ABSTRACT

“YOUR BODY MUST BE HEARD”: UNCOVERING A NEW LANGUAGE THROUGH FEMALE PAIN AND BODILY EMPOWERMENT

Jaclyn Swiderski, MA
Department of English
Northern Illinois University, 2018
Diana Swanson, Director

This thesis uses Virginia Woolf’s essay “On Being Ill” in order to examine her novel *The Waves* and Paule Marshall’s novel *Praisesong for the Widow*. In each of these novels, the main female protagonists are experiencing mental pain that becomes manifested physically. Although each of them is experiencing pain for multiple reasons, their pain at the core is caused by certain societal institutions such as marriage, motherhood, and the medical field. In order to get past their pain and move toward healing, all of the women examined here use their deviant sexualities. Deviancy here is defined as anything going against societal norms. Therefore, even though these women are not necessarily queer, their sexualities are still deviant because they use sex for their own pleasure rather than the pleasure of others. Deviant sexuality allows each of these women to move from a space of cultural construction into a space of self-reconstruction, where they do not have to confine themselves to what is expected by the society around them. The resistances that are forged by these female characters can then be used by women in the real world, where these institutions also affect everyday life.
“YOUR BODY MUST BE HEARD”: UNCOVERING A NEW LANGUAGE THROUGH FEMALE PAIN AND BODILY EMPOWERMENT

BY

JACLYN SWIDERSKI
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CHAPTER 1

FROM SICKLY TO SEXY: FINDING A SOURCE OF EMPOWERMENT IN THE BODY

“I went to bed crying, woke in the night crying, sat on the edge of the bed in the morning and cried – from sheer continuous pain. Not physical, the doctors examined me and found nothing the matter.” - Charlotte Perkins Gilman

The plight of women, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, in their attempts to have their pain recognized can be difficult to fully understand without looking back and analyzing the historical context surrounding the medical profession and female pain. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English conduct this analysis in their book, *For Her Own Good: Two Centuries of the Experts’ Advice to Women*, in which they examine both medical and novice advice that was widespread in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Ehrenreich and English uncover the implied message lying beneath each piece of advice: “that woman’s normal state was to be sick . . . . Medicine had ‘discovered’ that female functions were inherently pathological” (121). In fact, the female body was so pathologized that doctors believed that “woman’s entire personality was directed by the ovaries, and any abnormalities, from irritability to insanity, could be traced to some ovarian disease” (133). That the cause of concern was a naturally occurring organ reinforced the “naturalness” of women’s illness and therefore their pain. Importantly, the ovaries caused not just physical ailments, but mental ones as well, such as “irritability [and] insanity
Further, that the site of disease was a reproductive organ had explicit consequences for the expression and policing of female sexuality. Ehrenreich and English explain that although women had to submit to the “sex function,” or reproduction, “[f]emale sexuality was seen as unwomanly and possibly even detrimental to the supreme function of reproduction” (133). In other words, enjoying sex or having sex for nonreproductive purposes was unacceptable. As a result of this philosophy, expression of female sexuality became akin to a personality disorder, which was treated in the same way that doctors were treating women’s physical symptoms: through removal of sexual organs. In the 1860s, doctors went through a “brief fad of clitoridectomy (removal of the clitoris),” which doctors agreed “might be necessary in cases of nymphomania, intractable masturbation, or ‘unnatural growth’ of that organ” (136). More popular than the clitoridectomy, however, was the ovariotomy, or removal of the ovaries. Ehrenreich and English cite historian G. J. Barker-Benfield, who notes, “Most apparent in the enormous variety of symptoms doctors took to indicate castration was a strong current of sexual appetitiveness on the part of women” (136). Significantly, while “women of the middle to upper classes” underwent most of these surgeries, poor women and women of color “had suffered through the brutal period of experimentation” (137). Again, this inclusion of all types of women in the process, despite their different social and economic positions, reinforced the supposed “inherent” sickness that all women have.

While this advice was still popular, Virginia Woolf published her essay “On Being Ill.” Woolf was of course familiar with female illness and pain; her lifelong struggle with mental illness began shortly after the death of her mother in 1895. Although Woolf was privy to the potentially disastrous effects of pain and illness, in her essay she takes a stark stance against the fatalism that Ehrenreich and English’s experts were putting forth. Woolf argues that the body is a
source of untapped knowledge, capable of opening new perspectives. She states that literature currently figures the body as “a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear, and . . . [that it] is null, and negligible and non-existent” (195). Despite this common belief, Woolf notes that “[a]ll day, all night the body intervenes. . . . The creature within can only gaze through the pane – smudged or rosy” (195). In other words, Woolf points out a concrete connection between the mind and the body – one is always affecting the other. In this particular essay, Woolf is concerned with illness and pain as they have the potential to show “undiscovered countries” and uproot “ancient and obdurate oaks” (195). This focus draws a clear line between Woolf and the “experts.” Her essay itself works to uproot the “ancient and obdurate oaks” of negative images of female pain that were planted by the experts’ advice.

