

Transfiguring: colonial body into postcolonial narrative

to get me out of the belly of my patriarchal mother . . . [distance] my eye from her enough so as to see her in a different way, not fragmented into her metaphoric parts. Crossing through the symbol while I am writing. An exercise in deconditioning that allows me to acknowledge my own legitimacy. The means whereby every woman tries to exist; to be illegitimate no more. (Nicole Brossard, *These Our Mothers*)¹

The silenced and wounded body of the colonised is a pervasive figure in colonial and postcolonial discourses, although its valencies obviously shift with the transition from colonial into postcolonial history. In the postcolonial process of rewriting, certainly, the trope of the dumb, oppressed body undergoes significant translations or transfigurations, which this chapter will examine in closer detail. In *Maru* (1971), a novelistic indictment of intra-black racism, the South African writer Bessie Head stakes out a number of epigraphic moments with which to begin the discussion.

Maru recounts the tale of a woman who learns to paint – to *figure* – and in so doing undergoes significant changes of status and position in her society: from having no place or recognition she becomes a figure in the community.² This character, Margaret Cadmore, is marginalised on a number of counts: she is a woman, an orphan and above all a Marsarwa (more commonly known by the derogatory term ‘Bushman’). Her experience exemplifies what Head understood as the hierarchies of prejudice that can operate within communities, including those which are themselves prejudiced against.³

Margaret Cadmore’s mother having died at the time of her birth, she is brought up by a white woman, by and for whom she is named. This woman, the first Margaret Cadmore, is inspired to adopt the child when, during a visit to a hospital and following an idiosyncratic habit, she sketches the dead mother of the child. She is thus confronted by the incontrovertible evidence of the woman’s humanity, something which contrasts starkly with the prejudice expressed by the wider Botswanan community for the Marsarwa. In an

unusual chain of impacted replications, Margaret Cadmore, the adoptive mother, reproduces an image of the biological mother, while also, in her act of adoption, claiming and 'reproducing' the child. She projects her values and her vision upon the child: 'environment everything, heredity nothing' is the creed she lives by (*Maru*, 13).

Lowest of the low, the negation of the negated, the daughter Margaret Cadmore is granted selfhood in so far as she is *re*-produced as image, not unlike her mother; in so far as she is filled full of another's subjectivity. This logic of replication is halted and reversed only when the second Margaret, the Marsarwa, takes charge of the process of replication, and, by beginning to paint, produces her own images. She effects a split between image and self, body/heredity and subjectivity. Some of the first subjects she paints are, significantly, the women of the community, whom she observes involved in 'ordinary common happenings' (*Maru*, 107).

As a corollary to this process, at the same time as Margaret is developing her art, her closest friend, Dikeledi, in many ways her double, becomes pregnant. 'Reproduction' at both levels, of image and of child, is in relation to *Maru* neither simple replication nor fulfilment, the achievement of wholeness. It is rather a separation, the creation of difference, the possibility of new meaning – in particular, the possibility of creating a new narrative of self, a self-authored tale of the everyday. Woman as sign of the extreme other, the definitive subaltern, becomes a sign-writer in her own right.⁴ The second Margaret follows with her pencil the 'carved wounds' experience has left around the eyes and mouth of her friend: 'her portraits and sketches [trace the] unfolding of the soul' (*Maru*, 108).

The figured begins to figure by figuring the other – itself. How might this concept, this narrative of transfiguration, or indeed self-transfiguration, be more closely related to the question of colonial and postcolonial bodily representation? Here I want to introduce the partial analogy for symbolisation under colonial conditions offered by the Freudian condition of hysteria (the 'partiality' will become clearer in a moment). I will take up the analogy once again when considering postcolonial self-articulation, applying it more directly under the specific aspect of the talking cure.

According to Freud, a key symptom of hysteria is the tendency to take metaphor literally or anatomically, as described by or inscribed on the body.⁵ Putting it another way, the hysteric expresses her condition through converting 'mind' to 'body', translating her fears and repressions into a language of body images. As Mary Jacobus in her own adaptation of Freud's theory points out: 'As hysteria produces symptoms, so symptoms produce stories. The body of the hysteric becomes her text', and hence the text of the analyst.⁶ Physical disorders are seen to enact the psychological distresses of the hysteric: most famously Anna O.'s phantom pregnancy is interpreted as unconfessed desire.

