured as the narrative and historical excess of social change, our imagining of social and political change is reduced to a catalog of charismatic men and surrogate women, a record of spectacular shows of power rather than the ordinary labor of making change, and a series of gross understatements of both the terror required to maintain the hegemony of racial capital and the formidable ways that people have resisted it. (Edwards 187-188)

Before continuing, it is necessary to consider why it might be important to return to the time of slavery when dissecting a specific type of violence against women in 1968, occurring over one hundred years after emancipation. In her text, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Hazel Carby explains how an ideology of womanhood that separates white and black women and more specifically, their respective societal treatment and rendering has a long history. Carby writes, "the

institution of slavery is now widely regarded as the source of stereotypes about the black woman” (Carby 20). Moreover, she continues, “it is not an exaggeration to say that the formation of stereotypes of black female sexuality has been reproduced unquestioningly in contemporary historiography even where other aspects of the institution of slavery have been under radical revision” (Carby 22). Returning to the time of slavery is productive because it was the source of many of stereotypes that had a breath and a pulse long after the institution was dismantled. Even in their inaccuracy and falsehood, these ideologies about womanhood have tremendous power in influencing an individual’s livelihood. In considering the disparate evolution of stereotypes concerning white and black women, thinking about slavery is critical because it unearths the presence of the former distinctly within the home (and heavily protected), and the latter outside of it (and vulnerable to violence that while gender-specific, was incomparable to the experiences of white women).

During a time when the differences in gender roles between white men and white women were highly pronounced, the ideologies that supported or fostered this distinction between the abilities of men and women were not extended to the realities of slaves. For example, “Thomas Narine, an eighteenth-century South Carolina planter, expected bondwomen to do the same work as his male slaves. They would, he thought, clear, plant and hoe three acres of land in six months. Besides doing the field work he expected them to have children, and

thus, by natural means increase the slave population” (White 67). In other words, black women were expected to labor under the same conditions and produce the same results as black men. Carby elaborates on the ideology that largely determined the separate realms of white men and white women, explaining,

the parameters of the ideological discourse of true womanhood were bound by a shared social understanding that external physical appearance reflected internal qualities of character and therefore provided an easily discernible indicator of the function of a female of the human species: men associated “the idea of female softness and delicacy with a correspondent delicacy of constitution” and recoiled if a woman spoke of “her great strength, her extraordinary appetite,” or “her ability to bear excessive fatigue.” (Carby 25)

Although the legal conditions of formerly enslaved blacks changed post emancipation, the actual circumstances of newly freed individuals were not as dramatic as may be imagined. Many continued as laborers as “the former slaves’ economic status had not undergone a radical transformation—they were no less impoverished than they had been during slavery” (Davis 4). Thus, the idealized conception of womanhood as a paragon of domesticity was one that was neither applicable nor consistent with the realities of many black women post-emancipation. Moreover, even though one hundred years have passed, the opportunity for employment was not radically different as many occupations were reserved exclusively for women and men of color. Within the parameters of the play. Therefore, “a narrow definition of womanhood has never reflected the lives of Black or other racial minority women, or [even] those of many white working-

class women in the United States” (Higginbotham 95).³⁸ Foregrounding the image of a “press ‘n curl ruined by fire hoses” with a much abridged meditation on the disparate formations of black and white womanhood illustrates varying levels of state recognized protection.

The image that Camae brings to the fore, the image of press n’ curls being destroyed by the pressure of fire houses, directly highlights the different societal renderings and lived realities of many black and white women. This image also marks a beginning of Camae’s articulation of black feminist politics because she articulates the intersection of aspects of her identity that include discrimination on the basis of both her race and her gender. If the womanhood that applied most directly to wealthier, white women was rooted in their confinement within the home, an articulation of the circumstances of women who had to go outside of their homes for the survival of themselves as well as their families required a concern for the intersection of race, class, gender and sexuality. This image is significant not just because it highlights a difference in societal rendering with white women, but also because it illustrates a difference in the space shared with black men.

³⁸ Even a more contemporary study, decades after the setting of *The Mountaintop*, reveals that “U.S Black women may have migrated out of domestic service in private homes, but as their overrepresentation as nursing home assistants, day-care aides, dry-cleaning workers, and fast-food employees suggests, African-American engaged in low-paid service work is far from a thing of the past” (Collins 52).

When Camae inserts her unapologetic critique of the movement's strategies, King immediately responds, as he instigates a further explanation from her. She engages playfully with King, expressing, "*I got a plan. But...I'm just a woman. Folk'll never listen to me*" (Hall 23). This line is significant because she disrupts the assumption that she is unheard not because she is without a plan, but rather because of her social status that maligns her ability to be heard while also gesturing to the privilege he enjoys by way of his gender. King continues to rouse a response from her, proding, "So if you were me, what would you do?" (Hall 23). Simone Missick, playing Camae, dons King's jacket and shoes before standing atop the bed. Their physical positions on stage begin to reflect the shift in their status. King takes a seat with his back to the majority of the audience and Camae steps on top of the bed, creating a drastic difference in their positions. The choice to have King's back to the audience while he is seated in a chair creates the illusion that he is suddenly part of the audience, watching Camae give her speech. His physical change in position alters his status on stage, taking attention away from him and focusing it on Camae.

Hall's choice to have Camae borrow King's jacket and shoes while she gives a speech results in an immediate response from the audience and produces two separate reactions. First, she creates a lightly comical visual of a petite Camae in an oversized suit jacket and similarly generous dress shoes. The visual combined with Missick's purposely clumsy handling of King's clothing translates



Image 1.1: King (Adrian Roberts) and Camae (Simone Missick) in Katori Hall's *The Mountaintop*, directed by Anthony Haney in Palo Alto, March 2011; photo by Mark Kitaoka

into light laughter from the audience. However, reflecting on her initial claim that she remains unheard as a consequence of her gender reveals the instability of both the concept of gender as well as the social status that accompanies it. In other words, the choice to have Camae wear King's suit jacket and dress shoes during the moment that she takes the stage to make a radical speech plays with the idea of masculinity because she suddenly alters her costume to simulate King. Hall's choice to do this emphasizes the performativity of gender as well as the construction of gender roles. This is important because the entire rising action of the play stages an undressing of King. For her to wear the suit jacket and dress shoes at this moment insinuates that she is able to then say what she does with an active audience that includes King because she is in drag. This is a play on social status, in terms of both costume and height.

I argue that the addition of the external pieces of clothing paired with her gain in height provided by the bed marks a critical transition in her role onstage. Certainly, costume design is an integral element of performance in any production. Costumes, similar to set design, become tangible—though inanimate—characters onstage. An actor's change in costume midway through a play indicates a shift. Costumes, and any alteration they undergo during a performance, become synonymous with a character's unspoken inner monologue. Throughout *The Mountaintop*, audiences witness a gradual undressing of King, both literally and figuratively. He is most completely dressed and recognizable as

King in the opening moments of the play, before he removes his hat, suit jacket, tie, and shoes. With his clothing also goes his poise and reserved demeanor and so the audience witnesses a more human-like King.

King's removal of his layers of clothing marks a critical shift in the play as Camae becomes the orator as well as the leader in their journey onstage. Thus far in the play she remains beholden to her uniform, interacting with King within the confines dictated by her position as the motel maid. Once her uniform is buried beneath his suit jacket and no longer visible, Camae's voice transforms. Though extensive, I include this lengthy excerpt from the play to illustrate Camae's revolutionary perspective. Joy James defines revolutionary feminisms as "black feminisms [that] explicitly challenge state and corporate dominance and critique the privileged status of bourgeois elites...[and] do so by connecting political theory for radical transformations with political acts to abolish corporate state and elite dominance" (James 244). Camae demands a radical transformation in the current denial of basic rights, arguing:

I have told you that the white man is our brother. And he should be treated as such. We touch our brother with the softest of hands. We greet our brothers with the widest of smiles. We give our brother food when he is hungry. But it is hard to do this when our brother beats his fist upon our flesh. When he greets us with "Nigger" and "Go back to Africa", when he punches us in our bellies swelling with hunger. Abel was slain by his brother Cain and, just like the Biblical times, today the white man is killing his Negro brethren, shackling his hands, keeping us from rising to the stars we are booooouuuund to occupy. We have walked. Our feet swelling with each step. We have been drowned by hoses. Our dreams

being washed away. We have been bitten by dogs. Our skin forever scarred by hatred at its height. Our godly crowns have been turned into ashtrays for white men at lunch counters all across the South. To this I say, my brethren, a new day is coming. I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired, and today is the day that I tell you to KILL the white man! (*Sotto voice*) But not with your hands. Not with your guns. But with your miiiind! (*Back to regular voice.*) We are fighting to sit at the same counter, but *why*, my brothers and sisters? We should build our own counters. Our own restaurants. Our own neighborhoods. Our own schools. The white man ain't got nothing' I want. Fuck the white man! *Fuck* the white man! I say, FUCK 'em! (Hall 24)

Camae's speech strikes critically at a continued record and tradition of both physical and verbal violence that is incessant. Her proposal to reject a system that rejects her and seek political, economic and social independence resurrects a long history of radical activists who similarly recognized the futility in patience. It also resurrects a response to the racial climate in America that is not popularly associated with the public memory of King. The structure of her speech is important because it begins with an acknowledgement of a shared humanity and gradually transitions into an account of the lived experiences of many blacks in America. Camae addresses the range of violence and oppression—from physical torture to verbal assault, from economic suppression to social segregation—that punctuated the daily lived experiences of many. Embedded in her diction and imagery are vestiges of torture that harken back to chattel slavery, exposing that while the legal ownership of individuals may no longer exist, the forms of regulation and policing remain. Moreover, in quoting specific verbal abuses,

Camae articulates the importance of the linguistic environment. Although words take a different form of violence, they are tremendously powerful. Elsewhere in *The Mountaintop* and later in this chapter, I will meditate on the physical violence that Hall urgently brings to the fore. What I am most interested in here is the attention to the mental, verbal, emotional violence that Camae's speech is invested in dismantling.

When Hall directly quotes an abusive term and a hateful phrase in the beginning of Camae's speech, she thus equates the violence done by that language to the bruises and gashes left by "fist[s] upon our flesh" and focuses the necessary resistance as one that begins on an ideological level (Hall 24). She appeals to her congregation: "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired, and today is the day that I tell you to KILL the white man!" (Hall 24). By naming "the white man," Hall locates whiteness and masculinity as purveyors of particularly spectacular forms of terror. This resistance begins as an ideological battle because "black bodies, in the twenty-first century, continue to share in the experiences of their ancestors who were viewed as 'other,' unjustly incarcerated, and subjected to limitless violence" (Young 4). When in Camae's speech Hall questions "those fighting to sit the same counter," she urges individuals to think beyond those specific types of objectives. More critically, she challenges her imagined audience to rethink the larger issue of fighting to be included in the same crumbling system. Camae's

speech articulates a desire to move beyond the current system of government and create another not in its image, but rather rebuild another.³⁹

Through a meditation on how Malcom X is often reproduced in popular memory as a foil to King as well as how the Civil Rights Movement and Black Nationalism are remembered in disparate ways, I will be able to unearth some of the work that Hall is doing by staging King and including Camae's radical speech. Many understand and perceive "King through a narrow interpretive lens, invoking a frozen and ossified memory of him—one in which he is remembered as the 'I Have a Dream' American, not the insurgent anti-imperialist who changed his views in 1967 and linked racism and U.S. militarism, vehemently protesting the Vietnam War and calling the United States 'the biggest purveyor of violence in the world'" (Daulatzai x-xi). While towards the end of his short life King's politics grew to be more radical, a stark difference between the two men was their faith. As Daulatzai suggests, Malcom X embodied a particular type of terror in the eyes of many Americans because "to be Black is one thing in America that marks you as *un-American*, but to be Black *and* Muslim is quite another, as it marks you as *anti-American*" (Daulatzai xiv). Remembering King as a hero and Malcom X

³⁹ It is also important to clarify here, as Hall does herself, that "it ain't a *who*, it's a *what*" (Hall 45). Hall probes the violence that is distributed as a result of ideologies of whiteness and masculinity. One review of a regional performance noted that the particular line, "KILL the white man," as well as the cheers that accompanied it, was disturbing and eerie. However, to assume that Hall is advocating violence or racism is a complete misreading and a reductionist interpretation. Moreover, that review underscores the popularly imagined view of Malcolm X. When advocating self-defense, his words were consumed by the public as a call to violence by-passing the initial violence already present.

as his foil, an aggressive, violent figure, has served to also influence the repetition of their individual voices and objectives. Manning Marable explains,

for many years, in the mainstream media and in grade school textbooks, Malcolm X was most frequently juxtaposed with Martin Luther King Jr. These two central figures of mid-twentieth-century African-Americans political history were kept apart during their lifetimes by ideological conflicts and political rivalries largely beyond their control. In death, ironically, they continue to be pushed apart through selective quotations and image manipulation. To the masses of white American, Dr. King is favorably presented, preaching nonviolence and interracial harmony, whereas the militant Malcom X advocates racial hatred and bloody confrontation. (Marable 132-133)

The differences in how the two leaders are remembered and circulated say much about how their separate organizations either contribute to or belittle the idea of racial justice in America.

What I mean to say is that the Civil Rights Movement is favored, and popularly remembered partly because it can be recorded as a historical moment that had a beginning and an end, thus satisfying the perception that whatever wrongs may have been committed in the past were rectified. Daulatzai contends, “the narrative of Civil Rights has tremendous purchase and traction in the United States, because it has been used to rewrite the 1960s...which assumes that race has been transcended and that the United States has fulfilled its national destiny” (Daulatzai xi). Part of the impetus for returning to 1968 for Hall, is to pull at the idea that we are living in a post-racial society. There is a desire from some to

identify President Barack Obama's election in 2008 and reelection in 2012 as the fulfillment of King's dream. The term, post-racial, was widely broadcast as if "his election marked the nation's triumph over racial caste—the final nail in the coffin of Jim Crow" (Alexander 2). As Michelle Alexander reports in *The New Jim Crow*, the successes of individuals like President Obama illustrate more about a widening gap than about substantial changes in the texture of opportunity in the nation. Alexander articulates,

The clock has been turned back on racial progress in America, though scarcely anyone seems to notice. All eyes are fixed on people like Barack Obama and Oprah Winfrey, who have defied the odds and risen to power, fame, and fortune. For those left behind, especially those within prison walls, the celebration of racial triumph in America must seem a tad premature. More black men are imprisoned today than at any other moment in our nation's history. More are disenfranchised today than in 1870, the year the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified prohibiting laws that explicitly deny the right to vote on the basis of race. Young black men today may be just as likely to suffer discrimination in employment, housing, public benefits, and jury service as a black man in the Jim Crow era—discrimination that is perfectly legal, because it is based on one's criminal record. (Alexander 175-179)

When considering what Daulatzai argues in terms of the "tremendous purchase and traction" of the Civil Rights Movement and what Alexander confirms in "though scarcely anyone seems to notice," there exists a relationship between an investment in a historical moment and a contemporary denial. There is nostalgia in the way that the Civil Rights period is remembered in American history that doesn't allow for a contemporary accounting of present injustices. When Malcolm

X asked “how is the black man going to get ‘civil rights’ before first he wins his *human rights*?” (X 1868) he issues a direct critique of America that is relevant to the moment when Hall stages her play. Embedded in this question is the articulation that the record of human rights violations is so grave that the attention granting of civil rights cannot reasonably precede the acknowledgement of human rights.