Woolf argues that pain is ignored in literature because our language does not have the ability to express it. This “poverty of the language” is clear in that “[t]he merest schoolgirl, when she falls in love, has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her; but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry” (196). This seeming gap between pain and language causes a rift for Woolf between the ill and the healthy – a group which she deems “the army of the upright” (198). The ill are able to recognize this rift because they cannot express their pain through language. While the colonizing force of health moves forward “to communicate, to civilise, to share, to cultivate the desert, educate the native,” the ill “become deserters” (198). This breakdown occurs because the myth of human connection is central to the force of the healthy – communicating, civilizing, and sharing all require a bond between people in order to be accomplished. When one is in pain, however, one realizes that this sympathy and connection is fleeting, as they are unable to communicate (and therefore share with the larger community) their pain. As Woolf states:
That illusion of a world so shaped that it echoes every groan, of human beings so tied together by common needs and fears that a twitch at one wrist jerks another, where however strange your experience other people have had it too, where however far you travel in your own mind someone has been there before you – is all an illusion. (198)

While this statement seems at first fatalistic, Woolf goes on to offer another way of connection – through nature.

She describes the mind as a “virgin snowfield” (198) that other people cannot enter. This scene of nature can, however, be “visited by the cloud, kissed by the falling petal” (199). Nature stands in direct opposition to the army of the upright, as it continues on with no concern for human affairs. As Woolf notes, “Immeasurable resources are used for some purpose which has nothing to do with human pleasure or human profit. If we were all laid prone, stiff, still the sky would be experimenting with its blues and golds” (199). She goes on to state that flowers are “the stillest, the most self-sufficient of all things,” and that “[i]t is in their indifference that they are comforting” (199, emphasis added) to those in pain. In other words, the ill can find connection with nature because it does not impose constructions onto their bodies in the same way that the army of the upright does, as nature is “self-sufficient” instead of culturally motivated.

As Susan Bordo argues in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, “The body that we experience and conceptualize is always mediated by constructs, associations, images of a cultural nature” (35). This mediation is evident in the line that Woolf draws between the ill and the army of the upright. Drawing this line between the two parts of society allows the ill to see that connection among humans is unattainable because this connection is a construction made by the army in order to drive itself forward. Due to the fact that Woolf places nature in direct opposition to the army, nature becomes a world outside of the
army’s cultural construction and inscription. Woolf argues that the ill are able to connect with nature, and thus with this realm of non-construction. Once in this realm, the ill can recognize that the negative constructions of their bodies are created by the army of the upright’s cultural inscription. This realization opens the possibility for the ill to reclaim bodily construction for themselves.

Although Woolf does not expressly give a clear way to reclaim this construction in “On Being Ill,” female sexuality, as a historically constructed force, offers the potential for self-reclamation. As Bordo points out, cultural construction of the body is maintained largely “through individual self-surveillance and self-correction to norms” (27). The fact that construction is upheld by the self leaves opportunity for each person to begin to re-construct oneself in more empowering ways. The equation of female sexuality to a personality disorder by doctors in the army of the upright forced women into self-policing their sexualities in order to uphold cultural standards and avoid potential punishment through medical intervention. One way for women to reclaim bodily construction, then, is to use their sexualities in a deviant way. By deviance, here, I mean any expression of sexuality that goes against cultural norms of sexuality, defined by Judith Butler as “the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (471). When women move away from sex for reproductive means or for the pleasure of others they are able to reclaim bodily construction for themselves and, at least momentarily, escape their pain by finding the connection that Woolf sought between mind and body.

While Woolf does not explicitly mention sexuality as an opportunity for connecting with the body in “On Being Ill,” this theme can be seen throughout her fiction, especially in The Waves, discussed in Chapter 2. The Waves follows six friends from birth to death, with each character narrating certain sections. Bernard, Neville, Louis, Jinny, Susan, and Rhoda start at
school together and are eventually split across gender lines as they move up in school.

Significantly, the novel and its protagonists center on Percival – a friend of all the characters who does not get to speak at any point in the narrative. Percival’s death is the turning point of the novel, as it causes all six of the narrators to re-evaluate how they have lived their lives and their own mortality.