In colonial representation, exclusion, suppression and relegation can often be seen as literally *embodied*. From the point of view of the coloniser specifically, fears and curiosities, sublimated fascinations with the strange or 'the primitive', are expressed in concrete physical and anatomical images. The seductive and/or repulsive qualities of the wild or other, as well as its punishment and expulsion from the community, are figured on the body, and as (fleshly, corporeal, often speechless) body. To rehearse some of the well-known binary tropes of postcolonial discourse, as opposed to the coloniser (white man, centre of intellection, of control), the other is cast as carnal, untamed, instinctual, raw, and therefore also open to mastery, available for use, for husbandry, for numbering, branding, cataloguing, possession, penetration. Images of the body of the other are conventionally conflated with those of the land, unexplored land too being seen as amorphous, wild, seductive, dark, open to possession. Differently from the psychoanalytical scenario therefore, agency in this case belongs to the colonial/analyst, not to the colonised/patient (hence the only partial analogy).

Examples of such embodiment are fully present in the texts of the European explorers and travellers who prepared the ground for colonisation. Examples could be taken from as far back as the early colonisation of the Americas, but in relation to Head's continent of Africa, Mungo Park in his journal narrative of 'opening up' the Niger River sees the African women in the towns he comes across specifically as sexual bodies. Indeed, he describes with some relish the physical enticements they have to offer.⁷ As regards the 'Orient', the explorer Richard Burton demonstrates in his notorious accounts of his travels a specular fascination with the impressive 'venereal requirements and reproductive powers' of the 'Oriental' female compared to those of the male, as well as with the genital size and sexual prowess of African men.⁸ He quite explicitly exhibits the other as sexual body. In early nineteenth-century exhibitions of Saartjie Baartman, the 'Hottentot Venus' – like Margaret Cadmore, a Southern African extreme other – the fleshy, 'animal' black was represented to the eyes of Europe as a single female body. It was evidence as concrete as it was possible to obtain of the implacable physicality of the other woman.⁹

Under colonialism such representations of course offered crucial self-justifications of the imperial project. What is body and instinctual is by definition dumb and inarticulate. As it does not (itself) signify, or signify coherently, it may be freely or 'legitimately' occupied, scrutinised, analysed, resignified. The representation carries complete authority; the other cannot gainsay it. The body of the other can represent only its own physicality, its own strangeness – although that quality of inhering strangeness is again exclusively defined by Europe.

In a concrete illustration of this phenomenon, in a 1770s description by Captain James Cook of the 'Indians' – in fact, Maoris – of New Zealand, the

ultimate sign of their difference or weirdness is taken as their ‘tattooing’ – the marks scored upon their bodies. After having made observations in his journal of the physical stature and habits of the Maoris, and then of their alleged cannibalistic practices, Cook comes round to giving an account of their bodily lines and contours, in effect their tattoos. Decoration is converted into inscription; description becomes meticulous inspection. The Maoris have of course marked *themselves*, yet the Europeans here interpose themselves in the process, assuming agency and retracing these markings in their text. To offer a sample:

they have marks impressed by a method unknown to us, of a very extraordinary kind: they are furrows of about a line deep, and a line broad, such as appear upon the bark of a tree which has been cut through after a year’s growth; the edges of these furrows are afterwards indented by the same method, and being perfectly black, they make a most frightful appearance.¹⁰

The body of the Maori is seen as signifying its black difference. The other is body as sign, itself signed, furrowed and impressed, made to advertise its own unknownness and savagery.