Camae’s speech, in association with Malcolm’s perspective, articulates the importance of continual community participation and a move away from working within a broken system. Located in one of his most well known speeches, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” Malcolm X touches upon the paths of re-building and re-education. He contends,

the political philosophy of black nationalism only means that the black man should control the politics and the politicians in his own communitySo the political philosophy of black nationalism only means that we will have to carry on a program, a political program, of re-education, to open our people’s eyes, make us become more politically conscious, politically mature.... The economic philosophy of black nationalism only means that we have to become involved in a program of re-education, to educate our people into the importance of knowing that when you spend your dollar out of the community in which you live, the community in which you spend your money becomes richer and richer. (X 117-118)

The parallels between Malcolm’s words and those spoken by Camae suggest that King was not the only ghost onstage during the performance. Daulatzai suggests, “Malcom’s clear rejection of Black electoral participation and the Civil Rights

paradigm led him to the conclusion that black freedom will come only by using what he called ‘new methods’” (Daulatzai 137). Within the world of the play, the advocacy for new methods exemplifies Camae’s position. Her words recognize that while marches and other forms of physical protest have produced results, there is both a desire and a need to make moves such as building one’s own restaurants, neighborhoods and schools that would solidify real change that would not be as vulnerable to the types of legal regressions that follow attempts at progress. Camae’s character highlights a voice and perspective that is often relegated to the periphery in movements centered exclusively on discrimination based on either race or gender. Her speech is central to the play’s message because she articulates the need to rebuild a system that erodes intersecting oppressions rather than reinforcing them. Her words are critical of a multifaceted and chronic hatred that has and continues to directly suppress and extinguish the potential to live a life of one’s own making. In other words, her appeal delves decisively at the physical and psychological scars of oppression and the need to shift focus onto strategies of drastic rebuilding.

The image of “press ‘n curls ruined by fire hoses” and this moment together that juxtapose expectations of King with the character Hall stages underscores the work that the play attempts to do. Hall’s King disrupts conventionally maintained perceptions of him as a heroic figure. Thus far in the play, the audience has witnessed him smoke, drink and flirt but the laughter that

emerges after Camae's speech seems to indicate that her words are still at odds with language many believe he might utilize. Even the character of Camae senses that perhaps her words erred on the side of inappropriate as she immediately reminds herself of his presence, steps down from the bed and apologizes, saying "I AM SO SORRY! Preacher, Kang. Ooooooo. I just can't control my mouth" (Hall 24). Had Hall decided to not craft a response to this statement and move the play in a separate direction, it could be argued that Camae did misspeak and her words were at odds with her audience, King. Instead, Hall's King replies: "'Fuck the white man'?" (*Long heavy beat.*) I likes that. I think that'll be the title of my next sermon" (Hall 25). He elaborates:

Ooooo! They got me so tired, Camae. All this rippin' and runnin', rippin' and runnin' around this entire world, and for what? FOR WHAT? White folks don't seem to want to listen. Maybe you're right. Maybe the voice of violence is the only voice white folks'll listen to. (*He coughs.*) I'm tired of shoutin' and carryin' on, like you say. I'm hoarse. (Hall 25)

The dissatisfaction that Hall depicts through King's response to Camae's words transitions to an element of the play that perhaps most eerily illustrates continuity between 1968 and 2011—the slaughter of young black men in America.

THE REPETITION OF HIS NAME

The second moment in the play I want to think through is the naming of a teenager murdered by the police in Memphis just a week before King's

assassination. This section grapples with the presence of Larry Payne onstage and consider how he becomes the most compelling evidence of stagnancy between 1968 and the present. When reflecting on Hall's staging of Payne, I argue that the repetition of his name onstage displays the type of activism artists can contribute in terms of making crimes visible and public. Hall's King repeats Payne's name multiple times onstage and suggests that there may be something to be done that may honor him. King says, "I'll never forget his name... Well, we back and we gonna do it right this time. So Larry Payne won't have to die in vain" (Hall 20). Unfortunately, King was soon dead, and the cries for justice following Payne's death were obscured by the subsequent assassination of King and public mourning in Memphis and also the nation was redirected, eclipsing the attention on Payne's death.

The details of Payne's murder are tragic: sixteen-year-old boy gunned down by police outside of the housing project that was his home, unarmed, and suspected of stealing a television from Sears with a group of other teenagers. On the day of his death, Payne decided to skip school and instead attend a protest. His truancy that day was reflective of an issue so critical that it preceded the place of an education. Nearly two months prior, two sanitation workers—Echol Cole and Robert Walker—had been killed gruesomely when the garbage compactor in the back of the truck they rode in turned on and crushed them to death. In a report immediately following the shooting that left Payne dead, the officer in question

said that Payne was holding a knife, suggesting that the murder could be reasoned as self-defense. However, “a reporter did a more extended investigation. Nearly a dozen eyewitnesses claimed that Payne did not have a knife and was pleading for his life. ‘He had his hands up. I saw the white palms,’ said one witness” (Honey 359-360). Yet “the Memphis Police Department exonerated [the officer]; he was not even suspended during the investigation, nor did a grand jury ever indict him” (Honey 360).

The murder of teenager Larry Payne in 1968 highlights a critical lesion in the nation’s system of justice because it reiterates the vulnerability of individuals deemed suspicious as a consequence of their aspects of their physical appearance that may reveal their gender, race, sexuality or religion. I cite a lengthy passage from the play to illustrate how Hall contextualizes the moments prior to his death. Hall’s *King* recounts how the strike for the Sanitation Workers resulted in the death of a young man:

must have been thousands upon thousands of people there. Thousands! Everybody from old men to teenage girls to little boys holding up signs that read, ‘I AM A MAN’. Somehow they squeezed me to the front, we linked arms and the march began. ‘I AM A MAN! I AM A MAN!’ we shouted. Well, we hadn’t walked but one block before we heard the sound of glass breaking. I was swept up in a tornado of arms, legs, coughing, mace....my men pushed me into a passing car, and...I looked through that back window and saw such blessed peace descend into chaos. (*Beat.*) Don’t they know, you can’t be marchin’ down the street, bust into store windows, and then go get you a free color television. We’re marching for a living wage...not a damn color TV! It just gives these police an excuse to shoot innocent folks. Like that boy...that

sixteen-year-old boy they shot. Last week? (*Quietly to himself.*)
 Larry Payne. Larry Payne. Larry Payne. I'll never forget his name.
 (Hall 20)

The circumstances of Payne's murder lay bare the deep discrepancy between an act and the reciprocal force of violence that result in a peculiar equation of crime and punishment. In reports retelling the incident, the police officer expressed that Payne was holding a knife to suggest that his killing of a young man was sanctioned as self-defense. In his book on the Memphis Strike, Michael K. Honey provides a detailed account of the specific moments and incidents surrounding Payne's death. I include Honey's retelling because it deepens the picture of Payne that Hall begins to tell, while also illustrating the violent, tense, suffocating climate of Memphis at the time of King's death. Honey writes,

On the morning of March 28, he left Mitchell Road School to go to the march downtown, where a UPI photographer pictured him standing next to a looted window, watching as police beat a black teenager. Payne escaped from the police and left the downtown around noon; he went to the apartment of his mother, Lizzie, in Fowler Homes, a low-income project ten blocks south of Beale. Apparently he was carrying some stolen cloth. Another boy told Larry of someone he knew in the projects who could sew that cloth into pants, and Larry went out to find him...[and he] ran into another group of young men who were debating whether they wanted to go to the Sears store two blocks away. Not everyone did, and it is not clear if Larry went with them or not...[Shortly after,] two white police officers, Leslie Dean Jones and Charles F. Williams, drove to Sears and found a broken storefront window. Then they cruised until they spotted young men carrying TVs and stereos. According to their account, they followed them to Fowler Homes, where officer Jones chased a youth carrying a television—until he ducked into a basement door. Jones banged on the door

and he wouldn't come out, but after more pounding Larry Payne eventually emerged. When the officer told him to put up both hands, Payne pulled out "the biggest knife I ever saw," according to Jones. Jones pressed the barrel of his single-shot 12-gauge shotgun into Payne's stomach and pulled the trigger. Payne flew backward into a wall and then slid to the ground. The *Tri-State Defender* later published a picture of Payne lying against the basement stairwell, his eyes and mouth wide open, both hands above his head. After he was pronounced dead at John Gaston Hospital, police produced a rusty butcher knife that they said belonged to Payne, yet they were unable to lift any fingerprints from it. (Honey 359)

Although his day began by walking away from a classroom to attend a march, it can be argued that all he encountered and observed in the hours prior to his death composed a curriculum in the depth of injustice and unfreedom in America. After arriving at the march, Payne witnesses a fate near his own as a police officer beats a black teenager and later, after leaving the chaos downtown he encounters another group of teenagers, followed by another group of officers. Memphis was a warzone. The city, not unlike many others across the nation at this moment, boasted layers terror and discrimination that began on the streets with the officers. The "white police officers, many of them straight from the plantation districts, functioned like Klansmen in blue uniforms, brutalizing and insulting African Americans and union organizers with support from white judges, FBI officials, and federal attorneys" (Honey 11).

I argue that Hall is doing something here with the repetition of his name onstage. What Hall's King suggests is that when justice is not legible legally, it

may be pursued in other mediums. More specifically, when recalling activists in the past that have worked to make public the deaths that authorities refuse to recognize we are certainly reminded of Ida B. Wells, who saw that although lives could never be brought back, she could voice the realities of their individual deaths and put faces to the numerous victims. Most profoundly, she swiftly dismantled the logic used to defend those killings and thus articulated how these murders could not be conceived as isolated incidents, but rather taken together as mass murders. In other words, she “sought to recast lynching in the public eye so that it was no longer perceived as an understandable though unpleasant response to heinous acts but as itself a crime against American values” (Royster 27). Wells simplified the logic behind the mass killings of blacks, arguing that a significant shift occurred immediately post-emancipation. She focuses primarily on three excuses often used to murder: to curb or “repress and stamp out alleged ‘race riots,’ to prevent political domination as a result of receiving the right to vote, and in defense of white women. In addition to dismantling some of the logic often returned to, Wells provides the names, ages, dates, locations and accused offenses (if there was one) for lynching victims.

In addition to rendering these forgotten crimes as public, Wells’s accounting of these murders in *The Red Record* provided evidence of the relationship between all of these crimes. In other words, her work illustrated that these were not isolated incidents, but rather all connected. I invoke the work of

Wells when thinking through Hall's naming of Payne onstage because it suggests the necessity of a keeping a record of injustice when violence is ignored legally. Put differently, Hall inserts Payne center stage as a way to rectify the forgetting of his death. When reflecting on Hall's staging of Payne, I argue that her repetition of his name onstage displays the type of activism artists can contribute in terms of making crimes visible and public.

In this sense, what Hall achieves onstage goes beyond the simple act of naming and seeks instead to complicate the way audiences may understand specific violence in the present. When Camae says to King, "make you scared to bring a Negro child into this world the way they be blowin' 'em up" she is making a statement that echoes beyond 1968 (Hall 25). During the summer of 2013, just months after the Palo Alto production of *The Mountaintop*, the nation watched as a thirty-year-old self-appointed neighborhood watch captain stood trial for the murder of an unarmed seventeen-year-old. The facts in this case are relatively simple and well known. Trayvon Martin, carrying only skittles and an iced tea, walked home while talking on the phone to a friend. Meanwhile, the neighborhood watch captain, decided that this young man appeared suspicious and called the police. The police asked the man to remain in the car until they arrived. This man disregarded their instructions, and what shortly followed was an altercation between this thirty-year-old man, who was armed, and the seventeen-year-old teenager. Within minutes and one gunshot, Martin was dead. And yet,

the police saw no reason to charge this man with the crime, as he went home later that evening. Weeks passed as a family mourned the loss of their loved one, and he was still not charged. The assumption of suspicion lay completely with the dead, evident in the post-mortem drug testing of the victim and not the aggressor. As the trial ensued, the audience watched as a choreographed rationalization of a young man's murder took center stage. At one point, the sweatshirts he wore the evening of his murder were paraded around the courtroom as key witnesses made arguments about the proximity of the weapon. America watched as his friend, another teenager, took the stand only to be harassed and mocked for her appearance and diction. Ultimately, the man responsible for the death of a seventeen-year-old was acquitted of all charges and allowed to return home. For days prior to and following the verdict, the media reported on the continued fear of riots.

What I intend to illustrate through the juxtaposition of Wells's work, Hall's play and the trial following the murder of Trayvon Martin, is a peculiar and tragic stasis in our present. In the trial, the defense repeatedly stated that this was not about race. And moreover, if an appeal of the verdict was to be pursued, the Department of Justice would need to prove that the defendant had a history of racism. How exactly does one prove racism? What amount of American history becomes evacuated by the very presence of such a question? What would be the tangible measure of this? Of course, one must ask what, other than his external

appearance, made Martin appear so suspicious? What was it about sixteen-year-old Larry Payne that the officer in Memphis found so dangerous that he felt warranted or justified in shooting his gun? Furthermore, the immediate and exaggerated concern over the possibility of riots following the verdict coupled with the anxiety surrounding the necessity of the anonymity of the jury—for their protection—contributes to the spectacle of America's contemporary denial of racial tension.

When Hall decides to include Payne, and by extension his story, onstage alongside King she creates a contemporary record of his life and tragic death. The inclusion of his name honors, in some way, the type of work that Wells devoted her own life to by refusing amnesia of lives that have been unjustly extinguished. No real justice can exist for Payne's family because there is nothing that will bring his life back. But in remembering him, in circulating a memory of him, her purpose for including Payne onstage in a play about King makes an attempt to rectify a forgetting. When Hall decides to include Payne, and by extension his story, onstage alongside King she creates a contemporary record of his life and tragic murder. In Hall's play, it isn't as it was. When King was assassinated, Payne was forgotten—yet in Hall's play, through remembering King, we are also reminded of Payne.

THE GHOSTS ONSTAGE

Perhaps the most provocative and magically real element of Hall's play is the fact that ghosts dominate her stage. Death is everywhere in this play, from the recent murder of Camae, to the imminent death of King, and also to the allusions of the killings of Malcom X, Payne, Cole and Walker. Even as a live performance, the stage reenacts its own death on a nightly basis at the curtain's close. We are thus compelled to ask, what does it mean to have a stage of dead bodies? Or, rather, what are the ghosts really saying? As Avery Gordon declares, "the [ghosts'] arrival notifies us of a haunting" (Gordon 24). "What happens when we admit the ghost," Gordon continues, is "that special instance of the merging of the visible and the invisible, the dead and the living, the past and the present—into the making of worldly relations and into the making of our accounts of the world" (Gordon 24).