I will be examining Jinny and Rhoda’s attempts to reclaim bodily construction. These two characters can be considered women in pain for many individual reasons, which will be explained, but their shared pain comes from Percival’s death. He was thrown off a horse while in India, at the time a British colony. Percival was driven to India by the colonial force of the army of the upright, making this force an indirect cause of both his death and Jinny and Rhoda’s pain. Each of these women attempt to use their sexualities to escape this pain, to differing results. Jinny is ultimately able to use sex as a positive force, helping her to construct herself in empowering ways. Rhoda is not able to use sex in the same way, as her queerness or “sexual ambiguity” (Kramp 41) is a source of pain for her (in addition to Percival’s death), resolutely summed up in her desperate call: “Oh! to whom?” (40). The novel does not present her with a similarly queer woman to look to, leaving her unable to define her sexuality. Her inability to define her sexuality, and therefore to claim it as a part of her selfhood, leaves her unable to reconstruct herself in an empowering way.

Woolf, though, is not the only author to demonstrate this approach to healing from pain. In fact, the use of sexuality to reclaim bodily construction can be seen across both temporal and cultural divides. Chapter 3 will examine one of these examples in depth – Avey Johnson from Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*, written fifty-two years after *The Waves*. *Praisesong for the Widow* follows Avey on her path to personal and cultural awakening. In the middle of a
two-week cruise, Avey decides that she wants to go home and she gets off at a random port of call. This adventure, and her eventual trip to the island of Carriacou, gives Avey a distance from her normal life that allows her to reflect on and heal from the repression of her Afro-Caribbean culture and the death of her husband.

Like Jinny, Avey successfully begins the process of reconstruction because of the social resources around her, such as her great-aunt Cuney. Avey’s process differs significantly from Jinny’s, though, as racial tension is a large part of her pain and healing process. Avey is a black woman stuck in a white middle-class society focused on money and economic advancement. Entering this oppressive system causes a breakdown of self, as she attempts to negotiate her selfhood as a black woman in white society and tackle the pain of her cultural memory. Although placing Woolf and Marshall together may seem odd, their characters’ differences in class, race, culture, age, and time period illuminate the strength of self-reconstruction. Praisesong for the Widow is by no means the only text outside of Woolf’s own writing to which the ideas put forth in “On Being Ill” can be applied, and Chapter 4 will explore more texts that give examples of bodily reconstruction, such as The Awakening and Mrs. Dalloway.

According to Woolf, pain cannot be communicated accurately through language, yet both she and Marshall are able to communicate their characters’ pain in their texts. This communication is possible because these authors answer Woolf’s call for a language that is “more primitive, more sensual, more obscene” (196); they begin to forge a language of the body rather than the mind. Woolf and Marshall both take their character’s mental pain and remove it from the theoretical realm by having it manifest physically, and therefore they describe it in fully physical terms. Showing their characters’ pain in this way makes both the reader and the
character more aware of the physical realm. By increasing this awareness, Rhoda, Jinny, and Avey Johnson are able to recognize that their bodies are capable of creating and emitting language. As Hélène Cixous states in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” “A woman’s body, with its thousand and one thresholds of ardor – once, by smashing yokes and censor, she lets it articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction – will make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language” (424). These “yokes and censors” are the cultural inscriptions being put forth by the army of the upright, and Jinny, Rhoda, and Avey are able to start the process of reclaiming this construction by using their deviant sexualities. Through the use of their deviant sexualities, they are able to actively resist the cultural constructions being imposed on them, thus creating the potential to move toward both healing and a new language of the body with which to describe pain.
CHAPTER 2

“OUR BODIES COMMUNICATE”: THE WAVES AND THE SEARCH FOR RECONSTRUCTION

On December 30th, 1930, while working on her revision of The Waves manuscript, Virginia Woolf wrote, “that indeed is my achievement, if any here: a saturated, unchopped, completeness; changes of scene, of mood, of person, done without spilling a drop [of blood]. Now if it [could] be worked over with heat and currency that’s all it wants. And I am getting my blood up. (temp. 99)” (Diaries 343). Here, Woolf reveals that “completeness” is the ultimate goal and triumph of The Waves. While it is worth noting that she hints at having to be sick herself in order to revise (“temp. 99”), a larger revelation is that Woolf turns the novel itself into a type of body, one with “blood run[ning] like a torrent from end to end” (343). The blood of the novel too must rise, giving it the characteristics of an ill body. This passage from her diary signals that the sentiments put forth in “On Being Ill” were at work during the writing of The Waves. Woolf gives the novel a visceral physicality in order to establish a new language of the body that Jinny and Rhoda attempt to use in order to facilitate communication and a sense of connection across the pain divide.