Yet colonial enterprise did not stop at the inscription of the marked silenced body. It could, and in many cases did, go further and deeper, become closer, intrusive, a wounding, a violation. The enslaved or indentured body was often an engraved body, a bloodied form. Its mutilation denotes one of the more extreme forms of colonial marking and subjection. The difficulty here is that to speak of such bloody realities by way of literary representation can appear to distance and to sanitise them. Yet at the same time – and this must be the justification however meagre of commentaries such as these – to describe the colonial situation in this way is also to obtain some form of theoretical purchase on at once the importance and the near impossibility of self-articulation as resistance to colonisation. (By ‘self-articulation’ I intend a back-reference to the second Margaret Cadmore’s self-reproduction in the form of signs.)

J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Foe* (1986), correctly described by Gayatri Spivak as a ‘didactic aid’ staging the ‘undecidability’ of the margin, comments on the legacy of colonial figuring by representing the silence of the colonised body as, fittingly, a dumb, ravaged mouth.¹¹ In this narrative, a rewriting of aspects of Daniel Defoe’s novels, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Roxana* (1724), Friday the representative of the enslaved ‘wholly other’ is a figure literally silenced, made dumb like Philomel in the myth, his tongue plucked out. Cut, mute, disabled, Friday is locked in a silence that begs to be read as symbolic yet which, as the narrative unfolds, consistently – and rightly – sabotages signification, refuses to mean within the coloniser’s language. Struck dumb at some point in time that cannot be told and is unknowable, Friday remains outside European time, outside white signification, a cipher without an apparent historical point of reference, a character lacking definable character. As Susan Barton the chief

narrator, or female Defoe, puts it: 'The story of Friday's tongue is a story unable to be told, or unable to be told by me. That is to say, many stories can be told of Friday's tongue, but the true story is buried within Friday, who is mute. The true story will not be heard till by art we have found a means of giving voice to Friday' (*Foe* 118).

The forms of expression available to Friday are either silent or repetitive. He dances, whirling round and round (*Foe* 92); he plays one tune on the flute, one combination of notes (*Foe* 95). At a point towards the end of the novel, after painstaking writing lessons from Susan, he manages one letter, one character, which he writes over and over on a slate. The character is the exact opposite to 'I': it is 'o', the empty set, the empty mouth, the same figure as he traces in the turning dance, in the recurring tune. His writing effectively means nothing and yet it is (presumably) full of all the figuration he can muster. For the one silenced, the language of the master remains closed: signification can mean no more than signalling one's silence. Recalling the condition of the hysteric, Friday scarred, marked, excluded, remarked upon, has as his sole mode of expression a body language (rather than his body itself). Muted by his oppressors, Friday's dumb mutilation has now become its own sign: 'the home of Friday is not a place of words' (*Foe* 157).

Friday blots Foe's (or Defoe's, or Susan's) 'I' of autobiographical narrative with his own zero, his open empty mouth; he crosses the 'I' with a nought – but a nought can also be read as a full circle. Till the unspoken is spoken, the character Foe observes, we cannot come to the heart of the story (*Foe* 140). What he fails to realise, however, is that the unspoken themselves must speak this heart, and that their first sign, as with Friday, must be negation, the refusal to mean within the oppressor's symbolic system. The refusal represents a crucial taking of initiative. Friday's display of non-linguistic signs can be seen as his art, at once the denial of meaning and the intimation of another story. His inability to speak signals what Susan Barton and Foe cannot speak, yet his incapacity, his empty mouth, signifies potential plenitude as much as negation, 'silence, perhaps, or a roar, like the roar of a seashell held to the ear' (*Foe* 142).

Silence as negation – or as a fantasised potential, a not-yet-articulated fullness of speech. This is perhaps one of the key distinguishing features of the postcolonial: the acting out of paradox, the conversion of imposed dumbness into self-expression, the self-representation by the *colonial body* of its scars, its *history*. As confirmation of this, in postcolonial nationalist narratives of the last number of decades, images of the scrutinised, scored subject body have become the focus of attempts at symbolic reversal and transfiguration. Representing its own silence, the colonised body speaks; uttering its wounds, it strives to negate its muted condition.