In thinking through the possibilities created by listening to what the ghosts have to say, through the "merging of the visible and the invisible, the dead and the living, the past and the present" I argue that when Hall returns to 1968 she recasts contemporary issues in the temporal past and thus her critique expands to include not only the specific moment of 1968, but also the ways that certain experiences of injustice persist in the present. For example, King's death is highly visible and heavily mourned, whereas Camae, comparatively, exists on the margins—largely ignored and unmourned. But both draw attention to a complete disregard for

human life. When Hall peoples her stage with dead bodies, she draws attention to a continued crisis in which certain lives are treated as excess and expendable. In this way, it is critical to recognize that Hall summons specific ghosts whose separate deaths collectively unearth circumstances that render certain lives as precarious.

When the true premise of the play reveals itself to the audience midway through the performance, Hall creates a space onstage that works through the tenuous issues of faith, fear, forgiveness and death intimately, honestly and hauntingly. Hall takes a risk in this moment and decision because she has captive audience that, for approximately the last forty-five minutes, has invested in the characters of Camae and King as they are. In other words, the audience has, by this point in the play, become invested in the project of portraying a more-real or authentic King. To inject the occasion of magic in a play that has thus far been founded upon its realness, renders the reception of the remainder of the play tenuous because the audience does not expect what is coming. However, this transition occurs with relative ease because Hall imbues it with wit as some of the most genuinely comic moments erupt in the negotiations between Camae and King in the following scenes.

While having Camae reveal herself as an angel sent to bring King to Heaven may seem to complicate Hall's larger project of staging a more relatable King, this decision actually makes room for a thoughtful expression on what

King's death meant as human, not martyr. Thunder roars in the background and a stunned King begins to have a panic attack. In perpetual fear and certainty of his eventual premature death, King descends into momentary panic as a result of the sound and suddenness of thunder and its resemblance to gun shots. Through a slip of his given name (Michael), Camae exposes that she knows more than she originally portrayed. In order to dispel his fears that she is sent to spy on him, she performs an act of magic that enchants both King as well as the audience. After lighting a cigarette with her breath alone, she turns to him and says, "angel breath is some hot breath...I'm here to take you to the other side" (Hall 25-26). In what follows onstage, the audience learns of King's fear of death becoming realized and the sincere challenges in coping with his fate.

It is in these moments of reflection and honesty that Hall's version of King appears most human and his life's work becomes understood as unrelentingly courageous. He speaks of his fear of death, sharing, "fear has become my companion, my lover. I know the touch of fear, even more than I know the touch of my own wife's. Fear, Camae, is my best friend. She is the reason I get up in the morning. 'Cause I know if I'm still afraid, then I am still alive" (Hall 39). King seizes his final moments on earth to bluntly and directly challenge the government's taste for war as he begins writing what he imagines will be his final speech. "Why America is going to hell," King writes, "a country that sends brown boys to bathe little-bitty brown babies in the blood of our greed is headed for a

crossroads of conscience. Hurt villages set ablaze by our damning ignorance”
 (Hall 39). Camae must explain to King that he will die before he has the
 opportunity to speak again. The speech he is intently and furiously scribbling will
 never be read nor heard. He explodes with understandable rage:

there’s just so much I gotta do. So much I haven’t yet
 accomplished. So much...I GOTTA FINISH WHAT I
 STARTED!! My house has been bombed! I have been pelted wit’
 rocks. My arm twisted behind my back. My face shoved into a
 ground of gravel. I have been kicked at. Spit at. Pummelled.
 Abused. Looked at with the deepest scorn. I have been stabbed in
 my chest. And I walked away. Alive! Alive! If I woulda sneezed I
 would have died. (Hall 44)

Embedded in King’s plea is an awareness of the feat that remains in terms of the
 political, social and economic discrepancies that persist in America. In addition,
 his naming of specific abuses that he and his family had endured as a consequence
 of his resilient focus on change and progress illustrate the continued resistance to
 his pursuit of progress.

I argue that making this move allows Hall to create a space in which the
 audience witnesses a man pleading for his life in a way that is not heroic, but
 instead humble and begins a genuine process of mourning for what is certain to
 come. Although we stand with decades between us and King’s murder, her play
 digs back into the moment of his death with such force that it is difficult to exit
 the play without some semblance of grief. Onstage, King stares at the phone

knowing God is on the other line and impatiently interjects and a defeated Camae hands him the phone. King pleads with God for his life:

I'm but a servant for You, God, Ma'am.... I honored YOUR WILL, God, Ma'am. Let me not die a man who doesn't get to hug his children one last time. Let me not die a man who never gets to make love to his wife one last time. Let me not be a man who dies afraid and alone. (*Long pause.*) Then why'd You pick me, huh? ... You got some nerve. Dragging me here to this moldy motel room in Memphis. To die. HUH! Of all places! Well, I am *angry*. There have been many a' nights when I held my tongue when it came to You. But not tonight, NOT TONIGHT. I have continuously put my life on the line, gave it all up. Gave it all up for You and Your word. You told me that'd I'd be safe. Safe in Your arms. You protected me all this time, all this time! Glued a pair of wings to my back, but now that've I've flown too close to the sun I'm falling into the ocean of death. God how dare You take me now? NOW! I beg of You. I plead—God? Ma'am? God? (Hall 48-49)

His plea begins with an appeal to emotion and then quickly transitions to anger and ultimately, God hangs up on King. This specific moment in the play genuinely underscores the spectacular difference between reading a play versus breathing in a live performance. In reading these lines, one comprehends the desperation in his plea. He is fighting for his life. Yet this moment in a live performance, and specifically in the 2013 Palo Alto TheatreWorks Production with Adrian Roberts as King, is unrelentingly tragic as it becomes physically embodied onstage. It is in this moment that the difference between reading and seeing that Bert O. States explains become highly evident. He argues that,

in reading, the eye is an anesthetized organ, little more than a window to the waiting consciousness on which a world of

signification imprints itself with only the barest trace of signifiers that carry it. In the theatre, however, the eye awakens and confiscates the image. What the text loses in significative power in the theatre it gains in corporeal presence, in which there is extraordinary perceptual satisfaction. (States 29)

To witness an individual so despondent in his battle with fate and God and all that is beyond his control is gripping and tremendously powerful. Moreover, Hall is able to stage this moment in this way because of the magical realist element that opens space onstage for this type of reckoning.

King is not the only character that benefits from the occasion of magic onstage, as Camae's own story becomes audible and legible through this vehicle. For the majority of the play, the audience understands or perceives Camae as a young, motel maid with an energetic, witty personality and much to say. Earlier in the play, shortly after Camae enters the room and long before we know she is an angel, King calls her pretty. Her reply hits with such weight and yet it remains completely neglected. She says to King, "I know. Even my uncle couldn't help himself. You have fun tonight?" (Hall 11). And the play moves forward and her suggestion of sexual trauma or abuse becomes completely buried in the play. In performance after performance, I would watch for this moment and wonder how it was that she could reveal something so heavy and Hall would allow it to remain unquestioned or uninterrogated. The blocking at this specific moment left both actors with their backs to the other and occupied in separate tasks. There is a second when Roberts (as King) turns his head slightly towards Missick (as

Camae) in response and then just like that his next line is delivered. Perhaps Hall leaves this line untended because it reflects the ways in which this specific form of abuse often remains entombed. However, when we learn of Camae's status as an angel, we also learn about the circumstance of her death that in some ways resurrects the influence her earlier sexual abuse may have had on the way she views her body.

In elaborating on Camae's occupation as a sex worker, as well as her murder and subsequent task as an angel, Hall complicates the binary of sinners and saints to further buttress her larger project of humanizing King. Put differently, if the project of humanizing King involves illustrating him partaking in drinking, smoking, cussing and other un-saint-like activities, unveiling an angel whose life has veered from what many may consider the path of righteousness—but is still welcomed by God—further supports the idea that humans are tremendously complex and capable of lives that cannot be easily reduced into categories. King assumes that Camae lived a life of perfection and worship as a result of her position as an angel. Muddying his assumption, she reveals,

Honey, I've robbed. I've lied. I've cheated. I've failed. I've cursed.
 But what I'm ashamed of most is, I've hated. Hated myself.
 Sacrificed my flesh so that others might feel whole again. I thought
 it was my duty. All that I had to offer this world. What else was a
 poor black woman, the mule of the world, here for? Last night, in
 the back of a alley I breathed my last breath. A man clasped his
 hands like a necklace 'round my throat. I stared into his big blue
 eyes, as my breath got ragged and raw, and I saw the hell this old
 world had put him through. The time he saw his father hang a man.

The time he saw his mother raped. I felt so sorry for him. I saw what the world had done to him, and I still couldn't forgive. I hated him for stealing my breath. (Hall 55)

In some ways, it could be argued that what is left untended to earlier in the play, in terms of a history of sexual abuse, is taken up later when she reveals her lived experiences and her view of herself. At least initially, the tone of this moment greatly differs from the radical speech that she gives at the critical turning point of the play. However, when we explicate what Camae says here, we see that she articulates a call for radical love, compassion and forgiveness. She begins with a list of conventional sins: stealing, lying, cheating, failing and cursing. She then confesses to King what she regrets most and indirectly alludes to her earlier speech. She admits to hatred, both for herself and for others as well. Her confession adds weight to her plea to slay the ideological privileging of whiteness and masculinity because her hatred, born from years of inhaling what a racist and sexist society had to offer, compromised her sense of self. Similarly, as noted previously in this chapter, when she says to King, "its not *who* needs to be blamed, Preacher Kang. It's *what*. It ain't a *who*, it's a *what*", she clarifies the psychological damage done by racist, sexist, and homophobic ideologies.

Beyond a hatred for herself, Camae's regret for her inability to forgive or unearth compassion for her murderer, whose own life reflects the damage wrought by a patriarchal society, suggests a form of radical love that many would perceive as courageous. Camae reveals that in the seconds before her death, in

place of her own life flashing before her eyes, she witnesses this man's experiences. Her highlighting of two particular incidents illustrates the way in which all become affected by a decaying, hierarchic society—even those in the position of most power. Camae shares the lessons the world had taught this young man: “the time he saw his father hang a man [and] the time he saw his mother raped” (Hall 55). The extent to which his experiences and observations infiltrated his own sense of self is exhibited through the final moments of Camae's life in which he condenses the crimes committed by or against his parents. He becomes both murderer and rapist, suggesting an inability to extract himself from a dense fog of hatred that shaped the type of individual he would eventually become.

The ghosts of Camae and King that occupy the stage bring the past into the present, as well as the present into the past and resurrect the circumstances of their separate deaths that while seemingly distant and disparate, are actually closely related. King's death is highly visible and heavily mourned, whereas Camae, comparatively, exists on the margins—largely ignored and unmourned. But both result in a complete disregard for human life. When Hall peoples her stage with dead bodies, she draws attention to a crisis in which lives that present a threat to the state, or conversely, exist wholly on the margins, are treated as expendable.

Along these lines, it is critical to recognize that Hall summons specific ghosts whose separate deaths collectively unearth circumstances that render

certain lives as precarious. In “Tracing Magical Irruptions in US Ethnic Literatures,” Lyn Di Iorio Sandlin and Richard Perez observe that “US ethnic or minority writers insert magical moments in otherwise realist texts to highlight certain spectral realms within our midst” (1). Certainly, aside from the magic that erupts in the final half of the play, Hall’s work is founded in realism. The depth of detail pursued by Set Designer Eric Sinkkonen in manufacturing a replica of what the Lorraine Motel looked like the evening prior to King’s death testifies to the dedication to realness in the play. As does Hall’s commitment to portraying a more real and more human King. And yet the magical element of the play becomes integral as it allows for a deeper understanding of the lives onstage. Moreover, Sandlin and Perez continue, it is “through momentary and infrequent ‘dramatic shocks’ of magic, [that] US ethnic writers [are able to] expose a fundamental discontinuity in communal versus institutional memory, bringing to the fore the violent foundations of social life. It is as if the shock of magic lies in the revelation that reality, as is, is an insufficient barometer of lived experience” (4).

Exploring the genre of magical realism allows Hall to share a glimpse of the future/past to both King in 1968 and the audience in 2013. When King accepts his fate, he bargains for a glimpse of the future—a space he will not be able to witness himself. Camae complies, but warns, “I don’t know if you could handle it. It might break your heart” (Hall 56). The stage goes completely dark with a flash

of red in the background as we know that King has officially been declared dead. As the set transforms from a motel room to an empty space, images flash in the background in what becomes an unseen future for King and a history lesson for the audience. A sampling of the roll call reveals a list of activists, artists, performers, as well as the uglier side of the future/past through discriminatory legislature, neo-nazi groups, and war:

Bayard Rustin/Stonewall Riots/Andrew Young/ Julian Bond/ Bob Marley/ Redemption Songs/ Angela Davis/ Assata Shakur/ Afro Picks/ Black raised fists/ Olympics/ *The baton passes on*/ Skinheads/ The Cosby Show/ Baby Mamas/ Soul Train/ Montelle/ Don't Ask Don't Tell/Drive-bys/ McDonalds/ Diabetes/ Iraq/ NBA/ High-paid slaves/ The children of the Nile/ A nuclear 8 Mile/ Black picket fences/ And Jena Six/ American flags/ And Black Presidents!!! (Hall 58-61)

In this collapse of time when an audience in 2013 reflects on the past through the lens of the future that King will not live to see, we are compelled to reflect on the equation of progress and regress before us. In the breakdown of what separates the past from the present and the present from the past, Hall makes both legible and concise individuals and moments that collectively reveal where we are in terms of legal and social equality. Put differently, the collision of individuals and moments reveals more about a distance that still lies ahead, rather than a space that has been achieved or overcome. Because when we hear Assata Shakur's name, for example, we are momentarily proud for the inclusion of an activist, a radical who strongly believed that another society was possible. But then we must



Image 1.2: King (Adrian Roberts) in Katori Hall's *The Mountaintop*, directed by Anthony Haney in Palo Alto, March 2011; photo by Mark Kitaoka

become burdened by the knowledge that Assata Shakur cannot exist in America today. She was recently, in May 2013, added to the FBI's Most Wanted Terrorist List and the reward for her body was placed at two million dollars. In the juxtaposition of "Drive-bys/ McDonalds/ Diabetes" Hall plays with the association of drive-by murders that are generally understood as gang related alongside an enormous corporation famous for their drive-throughs. Audience members invested in food justice will recognize the critique Hall makes when she aligns these three, articulating how this enormous corporation functions like a gang, dealing out death to innocent bystanders, many of whom are children that become lured by their free toys and affordable prices. Hall's roll call disrupts the premature declaration of equality or justice that some assume was exhibited by the election and reelection of the first Black President. She troubles this assumption by reminding the audience that the President is one person in a long and continued legacy of unfreedom and injustice.