Both the pain divide and the search for connection come across clearly in the characters Jinny and Rhoda. One of the mutual sources of their pain is the death of Percival. The news of his death is delivered by Neville directly after an interlude: “‘He is dead,’ said Neville. ‘He fell.
His horse tripped. He was thrown. . . All is over” (109). As explained by Michael Kramp, Percival’s death is this monumental because “[t]he nationalistic connectedness constructed around and through Percival collapses and fails” with his death (43). Before he dies, Percival meets with all six protagonists for dinner, and Jinny describes the moment of connection that is fostered by him: “‘Let us hold it for one moment,’ said Jinny; ‘love, hatred, by whatever name we call it, this globe whose walls are made of Percival’” (105). Clearly this sense of connection that the protagonists feel at this moment is predicated on Percival’s presence, but even here Jinny notes that this connection is forced and temporary. She states that they “shall perhaps never make this moment out of one man again” (105). The verb “make” implies that this connection is constructed and not naturally occurring – the characters must create and uphold it themselves in an attempt to find cohesion.

The connection forged by Percival is in line with the “illusion of a world so shaped that it echoes every groan” (“On Being Ill” 198) that is created by the army of the upright in “On Being Ill.” His association with the army is made clear by his travelling to India, but it is also hinted at earlier in the text, even when he is a child. On the “playing-field” at school, Louis observes the other boys attraction to Percival: “Look now, how everybody follows Percival. . . . His magnificence is that of some mediaeval commander. . . . Look at us trooping after him, his faithful servants, to be shot like sheep, for he will certainly attempt some forlorn enterprise and die in battle” (25, emphasis added). The language surrounding Percival clearly echoes the empirical aims of the army of the upright – “to communicate, to civilise, to share, to cultivate the desert, educate the native” (198). When he dies, then, Jinny and Rhoda’s pain comes less from the physical death of their friend than the shattering of the myth of connection. Where they could
once convince themselves of a bond, nothing more remains. Rhoda recognizes this disconnection when she considers how each of her friends will react to Percival’s death. While Louis will “smooth out the death of Percival to his satisfaction,” Bernard will “enter ‘Phrases to be used on the death of friends’” into his notebook, and Jinny will “ask, ‘Did he love me?’ ‘More than he loved Susan?’” (Waves 116). This realization of the disconnection between the six protagonists causes the pain of both Jinny and Rhoda, as they then go on to attempt to answer Rhoda’s question of “what can one make in loneliness?” (117).

Percival’s death reveals another common source of pain that underlies the entire novel: the knowledge that death is inevitable. Suzette Henke argues that “[b]ehind the trauma of Percival’s death, Woolf incorporates into The Waves subtle evocations of an original traumatic moment undefined and inexplicable” (124). This original moment is the realization that death is coming, but the pain induced here is compounded, according to Henke, by the fact that the protagonists “find [them]selves incapable of envisaging the trauma of a death (un)foreseen” (124). In other words, both Jinny and Rhoda know that death is coming, but they cannot prepare for it as they do not know what death will bring.

Jinny’s preoccupation with death comes out in her fears of aging. While standing in a Tube station, she sees herself in a mirror and exclaims, “How solitary, how shrunk, how aged! I am no longer young. . . . Millions descend those stairs in a terrible descent. Great wheels churn inexorably urging them downwards” (141). This vision of an “army of the dead” (141) rushing down the stairs is brought on by a recognition of her own aging and therefore movement toward death. This vision also calls to T.S. Eliot’s poem The Wasteland – “A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many” (62-63). Despite this moment of
fear that reveals an underlying pain, Jinny is able almost immediately to recover by reconstructing her aging body in an empowering way. She claims that the fear overtook her momentarily because she “caught sight of myself before I had time to prepare myself as I always prepare myself for the sight of myself” (141). Here, Jinny is recognizing that the fear was brought on by societal constructions of her body rather than her own constructions. Once she realizes this fact, she is able to put forth her own construction and state, “But I will not be afraid” (141); “[l]et the silent army of the dead descend. I march forward” (143). As opposed to Henke’s reading, in which Jinny soothes her fear of death with “twentieth-century technology and . . . the dazzling products of an imperial culture whose commodity fetishism distracts its subjects with seductive material prizes” (136), I argue that Jinny is moving against this “imperial culture” and reclaiming construction of her body.