This is ideally speaking a process not of reclamation only, but, importantly, of self-articulation, reconstitution through speaking one's condition, as with

the hysteric. The unspoken time with which the native body is loaded, with which it may be marked, is converted into language, often into autobiography, at once a fabricated story of the self and a self-recuperation. Signifying, the once-silent, apparently timeless subject body places itself within a syntax of history. Yet, it is helpful to remember, in practice the situation is not as all-embracing or as liberating as this description might suggest. Social exclusions dictate that *not all* colonised bodies get the chance – or an equal chance – to represent themselves. Indeed as Elaine Scarry has influentially argued, pain is a radically incommunicable experience, and the body in pain an absolute other which is rarely if ever brought into representation.¹² This notion is counterbalanced, however, by the assertion of the universality of the experience of suffering, undivided by difference, as in Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's reading of Scarry. Even so, discourses of post-independence nationalism and racial solidarity inevitably impose their own definitions of normative pain; certain dominant recuperative selves stand in place of others. There are consequently those among the once-colonised for whom the silences of history have not ended.

Considering, however, the ungainsayable self-representation of *some* colonised, the earlier analogy of the hysteric may be extended. If colonial iconography figured repression upon the colonised body, then postcolonial nationalist writing can be seen to equate with the hysteric's talking cure. As with the hysteric, reminiscence, the retelling of the past, brings release from that past. The object body, the formerly unspoken, exposed and denuded figure, is clothed with words; the subjected becomes the subject of its/their own narrative. The spokespersons and writers among those who were denied representation, by articulating their condition, experience themselves as figuring rather than as figures. They exhume the dead metaphors of their repressed condition, 'disembody the text [of the past] and discover what the picture covers'.¹³ Such transfiguration, because it involves self-representation, implies self-division, which is a condition of narrative. It unfolds in, and is structured by, time – a further definitive condition of narrative. Transfiguration, in effect, becomes the recuperation of the body through the medium of time-bound, self-reproducing narrative.

Yet, at least in its initial stages, the body in this narrative of nationalist recuperation remains a significant term. The tendency is first to locate and consolidate self-identity on the site of the whole, restored, healed body – whether the physical body or the national body, the body of the land. Like the hysteric, the early nationalist seeks completion, a seamlessness of subjectivity (or of history, of the nation-state). So the reversal of the sign of the colonised does not in the first instance necessarily imply an erasure or a scoring out of the native body image. The female body form, for example, that most fetishised and silent of body symbols, as has been seen, figures prominently in early nationalist/postcolonial representations. National wholeness, fusion with the maternal

and national body-land, suggests a hoped-for plenitude, a totality with which to subsume the denial that was colonised experience.

Under nationalism, the female body signifies achieved desire, ideal made flesh, rather than repressed fascination or neurosis. Yet, as under colonialism, the invocation of the body rests upon the assumption of predominantly masculine – and upper or middle-class – authority and historical agency. Inevitably, given that postcolonial discourses of self-determination have a considerable investment in concepts of self-making and of retrieving history, the gender and class specifics of such nationalist imaginings are often either endured or overlooked. The widely celebrated attempt to upturn the master–slave dialectic of colonial discourse reinforces the tendency. If the most grievous colonial violations were those inflicted upon the utterly objectified body, that of the subjected motherland, or of the dumb subaltern, nationalist texts invoke this body as the ultimate signifier of sacrifice endured.

So it remains the case that, as in other symbolic systems, femininity in nationalism ‘is experienced as a space that . . . carries connotations of the depths of night (God being space and light), while masculinity is conceived of in terms of time [national history and myth]’.¹⁴ As Nuruddin Farah graphically demonstrates in his (now tragically prescient) novel of Somali identity *Maps* (1986), within the symbolic make-up of the male nationalist, pride of place is held by a great mother ideal, a multimamma figure.¹⁵ The hero Askar’s entry into manhood coincides with his discovery of himself as national son to Mother Somalia:

something which began with the pain of a rite had ended in the joy of a greater self-discovery, one in which he held on to the milky breast of a common mother that belonged to him as much as anyone else. A generous mother, a many-breasted mother, a many-nippled mother, a mother who gave plenty of herself and demanded loyalty of one, loyalty to an ideal, allegiance to an idea, the notion of a nationhood – no more, and no less. (*Maps* 96)

Askar seeks fusion with the illiterate mother-as-body yet can do so only by objectifying it. In this predicament a central contradiction of postcolonial nationalist narrative is epitomised. Self-articulating narrative cannot deliver what it promises: a completely united and unifying history, an absolute identification with the national body. To conceptualise that fusion demands, in practice, self-division. To transfigure body into narrative, to escape from being a mere figure in another’s text, is to effect a break in the self. The talking cure, too, was predicated upon self-estrangement. Reminiscence is at once the retrieval and redemption, and the effective alienation, of the past.