In returning to the text of the play, I include Hall's stage directions for the very final moments of the play because they allude, by way of the lighting, to the drastic shift the play will take in its conclusion. Thus far the play has documented an undressing of King for the purpose of reminding the audience of what he was able to achieve even though he originally "just wanted to be a minister in [his] small church" (Hall 52). Included in their entirety, her directions illustrate the arrival of King as we remember him—both those alive during his life and those

who only came to know him after his death—fully suited, eloquent beyond comparison, mesmerizing, powerful, and profound. Hall directs,

*The good, the bad, and the ugly of America continue to proceed like a fluid mental freeway into the very edge of now and perhaps beyond. It's like a river with no levee and the images flood our senses, our mind, and our heart. The sound and the fury of it all rises to a frenetic peak until BOOM! CRICKLE! CRICKLE-CRACK!! A flash of lighting illuminates the stage. And suddenly **King** stands in the deep dark blue of the blackness, trying to take his rightful place in the universe among the stars. He is looking over our heads. Past us, through us, floating above us in the silence. (Hall 62)*

Roberts walks to the center of the stage as it begins to rise and suddenly, he stands before us on an elevated pedestal. What seems effortless because it occurs seamlessly is the change in his voice. His voice deepens as he embodies King fully, grabbing the attention of our memory. This is the King that we have been waiting for. Yet, why in a play about humanizing King, and unveiling all of his relatable faults, place him on a pedestal and give a speech in the final moments? Why play directly to our already established memory of him now?

In other words, if the last eighty-eight-minutes onstage sought to temper our image of King as a saint, placing him directly on a pedestal, and fully suited while giving a speech that exhibits his exemplary eloquence, would seem inconsistent with the original project. King is captivating as he speaks his last lines:

walk towards the Promised Land, my America, my sweet America
with this baton I give to you, this baton I shall no longer carry.

Because you are the climbers, the new carriers of the cross. I beg you, implore you, don't give in and toss it off. On this here mountaintop there is beauty to behold. America, my America in black, red, white, blue, brown and gold. Canaan is calling! Calling for you to come...Oh, America, my America, your Promised Land is so close, and yet so far away, so close and yet so far away, so close and yet so—. (Hall 62)

Bringing the famous King that we knew all along and carried with us in our memory at this moment, and juxtaposing him with the more ordinary, human King that we have come to know in the past eighty-eight-minutes produces a more complex understanding of the man himself as well as the way we remember him. Hall forces us to see King differently and then see him again. Perhaps, Hall suggests that “if we hear again his voice, and listen once more to his enduring faith, even as he confronts death, we just might successfully conquer the death and grief in our own souls and in our nation. And we might just resurrect the hope we need to inch even closer to the Promised Land he saw” (Dyson xii). Put differently, it is as if “here art is perceived as an act of removing things from a world in which they have become inconspicuous and seeing them anew” (States 22).

Whereas many writers critically employ the genre of historical fiction or drama to revisit stories that were largely silenced in the pages of American record, Hall instead invites us to reconsider one of the most well-known figures of the twentieth century. In seeking to disrupt or dismantle a story we all thought we know so well, Hall's play fulfills what Brandi Wilkins Catanese calls

“performance’s affective potential” because the story she stages influences the types of discourse we may have. Through the singular image of a press n’ curl and the repetition of a name, Hall’s stage does what critical theatre should: it creates an opening, where through live performance, audiences are able to reconsider not only what King’s life and death meant, they are also reminded of, to return to Edwards, the “arduous, undocumented efforts of ordinary women, men, and children [to remake] their social reality.” And certainly, Hall encourages us to critically reimagine the individual positions we all currently occupy as well as our own tremendous potential to enact genuine and necessary change.



Image 1.3: King (Adrian Roberts) in Katori Hall's *The Mountaintop*, directed by Anthony Haney in Palo Alto, March 2011; photo by Mark Kitaoka

CHAPTER FOUR

“She Could Plant Herself into the Ground”: The Migration of Shahrnush Parsipur’s *Women Without Men*

Just before five in the evening on the twentieth of May, 2014, a video was posted online that resulted in the arrests of all involved in the production. The video, titled “HAPPY: Tehran Pharell William’s Fans,” featured three women and three men dancing on rooftops, in alleys, in apartments, and in stairwells. A message following the music video read: “We have made this video as Pharrell William’s fans in 8hrs, with IPHONE 5S. ‘Happy’ was an excuse to be happy. We enjoyed every second of making it. Hope it puts a smile on your face” (Rezaian).

I begin this chapter by referencing this specific moment because it at once illustrates the exchange between America and Iran and simultaneously reflects the enormity of what becomes mistranslated in the movement of that exchange. Headlines such as “Young Iranians Arrested for Being Too ‘Happy in Tehran⁴⁰,” and “In Iran, happy gets you arrested⁴¹” reflected the popular American consumption of the video and the subsequent arrests as an oversimplification of the context of the video. The story contained in these headlines focuses primarily on the repressive actions of the Islamic Republic of Iran, where, according to the

⁴⁰ This is a headline from a *New York Times* blog.

⁴¹ This headline appeared in a *CNN* blog.

headline, any expression of happiness is deemed criminal. Most importantly, these reductive headlines also undermine the voice and potential of the project itself⁴².

On the basis of spending much of their adult lives in the Islamic Republic of Iran, it is fair to argue that there are few more acutely aware of the potential consequences of producing and distributing a film that challenges the socially constructed and gendered codes of behavior in Iran, that are mandated by law, than the group involved in the music video. And yet, they did it anyway. In particular, the three women in the video chose to dance publicly (which is illegal) and do so without their scarves (also illegal). What is lost in the Happiness-is-Punished-in-Iran narrative is the courage, strength, creativity and resistance exhibited by the Iranians who were aware of the consequences, but chose to participate anyway. Even more, based on the frequent presence of American news clips on Iranian television, it can be argued that Iranians are hyper-conscious of their representation and portrayal in American media. Thus, I argue, their decision to compose a music video for a popular American song by a popular American artist attempted, in some way, to reshape the imagined interpretation of Iranians.

⁴² As Jason Rezaian wrote in “Arrest of Young Iranians in ‘Happy’ Video Reflects Iran’s Complicated Power Structure,” the differences in the public response from Rouhani and the subsequent arrests illustrate disagreements within the power structure. It must be noted that Rezaian, a correspondent for the *Washington Post*, has been held in prison in Tehran since July 22, 2014. The charges against him remain unclear.

Beyond the boundaries they pushed against in Iran, they also sought to define themselves against the heavy marker of anti-American-hostage-taker.

What is lost when the focus is shifted from the individuals to the response of the government is the potential for a more critical reading of the video that might notice the subtle ways some gendered norms are being resisted through the video. None of the women are wearing scarves to cover their hair, but some of the men and women take the scarves and utilize them differently—tying them around their foreheads as headbands. In this way, they are both wearing and not wearing an object that is enforced by law and has historically operated as a signifier in the country. Two of the men in the video wear manteau-style overcoats, worn by many women because it abides by the law to cover but is not as consuming as the long chador. Conversely, the women wear what might be considered as menswear: suit vests, button-down shirts and a blazer that is removed to reveal a short-sleeve t-shirt. However, because the entirety of the narrative emphasizes the state's official response, the subtle ways this group attempted to subvert gendered norms as well as their usage of social media to connect with a massive audience is lost from view. The narrative focus, perhaps ironically, only reified the exact stereotype of the Islamic Republic of Iran—and by extension, Iranians as “dour, dire and dreadful...[and] single-mindedly obsessed, to the exclusion of all else, with religion and revolutionary revenge” (Davis 7). Thus, the journey of the “HAPPY: Tehran Pharell William’s Fans” video from Iran to the U.S. aptly

illustrates the tension between production and consumption, purpose and perception, original and translation. The latter always comes to shape the former.

The central focus of this chapter similarly explicates the shift in narrative focus when a text moves from Iran to America. I examine the translation of Shahrnush Parsipur's 1989 novella, *Women Without Men*, and more specifically, the transformation of that text when Shirin Neshat translates it into a film. I am most interested in the factors that come to shape and influence the remaking of the original text. This is not an argument about quality or worth or which was better and which was worse. This chapter is less interested in articulating differences insofar as the simple utilization of the disparate mediums guarantees a shift. Instead, I am interested in what the major alterations reveal about perception and popular knowledge when considering the geographic relocation of the text. Both women grapple with haunting and suffocating absences in different historical and geographic contexts. For Parsipur, this is the long silenced taboo of female sexuality and specifically virginity, and the consuming power the ideology has on women's mobility. For Neshat, this is the ghost of the 1953 coup d'état, and the privileged amnesia of this moment in America.

The original text from which Neshat draws the basis her film examines the lives of five women in Iran. Each woman is introduced separately through brief chapters that read like short stories. The women in the text seek a new life. Mahdokht transforms into a tree so that she may reproduce without losing her

virginity. Faizeh and Munis, 28- and 38-year-old virgins are raped during their pursuit of a life without oppression. Farroklaqa kills her husband after she grows tired of the limits he places on her mobility. Zarinkolah, a sex worker, is seriously concerned about the fact that only she is beginning to see men as headless. For different reasons, the five women meet in an orchard in Karaj and develop their own short-lived community. Parsipur ends her novella the way it begins with short stories describing the women's new lives: two get married, one becomes a mountain of seeds and travels the world, one becomes smoke, and one becomes a schoolteacher. The novella blends magical realism as well as a shifting temporality of timelessness and specificity, making it a challenging text to translate into film.⁴³

The informal consensus regarding the film adaptation of the novella reflects a heavy dismissal. Some share the sentiment that Neshat's film took too many freedoms in her adaptation. Others suggest that Neshat's differences betray even the title of the book and misrepresent the relationship between the two texts. Neshat completely omits one major character who happens to be a human tree.

⁴³ While the presence of magical realism is not the focus of this chapter, I do want to cite a theory of the usage of magical realism that appropriately speaks to Parsipur's project. In *Moments of Magical Realism in US Ethnic Literatures*, Sandin and Perez explain that "Through momentary and infrequent 'dramatic shocks' of magic, US ethnic writers expose a fundamental discontinuity in communal versus institutional memory, bringing to the fore the violent foundations of social life. It is as if the shock of magic lies in the revelation that reality, as is, is an insufficient barometer of lived experience....The ethnic American subject, then, is haunted doubly: historically, by an inscrutable past that he or she must learn to read through the hints and fragments that remain, and socially, through his or her own ontological location in the Real where s/he is rendered ghostly by violent and systemic exclusions" (Sandin and Perez 4).

Munis does not even enter the garden. Zarrinkolah dies instead of becoming a lily. The gardener's role is reduced with such a heavy hand that it is forgettable. Faizeh rejects Amir's proposal and does not become his second wife. Munis cannot read minds. Nobody gets married in the end. Farrokhlaqa's poem is not included. Amir does not kill Munis, though he does still bury her. I have heard, multiple times, that Neshat's film is deeply problematic in its portrayal of Iranian women, of Iranian men, of a Muslim society. I have also heard the criticism that Neshat is at times insensitive to the potential of her work being appropriated to contribute to an already well stocked rhetoric that imagines Iranian and Muslim men in particular in a specific role. The visual images in the film resurrect specific anxieties many Iranians in the diaspora experience. More specifically, Mino Moallem elaborates, many Iranians in the diaspora

have aligned themselves with the prevailing anti-Islamic racism by claiming the radical separation of Iranian culture from Islam. The romantic notion of "Persianness" and a selective belonging to the glorious age of the Persian empire, removed from modern Iran, have become the most convenient means of ethnic identification and of protection from the everyday racism experienced by the Iranian diaspora. (7)

Moallem articulates a translation of Iranian culture that occurs in the geographic move outside of Iran, and arguably, most specifically within the U.S., though Iranians living in Europe and elsewhere would agree that the contemporary fear of Islam has a pervasive reach. To align oneself with "anti-Islamic racism," as Moallem suggests, reveals the extent to which individuals internalize the racist

and Islamophobic narratives that have become normalized. The continual reference in the American media to the Middle East as a specific site or locus of fear and evil has severely influenced the ways individuals claiming that space as a homeland can freely engage with their heritage.

In terms of organization, this chapter is placed last in my dissertation because it attempts to build upon many of the elements present in the previous chapters. The dialogue between the original text and its film remaking contains disparate performances of memory that reveal how memory operates in different spaces and contexts. This chapter expands upon knowledge that Chapter One highlighted as it seeks to grapple with histories in Iran and also America that remain unspoken. As in Chapter Two, the specter of the prison is a tangible influence, as Parsipur was imprisoned for the ideas contained in her novella. Lastly, in attempting to think through the distinct stakes of being an Iranian-American feminist in solidarity with Iranian feminists, this chapter pulls also from the theoretical framework of Black Feminist thought.

In this chapter I argue that when the text *Women Without Men* travels from Iran to America, the shifts that occur in Neshat's remaking illustrate the desire to separate from the negative stereotypes about Iran. In this way, this chapter critically engages with the film as a provocative site of a performance of exilic cultural memory. I explore how these differences in the text result not from the move from paper to film, but rather the geographic movement of Iranian to

Iranian-American. In the first section, I read Parsipur's novella as a text that troubles the socially constructed value placed upon female virginity and aligns the control over the body with the simultaneous challenge over the control of the land. In other words, by engaging with the temporal specificity of 1953 in a text about the limited mobility of women, I argue that Parsipur imagines the challenges for liberation as connected. In the second section, I examine the centrality of 1953 in Neshat's rendition to argue that the move to the diaspora reshaped the focus of the original text. By looking also at a popular television series that articulates the concerns of Iranians in exile, I illustrate how Neshat's version similarly responds to existing tensions in the diaspora. Lastly, in the third section, I consider how the image of the veil becomes the provocative object in reading the differences of stakes in being a feminist in exile.

DISMANTLING SOCIAL CONSTRUCTS

Munis thought about how for thirty-eight years she had been looking out the window at the little garden, assuming that virginity was a curtain. When she was eight years old, they told her that God would never forgive a girl who lost her virginity. Now it had been three days and two nights since she found out that virginity is a hole, not a curtain. Something inside her had broken.

—Shahrnush Parsipur

The willingness to follow ghosts, neither to memorialize nor to slay, but to follow where they lead, in the present, head turned backwards and forwards at the same time. To be haunted in the name of a will to heal is to allow the ghost to help you imagine what was lost that never existed, really. That is its utopian grace: to

encourage a steely sorrow laced with delight for what we lost that we never had; to long for the insight of that moment in which we recognize, as in Benjamin's profane illumination, that it could have been and can be otherwise.

—Avery Gordon

This section explores Parsipur's alignment of the socially constructed ideology of female chastity with the 1953 coup d'état that overthrew the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh. I argue that in writing a novella of resistance against the culturally imagined limitations placed on female mobility and setting it within the specific historical context of British and American claims on Iranian resources, *Women Without Men* suggests a critical perspective on the relationship between the two invasions. In other words, Parsipur's novella demands a reckoning with the potential parallel between the two types of control over body and land. I argue that she aligns the fight to reclaim the land and resources from colonial powers with the fight for women's liberation from the constrictive socially constructed ideologies. It is precisely in this space that Parsipur inserts her narrative and presents a perspective that troubles the boundaries separating modes of liberatory thinking. In this section, I investigate how ideologies of female virginity circulate and gain power as well as how Parsipur's text dismantles these constructions. Secondly, I interrogate the presence of 1953 in the novella to suggest that the temporal specificity has much to offer.