Rhoda is the protagonist that is perhaps the most affected by “the trauma of a death (un)foreseen” (124). She describes herself as “trust[ing] only in solitude and the violence of death” (170). As Henke puts it, “Like foam on the ocean waves, Rhoda is continually dashed against the jagged rocks of ontological reality” (132). From childhood, Rhoda has trouble finding meaning in her world. When solving a math problem she states, “Meaning has gone,” and falls into fear that she will be “blown for ever outside the loop of time” (13). This fear of the nothingness brought on by death continues throughout Rhoda’s life, and her meditations on death come to a fever pitch when she reflects on the death of Percival. While at a music hall, she realizes that Percival’s death “has made [her] this gift” of allowing her to see “the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing” (118). There is much critical conversation surrounding both what this “thing” is and Rhoda’s claims:
There is a square; there is an oblong. The players take the square and place it upon the oblong. They place it very accurately; they make a perfect dwelling-place. Very little is left outside. The structure is now visible; what is inchoate is here stated; we are not so various or so mean; we have made oblongs and stood them upon squares. This is our triumph; this our consolation. (118)

Irma Rantavaara argues that the square and oblong represent “artistic achievement, the fusion of reality into ‘reality’” (84). Similarly, Henke states that they show “the symbolic value of human creativity as a triumph and a consolation” (133). While there is potential hope for Rhoda in this passage, she does not accept it. Throughout this scene she is attempting to co-exist with a society from which she has been largely separate for her entire life in order to find solace after Percival’s death. She puts herself with the others attending the music hall, calling them all “maggots” and describing their “gorged” bodies being “rescue[d]” (117) by the music. With this denouncement of the army of the upright occurring directly before her realization of “the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing” (118), the tone of what follows becomes sarcastic and cutting. Rhoda realizes that those around her can find solace in music, or inside the “perfect dwelling-place” it creates, but she cannot. Rhoda sees the “thing” of death and that those around her are able to reside within a structure that protects them from this knowledge, but she is “blown for ever outside the loop” (13) and cannot participate. Unlike Jinny, Rhoda is not able to construct a “perfect dwelling-place” of her own and therefore cannot truly move past this pain. These “structures,” whether constructed by the person themselves, as with Jinny, or culturally, as with the music hall patrons, are not available to “rescue” Rhoda.

While the pain brought on by disconnection and death are shared by both Jinny and Rhoda, the pain associated with sexuality is felt by Rhoda alone. Rhoda’s queerness has become a critical commonplace, as she is commonly said to “embody Woolf’s bisexuality” (Hite lii). One
of the first cues of her queerness comes when she describes the crush she has on her teacher:

“When Miss Lambert passes, she makes the daisy change; and everything runs like streaks of fire when she carves the beef” (31). She also compares Miss Lambert to “a statue in a grove” (31), an image that returns later as Rhoda continues to question and attempts to pin down her sexuality.

At a party, she sees “two people without faces, leaning like statues against the sky” (77) in a garden. Rhoda momentarily feels secure watching these lovers of ambiguous gender but cannot claim this empowering sexuality for herself, as she is “not composed enough . . . afraid of the door opening and the leap of the tiger, to make even one sentence” (77). Although Rhoda perceives these lovers to be grounded as statues in their sexual identities, this identity is unattainable for her. Rhoda is still unable to name her sexuality and therefore cannot use it to empower herself. Her incessant call of “Oh! to whom?” (40) is a call for a sexual identity, one that she cannot currently find because she does not see herself in the others around her.

Significantly, though, despite the pain caused by not claiming a sexuality, Rhoda does not give in and accept a heteronormative role. Instead, she “resist[s] social pressure to fold over a ‘distinct’ identity that is stable, permanent, and individualized, and . . . offer[s a] marvelous vision of multiplicitous sexual and social subject positions” (Kramp 33), showing the potential power in sexuality, even if Rhoda is not able to claim it for herself.

The fact that physical bodies are capable of communication is obvious – yet there are many different ways to communicate with others through the body’s manipulation. This type of language, though, is not without its faults. As Susan Bordo points out, “Frequently, even when women are silent . . . their bodies are seen as ‘speaking’ a language of provocation” (6). Similarly, Diane Price Herndl also struggles with the potential disconnection between spoken
language and the language of the body. Commenting on an encounter with a cosmetologist after her breast reconstruction surgery, Price Herndl states, “I thought that my voice would outweigh the visible. . . . Had my belief that the voice could belie the visible been self-delusion?” (483). Both of these critics are raising the same issue: the inability to accurately use a language of the body due to cultural constructions. In Bordo’s example, the women are being constructed as sex objects by the male gaze, causing a breakdown between mind and body. Comparably, in Price Herndl’s example, her own body is being constructed as a plastic surgery success story, erasing the message of pain that her verbal language was trying to put forth. In The Waves, Woolf pulls the mind and body together, using a written language of the body in order to communicate her character’s mental pain.