Paradoxically, then, to tell a self-constituting tale implies the acceptance of the narrative (and deconstructive) conditions of temporality and lack. Such a paradox becomes perhaps most evident and extreme in those situations where

early post-independent nationalisms have been compromised, and transform into travesties of national unity, parodies of egalitarian ideals, where, in the emptying of national meaning, 'signifiers are prized loose from any signified'.¹⁶ No longer is the absolute consummation that the reconstitution of the motherland and the subjected body represented seen either as possible or as completely desirable. Too many have been left out of the process; too many bodies have as a result been discarded and abused.

As writers such as Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, Dambudzo Marechera and Ben Okri, among others, suggest, national wholeness has in many postcolonial contexts turned out to be little more than a dream or a folly; and national identity rarely anything but partial and split. The nation is in such cases regarded not so much as an ideal, an essential and necessary good, than as a necessarily imaginary composition, or even compulsion, as chapter 8 discusses at greater length. It is the product, constantly in flux, of a history of risks and chances and sudden reversals, rather than the outcome of a smooth historical flow from a determinate origin to a predetermined, preferably glorious future. The writers dramatise the intractability of postcolonial self-representation within the political and aesthetic languages of the colonial west. Indeed, from the point of view of Third World artists who are not part of an elite of any description, the nation itself, whether perceived as real or imaginary, may well appear as an irrelevance or a luxury. As Kwame Appiah has pointed out, to such artists one national cell of structural adjustment or neoliberal management will seem as good or as bad as another.¹⁷

And where a unified national narrative begins to fragment, so, too, does the iconography of the body. Where national histories are revealed as stochastic, divided, painful, where origins are obscure, the body, too, is exposed as fissured, reduced, violated. In Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), a dream-allegory of Nigeria's reiterative post-independence history, the symbolic spirit-child's Dad is repeatedly beaten almost to death and his body torn and severely bruised in a series of boxing bouts with ever more fearsome otherworldly opponents.¹⁸ As is also demonstrated in Farah's *Maps*, an ironic consequence of the single-minded effort at nationalist self-determination may be increasing divisiveness and a recurring process of self-doubling and self-defeat. In *Maps* Askar is an orphan boy born in the Kallafo area of the Ogaden: his father was a dissident Somali nationalist and his foster mother Misra is a woman of Ethiopian, specifically Oromo, origin. Askar's bond with Misra represents a more visceral reality than his theoretical Somaliness, yet across the narrative her 'foreign body' is repeatedly gouged, maimed and dismembered, her plight clearly figuring that of internally riven Somalia itself. As the nation projects itself upon divided and controversial maps, and assumptions of national integrity are repeatedly called into question, the mother body in the novel, putatively the symbol of national wholeness, con-

sistently signals absence and pain. Askar's own self is divided: he is male yet menstruates.

By definition, the process of establishing national identity involves an attempt to gather together the self in language, usually by way of narrative, by way of that which at once alienates and yet connects. At the end of his cycle of tortures, Dad in *The Famished Road* gives a visionary speech intimating spiritual and political reconstitution located somewhere in a dream-like future. In *Maps*, identity lies in self-inscription, literally the inscription of the body. As Askar grows to manhood, which in his case also means coming into his own as a male nationalist, he marks himself as textual or 'texted' body. (In a dream he revealingly wanders through a landscape full of people 'tattooed with their identities' (*Maps* 42–3).) As the existence of his narrative itself testifies, he tells his own story. But he also effectively inscribes himself – he writes the words of the Koran into his flesh; he draws the (to him) true map of a fully united Somalia on his skin. His inscribed, mapped body figures and makes concrete the figurative in nationalism. Bodily inscription here, self-imposed, signifies not so much subjection (being subsumed into another's body of knowledge), but self-realisation.