Parsipur's novella suggests that as an ideology, virginity is dually silenced and simultaneously always already present through the restraint the very notion of it places on a woman's maneuverability. Virginity cannot be discussed, challenged, or questioned, but it is always there. It is as an ideology an constitutive instrument of early education that establishes specific boundaries beyond which the female body cannot cross. The two excerpts placed above serve as a point of entry into a consideration of Parsipur's discussion of virginity. The first epigraph illustrates the depth of the loss Munis experiences when she learns that virginity is not what she had been taught and thus believed. It becomes clear that this is not just a myth being dismantled or debunked, but that a much deeper loss in knowledge occurs. This destabilizing moment suggests the extent to which what she had been taught about virginity, "a lie perpetuated by her family" frustrates her experiences and mobility (Karim 158). For example, she reflects upon the many trees she did not climb in her youth, for fear of damaging her virginity. Though slightly comical, the image of a thirty-eight year old woman remembering how as a child, she "gaze[d] longingly at the trees, wishing she could climb one" but never did, serves a metaphor for the pervasive power placed upon a young woman's virginity and subsequently, her mobility (Parisipur 30). In this way, mobility is understood as both the physical limitation manifested in the inability to climb a tree or ride a bicycle and also, by extension, the inability to fully participate as a individual outside of the burdensome marker of female. Thus

through Munis's reflection of her lack of mobility as a young girl, Parsipur articulates how the position of female became an overdetermining marker that prohibited movement.

Through the image of a "head turned backwards and forwards at the same time," the second epigraph that accompanies this section illustrates the possibilities that Parsipur's text creates. The language of haunting that Gordon supplies is immensely useful in thinking through the "social violence" that characterizes the psychological control placed on virginity in the Iranian cultural context as well as the importance of a "willingness to follow [the] ghost" of the 1953 coup in a critical engagement with the texts (Gordon xvi, 57). I utilize Gordon's words here also to contribute to a meditation on digging into the past as a mode of grappling with the present. The ideology of virginity operates as a form of haunting for Munis insofar as she recognizes the loss of something "that never existed, really."

In her critique of the emphasis placed on chastity, Parsipur establishes a difference between the knowledge that is passed on and taught from mother to daughter, and the knowledge that Faizeh gains independently through reading a book.⁴⁴ Through a conversation with Faizeh, Munis exposes her beliefs, sharing

⁴⁴ Parsipur illustrates how women played a critical role in the dissemination and maintenance of these social constructs. Through the juxtaposition between the knowledge gained from a mother and the knowledge gained from a book, Parsipur compares access to information within and outside of the home. Laws created outside of the home shape what occurs within the home. And

that “my mother [said] if a girl jumps down from a height she’ll damage her virginity. It’s a curtain, it can be torn” (Parsipur 26).⁴⁵ Faizeh’s disagreement becomes validated through her literacy, as she says “no. I read about it in a book. I read a lot. It’s a hole” (Parsipur 27). It is after this moment when Munis stands upon the roof staring down at the pavement that she will soon meet, and expresses her “cold rage” and the feeling that “something inside of her had broken” as a result of carrying false knowledge about her own body for thirty-eight years. She then becomes a character that is both dead and undead, as she leaps to her own death, but continues to experience life, eventually seeking knowledge through reading “*The Secret of Sexual Satisfaction or How to Know Our Bodies*” from “cover to cover” and “again and again” (Parsipur 32-33).⁴⁶ When she returns home after a month has passed, she enters, claiming, “I’m not the same person that I was before. Now I know a lot” (Parsipur 33). Through the act of leaving her home against the instructions of her brother, and the pursuit of reading, Munis is able to “reclaim her body and her mind and transform herself” (Karim 158).

Parsipur’s critique of the culturally constructed value placed upon virginity that manifests itself as a controlling presence is very much synonymous with what Farzaneh Milani refers to as “sharm.” An ideology “deeply rooted in

yet it is only through moving beyond the home space that a character gains access to alternative knowledge.

⁴⁵ Note: All textual references from *Women Without Men* are derived from the 2004 Feminist Press edition.

⁴⁶ Munis dies a second time in the novella when her brother stabs her shortly after she returns from her month long disappearance. When she is brought back to life, she is able to read minds. This new skill allows her to immediately reject and dismantle any lie told to her.

Iranian culture,” the concept of *sharm* “involves both an internal state and an external behavior” (Milani 52). Challenging to translate and define, this social value “accompanies feelings of embarrassment, shyness or self-restraint and a woman’s public self-erasure” and rewards “such virtues as chastity, silence, seclusion, and obedience, it immobilized their bodies, muted their voices. It sanctioned the submissive silences of domesticity.” Moreover, considering the author herself, “even to this day, Parsipur, a foremost novelist is bitterly criticized for her lack of *Sharm*” (Milani 52-53). Her novella was banned

the same year it was first published (1989)... because of the perception that it was un-Islamic and contained unseemly phrases about virginity. The boldness with which she writes about a number of taboo subjects including virginity, rape, prostitution, and resistance to male domination was the principal reason for her two arrests after the book’s publication. (Karim 135-136)

I situate Milani’s thorough articulation of a challenging concept housed in just one word here to consider the depth and complexity of the ideology that values virginity. In the selections reproduced above, Milani explains how multi-layered this belief is, and also how it does not simply reside in abstaining from pre-marital sex, but is also a code of conduct that links virginity to being both silent and obedient.

When the critique against the ideology of virginity is understood in this way, *Women Without Men* can be read as an attempt to intervene in the process of continuing to reproduce ideologies of womanhood that are restrictive and

suffocatingly violent. As noted previously, the knowledge that Munis gains is from her mother. Through this transaction, Parsipur elucidates the ways that ideologies such as sharm are transferred and reproduced. Even Faizeh, who is able to attain an awareness of virginity that is more accurate, is still very much wedded to a woman's worth being measured by her chastity. It is her sister-in-law's accusation of her loss of virtue that angers Faizeh so much that she wants "to go to Mrs. Mahjabin to get a certificate of virginity and frame it on the wall" (Parsipur 26). The desire to "frame it on the wall" bespeaks the extent to which the value of virginity has come to represent also her ability to participate in what Moallem refers to as the "civic body." She explains that this is "an abstract body that is made public and politicized in a way that displays the connections between individual and collective identities, and that is marked as a space of inclusion or exclusion. In the process of nation-state building, such corporeal inscriptions put in place a system of signs that marked transgressive and dangerous bodies to delegitimize and criminalize them" (Moallem 28-29). Thus, the desire to frame a certificate of virginity on the wall participates in a process of marking bodies as either "transgressive and dangerous" or as model citizens and actors who uphold the values of the state. The official documentation required in this hypothetical act of framing it on the wall performs unity with the state. While gossip, her anger at her sister-in-law's accusation is rooted in her understanding that being unchaste would render real consequences of exclusion.

Similarly, Parsipur is critical not only of the impact the emphasis on virginity has on an individual female, but the association of a family's honor to a daughter or sister's chastity that allows the subject of virginity to be not a personal issue, but a family one. When Munis returns after her month-long disappearance, her brother suspects that she has lost her virginity and thus reasons that she must be killed. Karim argues this "scene conjures the notion of honor killing (whereby male relatives feel justified in killing their sisters/daughters for their bringing shame on the family), and Parsipur identifies Amir with the irrational and total investment that Iranian men, particularly male relatives, often have in policing women's bodies and their sexual purity" (Karim 158).⁴⁷ The purpose of delineating the pervasive quality of the ideology invested in female virginity is meant to suggest the ways that this haunts the experiences of specific characters in the text, and reveals by extension, a general, cultural haunting. Recognizing the collusion and complicity of family members and the larger community is important because this highlights the perpetual reinforcement of these ideals.

Furthermore, Parsipur critiques the importance placed on a woman's virginity that often requires a performance of chastity to secure the perception of

⁴⁷ This is a scene that Neshat does not reproduce in her film. As Parsipur describes, "[Amir] took the fruit knife from the lunch table and stabbed Munis in the chest" (34). This is important to note because one of the criticisms viewers have of the film is Neshat's rendering of Muslim men. Amir is a far more violent and controlling figure in the novella, which renders the critique of his character in the film as actually a poor reading of the original text. This also highlights a tension with visual representation.

maintenance of this ideology. In other words, the novella illustrates that there “is no alternative,” such that even if a woman individually refuses measuring her worth in her actual chastity, there is an expectation to perform. This can be seen when Munis’s brother decides to marry a woman he perceives to be the expression of ideal womanhood (Parsipur 15). He describes her as the ideal woman: “she’s eighteen years old, very beautiful, soft and quiet, modest, shy, kind, diligent, hard-working, dignified, chaste, elegant, and neat. She wears a chador, always looks down when she’s in the street, and blushes constantly” (Parsipur 41). He adds, “it’s obvious from her appearance that she won’t be unchaste”(Parsipur 42). However, when Munis rises from her second death, she gains the skill of reading minds, granting her access beyond the performance. Confronting her brother and his new wife, she reveals that the young woman who performs perfect womanhood received “an abortion from Madam Fatimi” the previous year (Parsipur 51). This example suggests the necessity of maintaining a specific appearance. It also suggests the absurdity of an ideology that values or privileges virginity when it can be performed in this way. The confrontation with her brother and his subsequent shock implies that had she not exposed the young bride’s past, he would have no way of knowing; thus furthering her critique against measuring the value of both a woman’s, and by extension, her family’s worth with something that is somewhat unknowable.

Echoed within the tradition of Iranian women writers, the concept of measuring the value of a woman's worth erupts elsewhere in writings from the diaspora. Following the success of her first graphic novel, *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi published *Embroideries*, a graphic novel that examines the tragedies and triumphs in the love lives of a group of Iranian women who have gathered for tea at Satrapi's grandmother's home. Though the title is seemingly an allusion to sewing, *Embroideries* is actually a euphemism for hymen reconstruction, a popular procedure in Iran often sought to regain the illusion of virginity. The inside cover of the novel describes the plot: "stories about, among other things, how to fake one's virginity, how to escape an arranged marriage, how to enjoy the miracles of plastic surgery and how to delight in being a mistress" (Satrapi). Satrapi's grandmother begins the novel with a story that illustrates the critical importance of performing chastity. She recalls the distraught confession of her childhood friend: "I'm going to be married in 19 days. My husband will know that I'm no longer a virgin. Everyone will know! My father will kill me! Help me, I beg you, do something!!" Faced with the challenge of recovering her friend's lost virginity, Satrapi's grandmother concocts a solution: "here, take this little razor blade," she tells her friend. "The night of your honeymoon," she continues, "you squeeze your thighs tightly, you cry out very, very loudly and, when the time comes, you cut yourself a little, but just a very little bit! There will be a few drops of blood. He'll be proud of his virility, and you'll keep your honor intact"

(Satrapi). The placement of the story as the first in a series of women's confessions, reveals the importance placed upon virginity and how the need to perform has figured into the daily lives of these women.⁴⁸

Satrapi's graphic novel is also read here against Parsipur's contention of the limited political possibility for Iranian women. Parsipur argues that the value placed upon female chastity is damaging to a woman's ability to participate politically. She explains:

I believe women have had to be preoccupied with notions such as virginity and it has been a real barrier to their spiritual and intellectual progress. They have not been able to express themselves politically; that's my concern for Iranian women and what some of my works touch upon. (Karim 141-142)

In her statement, Parsipur draws a direct link between a consuming need to perform virginity and the impact this has on a woman's ability to be engaged with intellectual, spiritual or political concerns. One way of reading Satrapi's graphic novel would posit it as an example of an absence of the intellectual, spiritual or political and doing so in a way that can be read by a western audience as an alluring look behind the veil into the sex lives of "these beautiful and seductive women" (Satrapi). Another way of considering the graphic novel is as an occasion for sharing strategies of resistance against the pervasive ideology that

⁴⁸ I am looking also at *Embroideries* alongside *Women Without Men* because in some ways, Satrapi delineates what Parsipur's title promises. Satrapi's graphic novel is a narrative that assumes a conversation that is exclusive to women and indicates the ceremony of this by the announced exit of the men that serves as an opening for conversation. Similarly, the entrance of the male figure at the end of the novel ultimately concludes, or silences the stories.

narrowly defines a woman's worth and existence to her chastity. The reading that the preoccupation with virginity results in an inability to participate politically raises the question: how do we define what political involvement looks like? In other words, though their form of protest does not overthrow the existing ideology in a way that would radically revolutionize the system of thought, they do find a way to perform resistance that impacts their individual experiences.

Parsipur's linking of the "preoccupation" with virginity and the inability to participate politically serves as a productive transition into considering her inclusion of the coup of 1953 in her novella. As mentioned previously, the political presence is less overt, as the actual coup is not explicitly named⁴⁹. Elsewhere in the novella, Parsipur weaves characters into a timeless narrative that has been described as magical realism. Consequently, her sudden choice to ground certain characters in a specific temporality is noticeable. She begins Faizeh's story by writing, "at four o'clock in the afternoon on the twenty-fifth of August, 1953, after days of hesitation, Faizeh made a decision. Silence no longer had any meaning. Had she waited longer, everything would have fallen apart. She had to go defend her rights" (Parsipur 13). The introduction of Faizeh's conflict blends specificity and ambiguity, as readers are made aware of the exact moment, but must assume what "rights" she may be defending. Set in isolation, this

⁴⁹ This would really hinge upon one's cultural and historical fluency on Iran. Karim argues in her "Afterword" to *Women Without Men* that the details of the exact year and month of the coup would be legible to Iranian readers.

paragraph reads as a call to resistance against the coup d'état because of the temporal context. Yet she moves past the bodies of the protestors on the streets to stage her own protest against the gossip hurled against her. While the declaration of her recuperation of her rights operates as an allusion to the resistance against the coup d'état, she is instead resisting the accusations against her maintenance of the social construct. The juxtaposition of the coup and virginity through the declaration made by Faizeh suggests that "during the coup some women had political ideas, but other women were caught up in gossip and in monitoring other women's 'reputations'" (Karim 160). Certainly, one way of reading the juxtaposition of Faizeh's focus on the performance of her chastity amidst the enormous political coup occurring beyond her front door, would be to argue, as Karim does, that "Parsipur shows readers how limited, in fact, women's political participation was" (Karim 160). Another possible way of understanding Parsipur's novella allows us to perceive the fight for female control over their bodies not as in lieu of, or separate from, but rather as directly connected to the fight for decolonization on a the larger national stage. In other words, I argue that by reading these two acts of resistance as simultaneous, *Women Without Men* articulates how women were not ignorant of the political consequences of fighting for control of the land's natural resources but rather were always already engaged in a battle for control. While the accusation against Faizeh is considered gossip, it cannot be read or understood with the same weight at such a rumor might in the

U.S., for example. The reason Faizeh is so disturbed by the accusation is because there are real stakes for her. Certainly, the extent to which some women go to perform virginity supports this. If the fight for control over the land's natural resources is to be understood as vital to the livelihood of the Iranians, the maintenance of this ideology must be imagined as similar. Faizeh is often read as a frivolous character because she is consumed by proving her virginity. But to read Faizeh as unintelligent or void of political urgency forecloses the capacity for a complicated analysis on the lengths her character must go to "defend her rights."