Critics have repeatedly called attention to the “playpoem” (Diaries 203) language of The Waves, with differing ideas of its purpose. Maureen Chun argues that through this language “Woolf attempted to frame sensations, perceptions, and consciousness itself as a physical phenomena in the real world” (54). For Chun, though, the physical language is separate from the “subjective or semiotic nature of consciousness” (55), and therefore it “requires a single point of view” and can only express “a non-subjective reality” (57). In other words, Chun posits that Woolf’s language of the body is necessarily universalizing – that the physical is a state outside of a person’s subjectivity. As shown by Woolf’s arguments in “On Being Ill,” however, the physical is constantly affecting the mental: “All day, all night the body intervenes” (195).

Although Woolf is using a physical language in order to describe pain, this language does not become universal – there are different bodies, different pains, and therefore different uses of this language. While the pain being described is “unspeakable,” this break in communication does
not mean that pain is reduced to “a single point of view” (57). Instead, Woolf uses the different and distinct bodies of each character to express different forms of pain.

For Jinny, her language of the body is used to convey both her pain and her healing process. This physicality of her pain can be seen in the scene in the Tube station. Her contemplation of age and death is brought on by a realization that the army of the upright is completely surrounding her body: “I stand for a moment under the pavement in the heart of London. Innumerable wheels rush and feet press just over my head. The great avenues of civilisation meet here and strike this way and that” (140). Once the fear and pain set in, she goes on to describe herself as a “[l]ittle animal . . . sucking [her] flanks in and out with fear. . . palpitating, trembling” (141). This description is clearly rooted in the physical, but at the same time it describes a mental pain. Here, Jinny’s pain is translated into the physical through Woolf’s use of language. Calling herself a “[l]ittle animal” also speaks to her connection to Woolf’s conception of the natural world as described in “On Being Ill.” In this scene, Jinny becomes a small animal, outside of cultural construction, surrounded by the army of the upright as they attempt to impose constructions onto her body.

Jinny is able to overcome this fear and pain, though, by returning to her own construction of her aging body. She is able to do this by reasserting her own sexual agency and sexual identity. Jinny’s sexuality is categorized as deviant in a very different way than Rhoda’s sexuality. Instead of expressing her sexuality outside of heterosexuality, Jinny remains within a heterosexual framework while still challenging cultural norms. Her sexuality functions in this way because it is not exercised for reproductive purposes or for the pleasure of her partner. Jinny uses her sexuality to please only herself. This focus on her own pleasure can be seen in her
refrain, “But I shall not let myself be attached to one person only. I do not want to be fixed, to be pinioned” (39). Jinny’s deviance becomes clear at her first party after her school days, where she seamlessly attracts men to her: “All gold, flowing that way, I say to this one, ‘Come.’ Rippling black, I say to that one, ‘No.’ One breaks off from his station under the glass cabinet. He approaches. He makes toward me. This is the most exciting moment I have ever known. I flutter. I ripple” (73). After having her “moment of ecstasy” (75) with this partner, she decides that she has gotten what she wants from him and repeats the process with a newly arrived partner, saying, “Oh, come, I say to this one, rippling gold from head to heels. ‘Come,’ and he comes toward me” (75), showing her interest in her own pleasure over the pleasure of her partners.

These descriptions of Jinny’s body that express her sexuality are repeated throughout the novel. Jinny is constantly “rippling,” “flowing,” and “fluttering” – a direct result of her self-reconstruction. In fact, her first extended dialogue (after the one- or two-sentence dialogues of very early childhood) immediately shows Jinny as a “running” and “quivering” (7) subject, pushed on by sexual energy. After she kisses Louis for the first time, she reflects:

And I dashed in here, seeing you green as a bush, like a branch, very still, Louis, with your eyes fixed. ‘Is he dead?’ I thought, and kissed you, with my heart jumping under my pink frock like the leaves, which go on moving, though there is nothing to move them. Now I smell like geraniums; I smell earth mould. I dance. I ripple. I am thrown over you like a net of light. I lie quivering flung over you. (7)

This passage reveals a direct connection between selfhood, nature, and sexuality, as it directly follows Jinny’s questions of “What moved the leaves? What moves my heart, my legs?” (7). In other words, from her first extended introduction forward, Jinny associates herself with the natural world and sexuality – the two things that allow her to successfully reconstruct her body in empowering ways. Again, it is important to note that for Woolf in this case the natural world
represents a space outside of cultural construction. Therefore, when Jinny recognizes that her heart, stirred on by the excitement of her first romantic encounter, jumps “like the leaves,” she is drawing a direct parallel between herself and the nonconstructed world of nature, a parallel that is upheld by Jinny’s continued use of her sexuality throughout the novel.