If Askar's tale were to be taken as a metafiction for the strategies of self-representation in postcolonial narrative, then such strategies – writing the body, splicing the self – seem to take two main forms, which are not mutually exclusive. The first is the *literalisation* (or defamiliarisation) of the accepted status of the body as sign, in particular of the national body as woman/mother. The second is *figuration* or *transfiguration*, the translation of such metaphors into an other, self-directed if often self-doubting system of signs, usually one that is diachronic, that attempts through writing its own temporality to come to some kind of historical terms. As part of this process, scars, lines of wounds, the body text, may be retraced and objectified as actual violations, as lived silencings, as in the case of Okri's Dad.

The representational strategies which group under the headings of literalisation and figuration are predictably diverse, yet generally involve a self-conscious or self-reflexive rewriting of the already inscribed colonised body. The body is exposed as colonial fact and artefact, as overproduced, written upon. Devices such as mimicry or, more accurately, a kind of excessive self-replication, are used to indicate the weightiness and oppressiveness of the body's status as sign. The body complex as a palimpsest of different symbolic layers – land, mother, scored flesh – is disclosed, opened out and ultimately divided up into multiple constituent narratives of bodily/national investment. Symbol is expanded into plot, or plots; history in the epic sense of the tale of a nation is reduced to (auto)biography, anecdote, stories of growing up (as in *Maps* and *The Famished Road*). Icon, that is to say, is transformed into individual or communal narrative, less lofty than national epic, certainly not as coherent, not as

authoritative. Character (as in symbol, cipher) is transfigured into character (as in the subject of the story). The inscribed body – woman, oppressed – inscribes itself.

In Askar's case in *Maps*, where the originary land/mother is absent, divided and alienated, a foreign body, that of Misra, because it signifies familiarity and a local, specific loyalty, becomes the more dear and desirable (and also, as Askar grows older, the more repressed). The mother, even if adoptive, the nation, even if divided, signify a joyous plenitude of physical feeling and deferred desire (therefore, *literalisation*). However, in the space of lack opened up by Askar's process of maturing, as he grows further away from Misra, alternative symbolic rallying points are located: here the alternative strategy of *figuration* comes into its own. His life reads a tale of self-constitution, and the novel becomes a correlative to that narrative, a fictive supplement, an answer to 'the fictive riddle asking a factual puzzle': on which national side does he belong? (*Maps* 65) Often speaking in the second person, Askar objectifies himself in story. His reliance on story constantly reminds us that selfhood – individual, communal or national – is not fixed or *sui generis* but invented, protean, adaptable (*Maps* 216–17). Askar's identity is made up out of symbols often without explicit national reference, acquired at random, extracted from dream-memory (*Maps* 42–6). Unattended and orphaned at birth, self-inventing and self-doubting, he becomes the literal embodiment of a tragically divided Somali nationhood.

I will end by looking at self- and body representation in the Jamaican Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), a novel which boldly illustrates the overlapping strategies of literalisation and trans/figuration.¹⁹ As Françoise Lionnet has noticed, Cliff's interweaving of official and forgotten histories powerfully asserts the 'liberating potential of counter-narratives'.²⁰ The following commentary is offered therefore as a way of focusing and to some extent summarising the central issues of this chapter.

No Telephone to Heaven is structured around a guerrilla incident that took place in Jamaica in the early 1980s. The narrative of this incident is intersected with the personal histories, often truncated, of the main actors involved. In the course of this many-layered account, tracked across three key geographic regions (the Caribbean, North America and Europe), Cliff maps on to her novel an inventory of Jamaican/Caribbean colonial experience. The narrative is strung across episodes blatantly paradigmatic of colonial violations and delusions: sentences bulge out at certain points to offer lists of synonyms for postcolonial afflictions and pathologies.