NESHAT'S TRANSLATION

Film adaptations seem to face impossible prejudice on the basis that they will always be at odds with a reader's individual imagination. A film text is always already interpreted for the viewer, whereas a literary text provides a framework and demands from the reader an active participation in constructing scenes. No scene in a film can ever truly do justice to a moment in the book because the film denies the reader an active role in imagining and repositions the reader into a role of passivity. Furthermore, as disparate vehicles, they expect from and give to readers in ways that differ on the simple basis of medium. For these reasons, differences in Parsipur's novella and Neshat's film rendition are to be expected.

However, I argue that the major differences in the two texts are not a result of the limitations of the medium, but rather the translation of an Iranian text into a distinctly Iranian-American text. In other words, Neshat's decision to privilege the ghost of 1953 in her film rather than the critique on female virginity is a consequence of her geographic location as well as the differences in the stakes of the two projects. I begin this section with a brief historical overview of the conflict for control over the land's natural resource before moving to a reading of Neshat's own politics in the film. Lastly, I perform a close reading of an Iranian-American character in the popular HBO series *Homeland* to explicate the visual tension of being Iranian in America and explain how it directly relates to Neshat's choice to privilege the history of 1953 over Parsipur's focus on the ideology of female virginity.

In their collaborative piece titled "Writing Iranian Americans into the American Literature Canon", scholars of Iranian studies Persis Karim and Nasrin Rahimieh consider the necessity of remembering 1953:

This pivotal moment is remembered as one in which the United States, through the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), funded and staged a coup to remove from power the popular and democratically-elected prime minister, Mohammed Mosaddegh. Mosaddegh's nationalist agenda, particularly his vision for the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry, had set him on a path of confrontation both with the Shah and British government, which controlled Iranian oil reserves and production through the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. The CIA-backed coup toppled Mosaddegh's government and reinstated the Shah. Long etched in the collective Iranian national memory, this episode, mostly forgotten by many

Americans, fueled an anti-American sentiment that eventually erupted in the 1979 revolution. (8-9)

In the passage included above, Karim and Rahimieh illustrate the haunting qualities of this moment in the collective Iranian imaginary. Their usage of the phrase “collective Iranian national memory” is provocative because it explains an inclusive haunting and awareness of this moment regardless of an individual’s position or relationship with the current regime. When Parsipur reproduces this moment and recalls this memory, there is a larger aim to reckon with the ghost of the 1953 coup to imagine an alternative possibility for the future of Iran. With a “head turned backwards and forwards at the same time,” Parsipur invokes the symbol of Mossadegh, and the moment of democracy in Iran, for which he serves as a synecdoche, to revisit this ghost and converse with the possibilities that never before existed as a way to speak to the present potential (Gordon 57).

Extending further to before the overthrow in 1953, in *All the Shah’s Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* Stephen Kinzer provides a brief history of the original deal developed by a British billionaire and the then Shah of Iran. Kinzer writes,

In 1901 [William Knox D’Arcy] signed an agreement with the Shah of Iran, Muzaffar al-Din, under which he assumed the exclusive right to prospect oil in a vast tract of Iranian territory larger than Texas and California combined. To secure it, he gave the Shah, whom the British minister in Tehran described as ‘merely an elderly child,’ the sum of 20,000 [pounds], an equal

amount in shares of his company, and a promise of 16 percent of future profits. (Kinzer 48)

This deal had severe consequences for the land of Iran as well as the inhabitants.

Kinzer explains,

During its first few years in existence, Anglo-Persian [now British Petroleum (BP)] drilled scores of wells, laid more than a hundred miles of pipeline, and extracted millions of barrels of oil. It established a network of filling stations throughout the United Kingdom and sold oil to countries across Europe and as far away as Australia. Most impressive of all, it began construction of what would for half a century be the world's largest oil refinery on the desert island of Abadan in the Persian Gulf. (50)

As can be imagined, Abadan became a fast growing destination for those with a direct interest in oil. "From its private Persian Club," Kinzer writes, "where uniformed waiters served British executives, to the tight-packed Iranian workers' quarters and the water fountains marked 'Not for Iranians' it was a classic colonial enclave" (50). In deep contrast to the luxury and excess enjoyed by the British, the Iranian laborers "lived in slums and long dormitories with only primitive sanitation. Shops, cinemas, buses, and other amenities were off limits to them" (Kinzer 50). As the division between the wealthy and poor grew, so did the internal resentment of the British presence. Following a labor strike in 1946, Mohammad Mossadegh, then a deputy in the Majlis, wrote a law that was passed the following year, "forbidding the grant of any further concessions to foreign companies and directing the government to renegotiate the one under which

Anglo-Iranian was operating” (Kinzer 52). This marked the beginning of the long battle over the control of the land’s natural resource.⁵⁰

He suggests that “as militants in Washington urge a second American attack on Iran, the story of the first one becomes more urgently relevant than ever. It shows the folly of using violence to try to reshape Iran” (Kinzer xi). Kinzer supports the urgency in resurrecting this history because, he argues,

if the United States had not sent agents to depose Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953, Iran would probably have continued along its path toward full democracy. Over the decades that followed, it might have become the first democratic state in the Muslim Middle East, and perhaps even a model for other countries in the region and beyond. That would have profoundly changed the course of history—not simply Iranian or even Middle Eastern history, but the history of the United States and the world. (Kinzer ix-x)

Many decades later, and many miles across the globe, Neshat reflects on these moments of tension as critical to the future, now present climate in Iran. In an interview with David D’Arcy, Neshat draws a connection between the coup and the subsequent Islamic Revolution that drastically altered every layer of existence for Iranians. “My belief,” she says, “is that the 1953 coup paved the groundwork

⁵⁰ In his speech on October 15, 1951, Mossadegh argues: “I must add here that the population living in the oil region of southern Iran and around Abadan, where there is the largest oil refinery in the world, is suffering in conditions of absolute misery without even the barest necessities of life. If the exploitation of our oil industry continues in the future as it has in the past, if we are to tolerate a situation in which the Iranian plays the part of a mere manual worker in the oil fields of Masjid-i-Suleiman, Agha Jar and Kermanshah and in the Abadan refinery, and if foreign exploiters continue to appropriate practically all of the income, then our people will remain forever in a state of poverty and misery” (123-124).

for the Islamic Revolution, and the beginning of the antagonism between the U.S. and Iran.” Of her film, Neshat explains, “We’re showing this film here because Americans have forgotten how criminal the behavior of their government has been” (D’Arcy).

In a separate interview, Neshat supports this claim once again and provides a more complicated explanation for her personal investment in this project. She explains:

as an Iranian, I’ve been very perplexed by the perception of Iranian culture by Americans ever since the Islamic revolution, and I found I wanted to return to this historical moment and touch on how the American government had a direct relation to the overthrow of a democratic government, which eventually led to the deep resentment of Iranians against Americans, and indeed paved the road for the Islamic revolution. (Edwards)

Neshat highlights the dubious position Iranian-Americans often occupy as a result of being privy to the ways in which political histories have been erased or (mis)reproduced with an understanding also of the knowledge that is either lost or produced to bolster a specific narrative and political agenda. More specifically, narratives that diminish any accountability for this moment as well as the resentment that followed, and instead focus exclusively on the Islamic Revolution as a project of widespread oppression and aggression find both an audience and a profit in the U.S.. Neshat is also responding to the many ways that the taking of American hostages in 1979 circulates as an origins myth for contact between the U.S. and Iran. Similarly, Karim and Rahimieh contend that

being bombarded with unfavorable and repetitious images of and headlines about Iran and Iranians has reinforced the Iranian American community's anxieties about their national affiliation. The Iranian diaspora's simultaneous embracing and disavowal of its origins is inextricably linked to the political realities of the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries and is equally inflected by the community's desire to maintain a double allegiance to both its point of origin and its new home. (Karim and Rahimieh 9-10)

Likewise, in her essay "Can the Memoirist Speak? Representing Iranian Women, Gender and Sexuality in Recent Popular and Scholarly Publications," Roshanak Kheshti critically articulates, "Iran occupies a mystified place in the Western cultural imagination, constructed as an object of fascination and contempt, desire and disgust" (Kheshti 51). In my reading of the drama series *Homeland*, I hope to illustrate how the divisive pull between "fascination and contempt, desire and disgust" as well as the "simultaneous embracing and disavowal" become embodied in the character Fara, a young Iranian American recruited into the CIA for her language skills.⁵¹ I argue that through various methods Fara is continually denied access to a home and a land and ultimately becomes discarded after performing her role as an informant.

⁵¹ *Homeland* is a six-time Emmy Award winning drama series that was first released on HBO in 2011. The first two seasons focused primarily on an ex-Marine's conversion to Islam during his time in captivity as a prisoner of war, and his subsequent acts of terrorism when he returns to the US. I use the term *subsequent* intentionally here, as his conversion to Islam is directly linked with his terrorist tendencies. The first two seasons observe the moves of terrorist organizations across borders. It is not until the third season that an entire country—specifically Iran—is named as a specific site or locus of terror. And, it is in the third season that the series introduces an Iranian female character.

In what follows, I explicate six significant moments in the arc of Fara's performance that include: her arrival and the terror her presence incites, her attempt to linguistically align herself with the CIA, her un-translated confrontation with an Iranian double-agent, her attempt to distance herself from the CIA that results in an uninvited home visit, a conversation with her father in which she declares herself as American, and ultimately her final scene in which the participation of her family still living in Iran is demanded. I focus on these specific moments because they illustrate the peculiar and precarious space that she occupies as both a threat and an informer. Moreover, I argue that her pursuit of being defined as American requires a reciprocal disavowal of her Iranian heritage. This reading is useful in understanding Neshat's choice to reimagine Parsipur's novella as a history of 1953 because it illustrates the types of narratives American audiences would be accustomed to encountering. Critical of these types of narratives, Hamid Dabashi succinctly suggests that

one might also propose that given the way the US propaganda machinery is operating ever since 9/11, it seems (both domestically and internationally) to be completely contingent on a mode of *momentary amnesia*, a systematic loss of collective memory, a nefarious banking on the presumption that no one is watching, no one is counting, and no one is keeping a record of anything—that history is dead, as is memory, recollection, experience. (2)

It is amidst this social forgetting that Neshat's films attempts to speak. Despite the differences the film may have with the novella, Neshat's subsequent staging of the ghost of 1953 establishes the film as a performance of memory that intervenes

or disrupts the collective forgetting that would be necessary to the machinery that Dabashi references.

The third season of *Homeland* begins 58 days after the CIA headquarters are bombed, killing 219 Americans. Fara arrives by taxi, and as she steps into the street her body becomes directly juxtaposed with the remains. In her first appearance on screen, her body is aligned with the devastated ruins, and as she looks around at what is left, the music completes the assumption that her physical presence represents a direct contrast to the mourning that occurs in the wreckage. The haunting presence Iran specifically occupies in the American imaginary, delineated by Kheshti, as the source of both “fascination and contempt, desire and disgust,” becomes mounted onto her body in her first appearance onscreen. As she enters the CIA building the shots focus either exclusively on singular parts of her body, or in the few shots that feature her entire body, she is filmed from high above. The feeling of her being watched is tangible. As she moves, the camera follows over her shoulder and catches the tense glances of two men passing by. As the camera angle moves upward and then back again to catch the worried glances of even more individuals passing by the music is tense, serious, and looming. When she moves through the actual security gate, with badge lifted in hand, her own awareness of this moment is as clear as two men carefully observe her credentials. Through her first moments onscreen, Fara is named a suspicious character, as she is in continual contrast with her surroundings.

In her first conversation with Saul Berenson—a protagonist that the viewer is meant to associate with—her position as an outsider is verbally enunciated. Saul is a character that the viewers are meant to align themselves with because he embodies the ideal spectator.⁵² When Fara's attempts to posit questions about their task results in an eruption, Saul speaks on behalf of the ideal spectator and announces verbally what had been alluded to only through specific gazes and the music thus far. To add, their conversation is split completely between low angle and high angle shots, displaying their extreme difference in status. Saul expounds on the impossibility of perceiving Fara outside of the marker her headscarf represents. In response to her initial findings that the terrorist attack did not originate in Iran, his uncharacteristically explosive response reveals a critical tension. He says,

And you know what else, while we are talking about an event that left 219 Americans dead on the ground and what you are doing about it which is apparently nothing. Forgive me. You wearing that thing on your head? It is one big fuck you to the people who would have been your coworkers except they perished in a blast right out there. So if you need to wear it, if you really need to, which is your right, you better be the best analyst that we've ever seen and don't tell me there's nothing. (Gordon and Gansa)

In the final section of the chapter, I delve more deeply into the symbol of the veil. Here, I want to draw attention to how the headscarf arrived before Fara had an opportunity to speak. I draw upon Hortense Spillers's theoretical work on the

⁵² To borrow from Jill Dolan, "the male spectator's position is the point from which the text is most intelligible; the representation constructs the ideal (gendered) spectator at the point of its address" (Dolan 291).

myriad of terms utilized to name black female bodies as a point of entry for reading the way in which Fara has been marked. Spillers writes,

I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name....Embedded in bizarre axiological ground, they demonstrate a sort of telegraphic coding; they are markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean. In that regard, the names by which I am called in the public place render an example of signifying property *plus*. In order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings. (Spillers 203)

To be nameless and yet always already marked or defined suggests a preemptive presence. To have arrived before arriving or to have one's existence always already noticed without introduction undergirds Spillers's statement and exemplifies the way that Fara is defined. Spillers expounds upon the meanings derived from and carried by one's physicality alone. The "markers so loaded with mythical prepossession" undermine the potential to be seen, understood or read as anything beyond the confined space previously determined by a categorical naming. Although Spillers writes about black female bodies, I find it appropriate to invoke her work here because she elaborates on how the ability to live autonomously, or define oneself independently, becomes undermined for certain bodies because their presence always already signifies something else. In the following scenes that I include, I argue that Fara is never able to fully "come clean" or "strip down through layers" as even in her usefulness as an informant or

her attempt at participation in the state apparatus, she is never able to move away from the position of suspect.

After the exchange with Saul, Fara resituates herself and performs the role of informant, first by aligning herself with the agents in the CIA, but also most importantly, defining herself as American and capable of grieving for the individuals who were killed in the attack. Her attempt is rebuffed by the white and male executives of the bank she is investigating. Fara asserts,

Your bank? It has been trafficking in human misery since the opium wars and that is not an aberration, it is not a mistake that is your business plan. You move money for embargoed governments or phony charities, where it goes you don't want to know as long as you get your fee. But we're telling you where it went this time: into an SUV full of C4 that blew up right outside this building three months ago. You passed the blast site on your way in. We know the funds moved through your bank, we need to know where they originated. (Gordon and Gansa)

He replies, doubtfully, "*You do?*", emphasizing her difference and reminding her of her status. Her affirmative response is only ignored as the executives leave the room and as one retorts: "All respect m'am. In this country that isn't the way we ask for help" (Gordon and Gansa). His response and their collective exit refuse her ability to mourn for the American bodies, and remind her that her physical presence is marked as un-American.