Significantly, though, Jinny does not need to be in a sexualized position in order to rely on her construction process. Instead of being employed purely in action, Jinny’s sexuality becomes a state of being or an energy that she constantly employs. As she puts it, “I catch fire even from women’s cold eyes” (29) – meaning she does not need a chosen sexual partner (a man) in order to use and emit her sexual energy. Here, the connection forged between mind and body becomes clear. Jinny’s deviant sexuality becomes a mindset that she uses in order to connect to her body, allowing her to become a rippling body on fire. The importance of a connection between her mind and body can be seen when Jinny marches up the stairs at school to go to bed:

‘I hate the small looking-glass on the stairs,’ said Jinny. ‘It shows our heads only; it cuts off our heads. And my lips are too wide, and my eyes are too close together; I show my gums too much when I laugh. . . . So I skip up the stairs past them, to the next landing, where the long glass hangs, and I see myself entire. I see my body and head in one now; for even in this serge frock they are one, my body and my head. Look, when I move my head I ripple all down my narrow body; even my thin legs ripple like a stalk in the wind . . . . I move, I dance; I never cease to move and to dance. (28-9)

When Jinny is able to see only her head, she slips into viewing herself through cultural construction – as a young girl with certain cosmetic flaws. When she is able to see herself “entire,” however, she can again reconstruct herself. She realizes that her “body and [her] head” are joint, that the mind does not exist separately from the body. When Jinny sees just her head, or just her mental life, she falls into constructions of the army of the upright. It is a connection back
to her body, and her language of the body, that allows her to reconstruct. Jinny later states, “I open my body, I shut my body at my will” (45), showing her ability to construct however and whenever she wants.

In contrast, Rhoda is unable to make this movement from the mind alone to a continuation from the mind to the body, leaving her unable to reconstruct herself in the manner that Jinny does. In Henke’s view, Rhoda’s pain comes largely from the fact that, “[l]ike foam on the ocean waves, [she] is continually dashed against the jagged rocks of ontological reality” (132), and very early in the novel Rhoda begins trying to combat this constant thrashing. She does so by attempting to create her own waves in a basin full of petals and water: “I will now rock the brown basin from side to side so that my ships may ride the waves. Some will founder. Some will dash themselves against the cliffs. One sails alone. That is my ship. It sails into icy caverns where the sea-bear barks and stalactites swing green chains” (11). Here, Rhoda’s own attempt at reconstruction is apparent. She uses the physicality of her body to create a world where she is alone and therefore outside of cultural construction. Notably, this world is marked by nature – she is surrounded by “sea-bear[s]. . . stalactites. . . [and] parrots” (11). However, unlike Jinny, Rhoda must be alone in order for this process to happen and she is not consistently able to use this aloneness to her advantage. The moment that she is around others, her attempt at reconstruction fails; she returns to the realm of the army of the upright, where their constructions can “knock. . . against and damage” her (18). While Jinny is able to bring her conception of nature with her into any situation, Rhoda views nature (and therefore the opportunity of reconstruction) as separate from the rest of the world, hindering her from moving toward healing.
The five other protagonists often note Rhoda’s distance from the rest of them. Perhaps the most telling aside about her comes from her future lover, Louis: “She has no body as the others have” (14). Louis notes Rhoda’s state as a “psyche or soul detached from the weight of physicality” (Henke 131), which reveals her potentially liminal state as a being outside of cultural construction. In other words, Rhoda has found connection with nature and therefore a space outside of cultural construction, but she cannot construct herself and will not allow herself to be constructed by those around her, as she recognizes that she is other than them. As Rhoda puts it after her first day at school:

But here I am nobody. I have no face. This great company, all dressed in brown serge, has robbed me of my identity. We are all callous, unfriended. I will seek out a face, a composed, a monumental face, and will endow it with omniscience, and wear it under my dress like a talisman and then (I promise this) I will find some dingle in a wood where I can display my assortment of curious treasures. I promise myself this. So I will not cry. (22)

Clearly, Rhoda recognizes the disconnection between herself and those around her – being around others “rob[s]” her of her identity. Her assertion that she has no face reveals that she is unable to get past this state of nonconstruction. She will attempt to forge a face for herself, but its representation as a “talisman” shows that this face is simply for protection; it is not an empowering reconstruction such as Jinny is able to make.