For Cliff, colonial and, perhaps even more so, post-independence signification involves the ceaseless, self-reinforcing replication of the signs of power and colonial presence, or latterly, the mere simulacra of such a presence. First World brand-names dissociated from their original products are 'quoted' in incongruous contexts: they are hand-outs without useful contents, past their

sell-by date. Dingle, the Kingston slum, is described as a 'town of structures made by women and children. Structures made from packing crates which once housed Vauxhalls, Morris Minors, Renaults, Kelvinators, Frigidaires, Maytag washer-dryers' (*NTH* 31). The experience is one of: 'Depression. Downpression. Oppression. Recession. Intercession. Commission. Omission. Missionaries' (*NTH* 17). From the point of view of those Jamaicans who remain unfree and poor, postcolonial history denies both conflict and continuity, cancelling that which is not itself: 'Like a mule working a cane cutter – [going] round and round' (*NTH* 169). 'So lickle movement in this place. The place of their people's labour. From this place. Then only back and forth, back and forth, over and again, over and again – for centuries' (*NTH* 16). Circularity, synonymity, like the replication of the metropolis in myriad tourist resorts on its periphery, figures the influence and primacy of the centre. That which is different, not like itself in every part, is dismissed as trivial, marginal and unnatural.

As the divide or pivot in his/her name suggests, the character Harry/Harriet is one such 'unnatural' creature, 'one that nature did not claim' (*NTH* 21): 'Not just sun, but sun and moon' (*NTH* 128). His/her identity is indeterminate, divided. Her/his body, a literal symbol of colonial violation, has been split – he was raped as a *bwai* by a British army officer. The rape forms one of the text's highly self-conscious metaphors for colonial violence figured on the body (an instance of literalisation). Yet Cliff is vigilant about the potential glibness of these symbols. Harry/Harriet, recognising this danger, refuses to reify the rape as symbol, asserting instead the value of what happened as a formative experience, and a way of identifying with others:

Darling, I know it is hard to listen to all of this; it is hard to tell. I have been tempted in my life to think *symbol* – that what he did to me is but a symbol for what they did to all of us, always bearing in mind that some of us, many of us, also do it to each other. But that's not right. I only suffered what my mother suffered – no more, no less. Not symbols, not allegory, not something in a story or a dialogue by Plato. (*NTH* 130)

But Harry/Harriet refuses not simply the subjection to symbol, the split body. S/he also seeks to alienate and reverse the process that entails that subjection, the signifying practices of colonial othering. Not quite female, s/he yet chooses to be female, which on the colonial periphery is conventionally to be triply oppressed. Yet through a process of transsexual transformation, 'H/H' makes of this femaleness an audacious diversity, a constantly changing and therefore unlawful difference. His/her various, necessarily imperfect acts of copying produce slippage, a shift away from symmetry and sameness, and the absolute two-term division of self and other, male and female. The body of the other, already 'denatured', is multiply refigured. For H/H gender differences

cut both ways: s/he parodically performs as a male ballet-dancer, s/he works as a female nurse, and in a notable act of double disguise, plays, while in female dress, at being a cartoonish 'Prince Badnigga' to a gullible American tourist.

In the case of Clare Savage, H/H's close friend and the central protagonist, self-splitting, less in evidence, is as significant – in fact, it is her story. Clare's body, almost white, suggests near colour purity from the point of view of the Jamaican national elite. Yet, in conflict with her own upbringing, she identifies with that in herself which is dark, 'impure'. She has been taught 'to quell one side, honey,' but finds it 'amazing how the other side persists' (NTH 152). As with H/H, the desire to be different is mediated by the intrusion of the body, again figured as the target of colonial history, though with her the resolution is in a different direction, giving neither one, nor two. When she becomes pregnant by her lover, a black Vietnam war veteran, she finds that his war experience brings the likelihood of genetic abnormality. As he points out, the child will be less a body than a 'disharmony of parts' (NTH 156). Their own bodies in spite of themselves enact the distortions of their historical inheritance and the end result of the experience is to tamp Clare's womb. She miscarries and is told she will no longer be able to bear children. Yet this bodily wounding, this apparent lack, ultimately acts to return her to her past and to the land, the two intersecting in her grandmother's abandoned property, where she sets up house. Her individual development becomes a trope for national transfiguration. Instead of a preoccupation with ravaged symbols, instead of reproducing the denatured body of colonial suffering, she makes history, she turns to narrative, both by connecting with her familial past, and, at the last, by committing the self-sacrifice that is involved in her guerrilla insurrection.