Furthermore, the ghost of 1979 is invited to speak during a brief history lesson Saul compiles for Fara through photographs of the dead. By way of

explaining to Fara the severity of their capturing of Javadi, he shows her a series of photographs that display the murdered, bloody bodies of Javadi's victims. The bodies he murders are those that were meant to be saved, to be safely removed from Iran at the moment of revolution because they were deemed an asset to America. To clarify, Saul is not gesturing to the many bodies that were held in prison, that were executed in Iran before, during, and after the revolution—bodies that Fara would know, and would recognize. The bodies he mourns, and thus values and measures are those that were defined as more American than they were Iranian. As Fara meets Javadi for the first time and declares the economic crimes he has committed in English, he responds in Farsi.

You should be ashamed of yourself. You work for the enemy.
 These people are not the enemy. [Fara replies.]
 So why are you dressed like this? As if this place is Tehran?
 (Gordon and Gansa)

Saul steps in, halting the conversation. This moment specifically illustrates how in an exchange with the only other Iranian (aside from her father), she is named as an enemy. Fara comes to occupy a duality, seen as an enemy by both, equally un-American and un-Iranian. And, again here, her physical presence becomes a marker for how she is defined.⁵³

⁵³ Critical to note is that I only have access to this conversation because I understand Farsi. The director made the decision to not translate into subtitles the loud, intense exchange between Fara and Javadi. While I can only guess at the reasons this choice was made, I argue that the consequence of the decision to keep this moment foreign, achieves a couple of results that are interesting for our discussion. First, to return to the ideal spectator, I am not it. This was not meant

Moreover when Fara learns that instead of being held responsible for his crimes (that she recognizes as being committed against both America and Iran), Javadi will be reintegrated back into Iran, where he will perform the role of a double-agent, infiltrating the Islamic Republic to pursue American interests. In response to the news that he will be planted back into the government to act as an undercover agent, Fara exclaims, “Was this always the plan?” Her question is unnoticed and unanswered so she must repeat herself. Finally, Carrie responds, informing Fara, “well, you should be proud. Your work made it all possible” (Gordon and Gansa).

As Fara begins to digest not only what it might mean to occupy the position of a “native informant” but also the inconsistency of justice occurring around her, she is unable to attend work. The scene begins in the home she shares with her father, a home that from the music to the furniture to the abundance of photographs appears very much invested in the maintenance of a connection to a homeland. A tall man in a suit appears at her front door.

You called in sick two days in a row, is something the matter?
 Migraines.
 Yet you drove to work yesterday.
 Yes.
 Where you sat in the parking lot for over half an hour before
 deciding to leave again.
 I was hoping that it would go away. (Gordon and Gansa)

for me to see. Secondly, in terms of Fara, it continues to portray her as an object of suspicion, but it also denies her the occasion to speak.

His unannounced and uninvited entrance into her home space illustrates the unlimited expanse of his power as well as the threat if she does not comply. The aching feeling that Fara experiences of being continually under surveillance is palatable. The feeling she has of “hoping that it would go away” becomes symbolic of the anxiety of simultaneously “embracing and disavowing,” and of simultaneously recognizing that her presence within the CIA is a direct result of her cultural identity that also marks her as a suspect. The man’s entrance into her home is critical because it illustrates that there is no way she can fully extract herself from the role she performs.

As a consequence of the uninvited home visit, Fara is forced to reveal to her father that she does not work at a bank but is instead a language specialist for the CIA. In defense of her decision, she explains, “Baba, an attack happened.” Her father responds by vehemently reminding her that her actions have implications in Iran, pleading: “we still have family in Tehran! Your uncle, his wife and children! They will be added to the list to be hanged!” Her response illustrates a significant turning point. When she says, “I’m an American” she implies a complete disavowal and defines herself solely by her allegiance to U.S. (Gordon and Gansa). Her verbal naming of herself in this moment, in this way, imagines that she cannot be both American and Iranian. Through her declaration, she names the death of an aspect of her identity.

Fara makes her final appearance in the last five minutes of Episode 10. Working alone in a dark room, only the silhouette of her body is able to be seen, foreshadowing the social death her character experiences. Her face is almost entirely cloaked in the darkness of the room. Carrie enters to speak with her: “Fara, you are one of the few people in the building that know that Mahjid Javadi is an agency asset.” Fara’s immediate response of “I didn’t breathe a word to anybody” underscores her permanent feeling of anxiety, of always already being read as a suspect. Carrie invites Fara even further into the interior, but as a cost, explaining that “Javadi is only half the play, there is another phase” and that the remainder of the operation will take place in Iran. Carrie’s request is clear as she says, “Fara, you have an uncle in Tehran, your father’s brother...” Fara interrupts Carrie’s suggestion, “No. You are asking me to put my family at extreme risk. You know you are. You forget I know firsthand how an operation can go sour. Tell the truth. You would never ask your own family to do this.” Carrie’s reply is telling, “I might. All we need is a place to meet in the city—a defacto safe house. Fara, we have a brother agent in the field, soon to be in mortal danger. Don’t we him every chance to get out alive?” (Gordon and Gansa). The specificity of her language, and in particular, invoking the word brother exudes a level of inclusion as well as manipulation. The fact that the scene cuts before she is able to answer suggests that she ultimately implies that Carrie wasn’t asking, she was demanding, and Fara must involve her family.

Although some may contend that as a form of entertainment, a television series and the images it produces and circulates should not be given much regard, let alone serve as the subject of serious study, I argue that in their devotion to marketing “realness”—and by that I mean—their dogged attempt to illustrate the “based on a true story” component of their narratives, they actively pursue a blurred line between fantasy and fact. In the hybrid space of historical fact and generous fantasy in which they emerge, programs like *Homeland* begin to constitute and replace the actual narratives on which they claim to be based. In other words, these performances stage a fictional realness and consequently gain both power and longevity as audiences digest images that purposely disguise their existence as a form of entertainment. The slippage of fact and fiction are swiftly woven together so that an audience consumes both without a clear distinction between the two. Moreover, when theorist Theodore Adorno wrote that “today the commercial production of cultural goods has become streamlined, and the impact of popular culture upon the individual has been concomitantly increased” (Adorno 160), he articulated the ways in which individuals form a connection with popular culture and thus experience a significant influence as a result. “Above all,” Adorno believed, “this rigid institutionalization transforms modern mass culture into a medium of undreamed of psychological control. The repetitiveness, the selfsameness, and the ubiquity of modern mass culture tend to make for automatized reactions and to weaken the forces of individual resistance” (Adorno

160). And even more, Adorno continues, “the ‘hidden meaning’ emerges simply by the way the story looks at human beings; thus the audience is invited to look at the characters in the same way without being made aware that indoctrination is present” (Adorno 167). In this way, the ‘hidden meaning’ as it relates to the character Fara, and her treatment as a human being, would reveal that she cannot exist as she is denied access to both a home and a land.⁵⁴

My reading of *Homeland* illustrates the types of popular characterizations of Iranian-Americans that are responsible for the production of types of knowledge that remember certain histories in place of others. Put differently, this television series delineates what Neshat attempts to disrupt through the production of her film that articulates a history that has been forgotten in the U.S. In returning to the Neshat’s film, it is critical to note that she makes a specific choice to heighten one character’s presence for the purpose of speaking directly to an American audience that would have minimal knowledge of the coup d’état. It is through Munis’s revised political activity that Neshat is able to introduce a new character that figures prominently throughout the film and provides brief history

⁵⁴ To borrow from Laura Mulvey, “going far beyond highlighting a woman’s to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself” (Mulvey 274). While Fara is welcomed inside the space of the CIA and brought into the interior, she is always already looked at as a threat. The gaze focused on her is always dubious, as the very aspect of her identity allows her entrance as an expert, also defines her as a threat. While she must denounce any affiliation with Iran, she is simultaneously kept on the margins in the US. As a consequence of never being exonerated of her suspect-status, evident in her inability to officially mourn, reveals that the title itself, *Homeland*, cannot possibly apply to Fara, as she is denied both the security of a new home and the identification with a former land.

lessons that seek to disrupt the privileged amnesia that is able to forget the coup. In almost every scene, Munis is joined by the presence of an ominous voice emerging from the radio. The radio is Munis's most prized possession and becomes a character of its own because it serves as her connection to the outside world and also narrates the basic events that occurred during the coup for Neshat's audience. The voice explains:

In reaction to the military intervention by the British who blocked the Iranian oil tanker Akhgar Prime Minister Mossadegh stated that these provocations won't weaken the Iranian people's will to control their own resources...He stressed that Iranian oil belongs to Iranians and that international law protects the use of Iran's natural resources as an undeniable right of the Iranian people.
(Neshat)

The radio becomes a character that gains instant authority on the screen because it is never embodied through a specific character. The choice to relay these history lessons through the never seen but always heard voice emerging from the radio endows the news that is relayed with a unique power that a character would not exhibit or obtain. Through her choice to utilize the radio in this way, Neshat reveals her awareness of the marker that would undermine a presence of a character speaking these history lessons. In this way, her reliance on the radio to perform this role becomes evidence of the tension of being Iranian in America.

THE VEIL AS SIGN

In “Nature of the Linguistic Sign” Ferdinand de Saussure writes, “a word can always evoke everything that can be associated with it in one way or another” (851). He continues, “a particular word is like the center of a constellation; it is the point of convergence of an indefinite number of coordinated terms” (Saussure 851). In this section, I argue that in the U.S. the veil operates as a constellation always already carrying meanings that limit the potential for a more complicated understanding of its presence and purpose. In other words, the image of the veil is so deeply wedded to the image of oppression—and also fear—that it greatly influences possible readings of its appearance in Neshat’s film. The limitations of a discourse on the veil in the U.S. context would have to consider the ways that it has become the ultimate symbol of oppression for women and based on renderings of it in mainstream U.S. media, there does not currently exist room for any other possibilities.

Through a reading of Faizeh’s process of growth throughout the film and more specifically, the removal of her chador that seems to punctuate her transformation, I argue in this section that Neshat’s film rendition serves as a primary example of the severe differences in stakes for Parsipur and Neshat. While Neshat specifically speaks to an American audience, as her film is meant to disrupt the social forgetting of the coup d’état of 1953, her choice to have one character’s growth narrated by her removal of her chador leads to a simplistic

understanding of the veil. In what follows, I contextualize the symbol of the veil in Iran and offer an alternative reading that complicates Faizeh's rejection of the chador. This section meditates on how the veil is simultaneously tremendously complicated in the context of Iran and sweepingly reductive in the U.S. context—and what this means for feminist scholarship that traverse these spaces.

When Neshat's (re)imagines Parsipur's novella, she expands and alters Faizeh's journey of self discovery through her lengthier inclusion within the garden space. The Faizeh that emerges at the conclusion of the film is visibly transformed first in her posture and the strength of her stride as she walks beyond the garden walls. A viewer will notice that she is no longer wearing her chador, which appears visually in severe contrast with the hunched, terrified woman who once gripped the black cloth tightly around her face. In addition, Neshat adds a scene in which Faizeh stands before a mirror and undresses, producing a reflection of her standing completely topless. While the journey of an individual appreciating one's body and sexuality is a beautiful and powerful process, it would be problematic to ignore the specific context the removal of her chador occupies in Iranian cultural, political and religious history.

A meditation on the removal of Faizeh's chador must be framed first within the context of Iran with respect to the ideological symbol of the veil. In her fascinating text on the encounter of Western feminism in Iran, Nima Naghibi

traces the history of the state's desire to veil or unveil Iranian women.⁵⁵ She

writes:

the first moment is in 1936, when the ruling monarch Reza Shah Pahlavi legislated the Unveiling Act, which prohibited women from appearing veiled in public. The second is in 1983, when revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini implemented the Veiling Act, which prohibited women from appearing unveiled in public....In both instances, legal and feminist discourses proffered the Iranian woman as a visible marker of the nation as either secular, modern, and Westernized, or alternatively, as Islamic, modern, and anti-imperialist. Beneath these two polarized representations lies a desire to possess and to control the figure behind the veil by unveiling or re-veiling her. (Naghibi 37-38)

Naghibi points to an important absence in the state imposed mandates surrounding the veil. Missing from the discussion of the unveiling or veiling is the woman herself and the potential for her ownership of her own body and the choice to cover or not cover herself without permission from the state, and also without serving as a metaphor for the nation. In both of these moments of state intervention, a direct call is being made from Iran to the West through the bodies of women. The message translated is one of either acceptance or rejection of a conception of Western secularism, depending on the government in power. Moreover, attention must be placed on the violence that occurs in the mandate of wearing the chador as well as the previous mandate to not wear the chador. Both had dramatic effects on the mobility of women outside of their homes, but only

⁵⁵ It is worth noting that, although it may have been a choice made by the University of Minnesota Press, Neshat's photograph titled "Unveiling" is on the cover of Naghibi's book, *Rethinking Global Sisterhood*.

the latter, that of being forced to cover oneself, finds legibility in the West. By this I mean to suggest that the veil is singularly seen as an object forced upon women as a symbol of oppression. As a result of the reductive reading, the prohibition of the veil would likely be read as positive and liberating.

In “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”

Chandra Talpade Mohanty offers a useful reading of the differences in veiling during the revolution and after. Mohanty explains,

Iranian middle-class women veiled themselves during the 1979 revolution to indicated solidarity with their veiled, working-class sisters, while in contemporary Iran, mandatory Islamic laws dictate that all Iranian women wear veils. While in both these instances, similar reasons might be offered for the veil (opposition to the Shah and Western cultural colonization in the first case and the true Islamization of Iran in the second), the concrete meanings attached to Iranian women wearing the veil are clearly different in both historical contexts....To assume that the mere practice of veiling women in a number of Muslim countries indicates the universal oppression of women through sexual segregation not only is analytically reductive but also proves quite useless when it comes to the elaboration of oppositional political strategy.
(Mohanty 34)

As Mohanty notes, the value of unveiling to the colonial project was certainly not unfamiliar to forces leading the Islamic Revolution, and the initial recommendation (which of course shortly after became law) for women to take to the streets wearing black chadors signified a direct dismantling of the Western presence in Iran. Although lengthy, and though specifically concerned with

Algeria, Frantz Fanon's analysis is especially useful for reckoning with the symbol of the veil in the West. He writes,

Every rejected veil disclosed to the eyes of the colonialists horizons until then forbidden, and revealed to them, piece by piece, the flesh of Algeria laid bare. The occupier's aggressiveness, and hence his hopes multiplied ten-fold each time a new face was uncovered. Every new Algerian woman unveiled announced to the occupier an Algerian society whose systems of defense were in the process of dislocation, open and breached. Every veil that fell, every body that became liberated from the traditional embrace of the *haik*, every face that offered itself to the bold and impatient glance of the occupier, was a negative expression of the fact that Algeria was beginning to deny herself and was accepting the rape of the colonizer. Algerian society with every abandoned veil seemed to express its willingness to attend the master's school and to decide to change its habits under the occupier's direction and patronage. (Fanon 42-43)

In this passage, Fanon connects the removal of the veil with the "success" of the "Western penetration," demonstrating the process of mapping the nation onto the bodies or "flesh" of women such that the only interpretation of a removal of a veil would be a disowning of one's culture and nation. It does not seem that space exists, at least in his analysis, for a woman to decide on her own to not wear a veil without the act symbolizing an acceptance of Western dominance. Instead, the veil becomes a larger symbol that operates beyond the singular experience of the individual wearing it.

Certainly, this linking of the morality of the nation to the bodies of women has historically served a critical role in defining the social and political moment in Iran. Negar Mottahedeh illustrates how the linking of women's bodies to the state

led to the last government imposed reform. She writes, “it is evident in his writings that for Khomeini, women’s bodies marked the site of contamination. They were the very fissures through which foreign impurities were introduced into the nation” (Mottahedeh 1). Mottahedeh’s analysis of Khomeini’s writings is useful in thinking through the state’s logic, but it also provides for a way of reading the value placed on virginity and how Parsipur is critical of how a woman’s chastity moves from being a personal issue to the concern of the entire family to something protected or punished through law. Importantly, after the veiling was enforced by the state, “when a woman looks in the mirror she sees a part of the state, part of the public space. In the Islamic republic of Iran women’s bodies become part of the object (Islamic space), which is constructed so that ideology will seep into the very being of those that traverse it” (Varzi 113).

If a woman must see the state when she looks in the mirror, how then do we read the moment in which Faizeh looks into the mirror and sees herself topless? Rather than a reading that implies a removal of her veil as a necessary component to her growth, I argue that the mirror becomes a tool through which Neshat disrupts the gaze upon her and resituates the focus to render the woman looking at herself.⁵⁶ In the repeated image of her viewing herself, Neshat

⁵⁶ Furthermore, Neshat uses mirrors throughout the film to artistically add a layer of depth to scenes as well as situate the characters themselves in a position of spectator. In addition to the artistic value, mirrors figure throughout the film during marked moments for each of the women. The moment of viewing herself nude represents an occasion of growth for Faizeh, but elsewhere and earlier, the other women with whom she shares the garden similarly experience their own

interrupts a viewer's gaze and instead positions Faizeh as her own ideal spectator. This move removes the state from decision-making gaze. In this way, the removal of the chador symbolizes her personal choice beyond the influence of the state. When Faizeh observes her nude reflection in the mirror, it could be implied that this is her recognition of herself, her "infant stage", and in this way, it is only through her abandoning of the veil, and again, all that it symbolizes and signifies, that she comes into being.⁵⁷ What then is the larger implication of becoming, or becoming conscious through the sight of oneself nude?

Neshat adds a scene in the orchard that features Faizeh watching herself being raped. In the scene, she watches herself being raped by the two men who follow her outside the coffee shop. When this originally occurs in the film, Faizeh explains to Munis that she has shamed her family, and cannot ever return home. As a result of the violence done to her that takes her virginity, Faizeh believes that her honor no longer exists, nor does her ability to participate in her family. As she later reimagines her rape, she reclaims her body after the violence has been done to her in the mirror scene that immediately follows. Recognizing the larger

reflection. Farokhlaqa stares into her reflection in the exact moment that she announces her disgust for her husband and decides to leave him. Although Zarrinkolah never speaks in the film, she did exhibit a specific ritual in the scenes that took place in the brothel. Before and after each male client, Zarrinkolah would look at her reflection in the mirror. To either tweeze her eyebrows, apply lipstick, spray perfume, or wash her face, she returned to the reflection of herself as if to suggest that the reflection authenticated her existence. In this way, the usage of mirrors can be understood as a disruption of the ideal spectator. The women appear in front of the mirror for themselves to see.

⁵⁷ See Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience."

context of her nudity in the film allows for a reading that suggests that she has in some way reclaimed her body and begin a process of healing that requires her to define her body on her own terms, outside of the markers of the state and the socially constructed ideologies. In other words, it is not so much that Faizeh is moving from chador to topless in one step, but that there is actually a process of healing that requires Faizeh to view herself beneath all the literal and figurative layers so that she can heal and move forward.

The limitations of this specific moment speak for a U.S. audience to how this removal can be read and interpreted reductively by some as a rejection of Islam and by extension, an Islamic nation-state such that the only way Faizeh can be liberated is through abandoning her faith because her religion and the state are rendered as one. As the symbol of the veil is always already interpreted as oppressive in the West, understanding the stakes in terms of audience is critical. Naghibi isolates the removal of a veil as historically the place where Western feminists focused most attention:

Western women mobilized to their advantage the popular significations of the veil as evidence of women's subjugation and claimed the unveiling, hence liberation, of Muslim women as their prerogative. In Western discourses, the practice of veiling was represented as tantamount to imprisoning women; it was enforced by the male patriarchy and symbolized a dogmatic faith that enlightened Europeans had discarded in favor of a democratic and secular system of government. (37)

Knowing that Neshat produced this film for mass distribution amongst a specifically American audience, what then do we make of the choice to have Faizeh remove her chador? While being aware of the prospective audience, the specific context and moment in the film deserves attention as well. However, is it also possible to read this moment in a non-linear way, considering that perhaps this is not indicative of an abandonment of her religion? And also, why would it matter if she did in fact abandon her religion?

Why does Faizeh's freedom require beginning with nudity, or the disavowal of the veil? This potentially results in a specific reading of the veil that aligns it directly with liberation through its removal that ultimately ignores and disrespects the legion of Muslim women—both in and out of Iran—that recognize the choice to wear the veil as a sacred and important expression of their own beliefs. Naghibi refers to an already existing reading of the veil that is deductive and anti-Islamic, explaining, “there is a substantial body of work on the veil in the diasporic Iranian feminist community; while some Iranian feminists acknowledge the complexities of the issue, a regrettable number tend to fall back on the discourse of the veil as oppressive, thus endorsing a colonial feminist position of the unquestioned naturalness of the unveiled body” (63). This aligning the removal of the veil with a character's growth in Neshat's film deduces the complexity of women's politics to a piece of cloth. To a Western audience, the

veil occupies a place as the penultimate symbol of oppression and thus the removal in Neshat's film opens itself up to an easy appropriation as anti-Islamic.

The stakes of a dialectic that potentially finds freedom in rejecting Islam present in the film is imperative to examine, especially when it is clear that the film is produced for American consumption. Moving beyond Faizeh's emancipatory removal of her chador, when we look elsewhere in the film, we find moments that with even a shallow level of analysis slip dangerously toward anti-Islamic propaganda. The film begins with a call to prayer⁵⁸ and the character, Munis, pacing back and forth on the roof. The prayer continues and Munis jumps. Her descent is slowed significantly so that she can say, "now I'll have silence." She continues, confessing, "and I thought the only freedom from pain is to be free from the world" (Neshat). These opening moments juxtapose an Islamic call to prayer and a woman cloaked in a black chador leaping to her death. The only sound the audiences hear is the call to pray, thus inferring that it is this she wants to silence through her death. Munis's jump is returned to three times throughout the film, suggesting also that she is a character who is living death as her death is always already present. In the scene that follows, her brother enters the scene and destroys her radio, threatening to "break her legs" if she leaves the house. As I noted earlier, Neshat actually softens the character of Amir. That said, the

⁵⁸ Historical inaccuracy. Unless the family lived directly next to a mosque, it is unlikely that the call to prayer could be heard from the rooftop of a home as it is portrayed in the film, which leads to another question: why exaggerate or inflame the presence of Islam in this way?

transition from a character on the page to a character on the screen immediately endows the visual representation with a type of power. In other words, while readers of the novella may not interpret Amir as a representation of the Iranian Muslim man, somehow this becomes a risk in the film adaptation. In the novella, Amir was able to exist as a singular character but in the translation to film, the character of Amir seems to problematically contribute to an already imagined Muslim man in an era of overt racial profiling.

This leads to a rather large, but critical question as we witness the publishing success of many Iranian women living in exile whose various forms of art present representations of Iranian women. How does the diasporic Iranian feminist participate in this conversation? What is the role of the diasporic Iranian feminist? In an interview included in Lila Azam Zanganeh's book *My Sister Guard Your Veil; My Brother, Guard Your Eyes*, Neshat alludes to this tension:

Westerners have this sense that Iranian women are submissive victims. But they're not victims, and they're certainly not submissive. In fact, feminism functions in Iran within very different parameters than in Western countries. Iranian women don't compete with men—they don't try to replace them. And while they're fighting hard against oppression, they often get their way, they produce their own solutions. Now, somehow, this whole idea got me into trouble; I would be in places where I'd show my work, and Iranian women in the West would come and see it and they'd get up and say, 'How dare you say that Iranian women are not victims?' What I am saying is this: through their resistance and strength, Iranian women have had a voice in Iranian society, and they continue to have a voice, perhaps more so today than ever before. (46-47)

What Neshat points to here is an already existing interpretation of the Iranian woman, and the difficulty in presenting new ways of seeing through her art. Unfortunately, Neshat could also be read as collapsing all Iranian women into one category. By her own admission, the conflict that she enters with other Iranian women in exile is rooted in the misconception that there is or has been a singular experience. There is also the underlying construction of a binary here, in which Iranian women are represented as either victims or heroines. Art that can only imagine this binary reduces or ignores the possibility for individuals to possess their own “complex personhood” as well as the fact that “even those who live in the most dire circumstances possess a complex and often contradictory humanity and subjectivity that is never adequately glimpsed by viewing them as victims or, on the other hand, as superhuman agents” (Gordon 4).

In her memoir about her experience in prison, Parispur writes about her own complicated relationship with the headscarf. After leaving Iran, she is asked to give a speech at an event for the Iranian Women’s Studies Foundation. During her speech, she attempts to utilize the object of the headscarf as a symbol for her complicated social and political position. Parsipur explains,

I had no intention of saying anything that could be construed as an attack against Islam. Islam is the faith of ninety-nine percent of the people of Iran, sixty percent of whom live in far-flung rural areas with meager means and without the least comfort. They live relying on their faith. What’s more, Islam was not the cause of the ills in Iran. It was the fundamentalist interpretation of the faith that had brought about the tragedy that continued to unfold.

Meanwhile, I made a decision on how best to deal with the issue of hijab. At each event, I would walk up to the podium with a headscarf draped on my shoulders. I would explain that I was against mandatory hijab. Then, I would take the headscarf and cover my hair. At the end of my talk, I would take it off and leave the podium. This way, I hoped my audiences would know that I objected to hijab, but seeing me wear it, they would realize I was not free to speak openly. Some people understood this; many others did not and objected to my hijab. (Parsipur 197)

In her failed attempt to perform a symbolic protest through her usage of hijab, Parsipur explains how the hijab operated as such a heavy marker—“a point of convergence of an indefinite number of coordinated terms”—that the potential for the audience to understand her performance was greatly limited and undermined (Saussure 851). Her performance imagined that the audience would associate the object with oppression and understand that her speech was curtailed by the potential consequences in Iran so that she could not truly speak freely. Yet it became such a loaded marker that many could not even take that step with her. So offended by its presence, many were left confused by the statement she was attempting to make.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ In *Words, Not Swords: Iranian Women Writers and the Freedom of Movement*, Farzneh Milani narrates a similar failed performance when “wanting to strip the veil of its symbolic stigma, [she] had decided to teach [her] class at the University of Virginia covered in a chador” (203). Critical to note is that Parsipur reads the hijab as oppressive and was expecting her audience to see that and understand her political statement. However, similar to the argument in this chapter—that the meaning of the text shifts because of its translation from Iran to America—this performance becomes complicated because of its geographic location. Wearing the hijab (currently) in Iran is a law. It is not in the US. Yet, because of the popular reading of the veil in the American context, it is always already read as a symbol of oppression.

“The challenge” writes Naghibi, “for cross-cultural feminist understanding and exchange between Iranian, Western and diasporic Iranian feminists remains, particularly in light of the long and fractious colonial history of Western feminist intervention in Iran” (73). This is to say that there is the danger of reproducing the same types of encounters between the West and Iran that posited the West as a type of savior, whose ideologies of freedom would lift Iranian women out of the oppression that was defined by Western Feminism. Adding to Naghibi’s analysis, her usage of the words “understanding” and “exchange” seem particularly important. Recognizing and understanding one’s position of privilege is truly critical. Certainly, the stakes in what is said, as well as how and to whom, can be examined through Parsipur and Neshat’s different experiences with texts that for the purpose of comparison in this moment can be imagined as relatively similar. When Parsipur published *Women Without Men* in Iran in 1989, her work was banned and she was imprisoned. The stakes for her were struck on a very personal level and severely impacted her daily life. When Neshat released *Women Without Men* abroad in 2009, her film was warmly received by an international audience, granting her personal success and recognition.

Performances of memory like both versions of *Women Without Men* endow audiences with an opportunity to reconsider how the past continues to erupt in the present. Yet our understanding of the past and its relationship to the

present is complicated by the extent to which geographic locations shape the rendering of either temporal space.

EPILOGUE



Image 1.4: Tehran, 1953; photo provided by the Dabiran family

For 26 years, I have walked past this photograph never pausing long enough to consider its contents. And perhaps, even if I had, with the exception of my grandfather seated far left, I would not have even been able to slightly guess at faces of the others. Tucked neatly into a corner of my parents' bookshelf, this photo always managed to be upstaged by craft projects, school portraits or report cards.

What I mean to say is that we are all drawn to different projects for reasons that we cannot possibly know. When I agreed to give a presentation on Shahrnush Parsipur's novella in a graduate seminar at UC Irvine, I knew very

little about her text and even less about the coup of 1953. When a classmate offered a copy of the film I imagined my presentation might benefit from viewing scenes of the adaptation. I never thought that through my pursuit of this project and my attempts to salvage something that I saw of worth in Neshat's film, I would discover a family history that was unknown to me.

After his passing when I was two-years-old, the memories of my grandfather were forced into hiding by my mother's best intentions. The sadness that accompanied stories about him proved too heavy for sharing. So, when on that afternoon after watching Neshat's film, my mother turned to me and said, "I never told you the story of your grandfather and the year I was born," I learned what performances of memory can make possible. I learned also the critical significance of the work these artists do in resistance an overwhelming social forgetting of marginalized histories. Though the film, drawing its inspiration from the novella, brings to life ghosts that haunt the collective Iranian imaginary, performances of memory provide the occasion for the articulation of personal histories as well. These performances conjure a moment to pause and an opportunity for reflection. They offer an opening. They give us an excuse to remember what has been forgotten, intentionally or otherwise.

The first text I read as a student in this doctoral program was *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* by Saidiya Hartman. I was tremendously influenced and moved by how honest and reflective her work was

as well as its unique transgression of boundaries between individual and public histories. It was my reading of this particular text as well as the encouragement from many within the program that inspired this project. My hope is that it created an opening for emerging conversations on the influence cultural texts can have on the way that memory circulates and continues to shape lived experiences.

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