Notes

- 1 Nicole Brossard, *These Our Mothers: Or the Disintegrating Chapter*, trans. B. Godard (Toronto: Coach House, 1983), p. 16.
- 2 Bessie Head, *Maru* [1971] (London: Heinemann, 1987).
- 3 Head observes: 'if the white man thought Africans were a low, filthy nation, Africans in Southern Africa could still smile – at least, they were not Bushmen . . . Of all things that are said of oppressed people, the worst things are said and done to the Bushmen' (Head, *Maru*, p. 11). Page references to *Maru* will henceforth be cited in the text along with the title *Maru*.
- 4 On extreme otherness or the 'wholly other', see Gayatri Spivak, 'The Rani of Sirmur: an essay in reading the archives', *History and Theory*, 24:3 (1985), 247–72, as well as her reading of Coetzee's *Foe*, also cited below. The latter appears in its most recent form in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 169–97.
- 5 I refer here to the theory of hysteria first analysed by Freud but for the purposes of this chapter usefully adapted as a paradigm of reading by Mary Jacobus. See Mary

- Jacobus, 'Readings in hysteria', in *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 195–274.
- 6 Jacobus, *Reading Woman*, p. 197.
 - 7 Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior of Africa* (London: The Folio Society, 1984).
 - 8 Richard Burton, *Love, War and Fancy: The Customs and Manners of the East from Writings on the 'Arabian Nights'*, ed. Kenneth Walker (London: Kimber, 1964), pp. 154, 156. On Burton's orientalism, see also Rana Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of the Orient* (London: Macmillan, 1986).
 - 9 See Sander Gilman, 'Black bodies, white bodies', in Henry Louis Gates Jr. (ed.), *'Race', Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 223–61. Saartjie Baartman's remains, it is worth knowing, were finally repatriated from France to South Africa in 2002.
 - 10 John Barrow (ed.), *Cook's Voyages of Discovery* (London: A. C. Black, 1925), pp. 104–5.
 - 11 J. M. Coetzee, *Foe* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986). Page references will henceforth be cited in the text together with the title *Foe*. See also Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, pp. 169–97, in particular pp. 174–5, 181–2, 189–90. Spivak reads the novel, too, as enacting 'the impossible politics of overdetermination' in a situation where, as for Susan Barton, one is both author and mother: a depressing reading for any woman who would seek to combine these roles.
 - 12 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). For Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's reading, see *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 15–39.
 - 13 Jacobus, *Reading Woman*, p. 217.
 - 14 Luce Irigaray, 'Sexual difference,' in Toril Moi (ed.), *French Feminist Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p. 120.
 - 15 Nuruddin Farah, *Maps* (London: Picador, 1986).
 - 16 Jean Franco, 'The nation as imagined community', in H. Aram Veesser (ed.), *The New Historicism* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 205. On the second, cynical, 'post-nativist' stage in African writing, see Kwame Anthony Appiah, 'Is the post- in post-modernism the post- in postcolonial?' *Critical Inquiry*, 17:2 (1991), 336–57.
 - 17 Appiah, 'Is the post- in postmodernism', p. 353.
 - 18 Ben Okri, *The Famished Road* (London: Cape, 1991). The spirit child or *abiku* is one who repeatedly dies and returns to the world (as does the *ogbanje* child in Achebe), thus signifying in Okri's work truncated cycles of growth.
 - 19 Michelle Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven* (London: Minerva, 1987). An earlier form of the novel centred on the young Clare was published as *Abeng* in North America in 1984. Page references will be cited in the text along with the abbreviation *NTH*.
 - 20 Françoise Lionnet, *Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 20.