While some critics, such as Kramp, see Rhoda’s state of being unmoored from her body as potentially empowering, within the text it causes Rhoda intense grief. Kramp argues that “[h]er ‘inability’ to occupy a specific and distinct role demonstrates her ability to resist society’s desire for separate beings who can perform isolated capitalistic tasks” (42). While Rhoda may have this ability, she is clearly uncomfortable occupying this space. When she is around others she is “rocked from side to side by the violence of [her] emotion,” and when she is alone she is
not able to consistently have moments of connection as she had with her basin (30). Her inability to connect consistently to her body even when alone is clear during her school days: “Alone, I often fall down into nothingness. I must push my foot stealthily lest I should fall off the edge of the world into nothingness. I have to bang my hand against some hard door to call myself back to the body” (30). The fact that Rhoda must connect physically with the world to bring herself into her body further shows that she is unable to construct herself in empowering ways. It is important to note that although Rhoda is disconnected from her body, the language that Woolf uses to describe her pain and attempts to heal is still highly physical.

Rhoda is trapped in this space of nonconstruction largely because she is unable to find a suitable role model, or “a female precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed,” gives her an opportunity to see successful reconstruction (Gilbert & Gubar 12). She is clearly seeking this type of model, as she states numerous times that she “ha[s] to look first and do what other people do when they have done it” (29). Although Rhoda is often surrounded by other women, most often Jinny and Susan, she cannot continue to use them as models because they are not queer as she is. The distance between Jinny and Rhoda is the most clear, as Rhoda claims that “Jinny has her own knowledge but keeps it to herself” (30). In other words, Jinny has the ability to construct herself, but this knowledge is unattainable for Rhoda because Jinny is so deeply enmeshed in her heterosexuality. While this approach clearly works for Jinny, it leaves Rhoda unable to construct; she must instead “attach [her]self only to names and faces; and hoard them like amulets against disaster” (30). Like her “talisman” earlier, these faces that Rhoda tries on are only “amulets,” a defense mechanism rather than a true identity for her.
Rhoda’s final monologue reveals that her facelessness continues well into her adulthood. As she watches Susan, Bernard, Jinny, and Neville approach her and Louis, she notes, “Pity returns, as they emerge into the moonlight, like the relics of an army, our representatives, going every night (here or in Greece) to battle, and coming back every night with their wounds, their ravaged faces. Now light falls on them again. They have faces” (170, emphasis added). Here she sets up a clear distinction between herself and those she perceives as the army of the upright. Members of the army have faces, recognizable identities, in a way that she does not. Later, Bernard reports that “she had killed herself” (208). His report of her death can be taken in two ways – that Rhoda actually did commit suicide or that her mental pain led to an eventual decline and then natural death. Either way, it is clear that Rhoda’s inability to construct left no room for her in society. Remaining unconstructed is impossible, but for Rhoda, construction was also unattainable.

Throughout The Waves, Woolf, with all six of her protagonists, forges a language that is “more primitive, more sensual, more obscene” (“On Being Ill” 196). Her goal of using this new language is apparent, as Bernard thinks explicitly about the use of language in his final monologue: “But for pain words are lacking. There should be cries, cracks, fissures, whiteness passing over chintz covers, interference with the sense of time, of space; the sense also of extreme fixity in passing objects; and sounds very remote and then very close; flesh being gashed and blood spurting, a joint suddenly twisted” (195). Using this language which she explicitly lays out allows her to communicate Jinny and Rhoda’s pain and their attempts at a healing process. Although Rhoda was ultimately unable to construct herself, Jinny’s success and Woolf’s forging of this new language offer hope for moving forward.
CHAPTER 3

“LANGUAGE IS THE ONLY HOMELAND”: MULTICULTURAL BODIES IN

PRAISESONG FOR THE WIDOW

In her short essay, “From the Poets in the Kitchen,” Paule Marshall discusses the importance of Afro-Caribbean women’s language. She names her mother and her friends as her most influential literary forbearers, and this essay directly sheds light on Marshall’s novel, Praisesong for the Widow. The women in her mother’s kitchen “talked – endlessly, passionately, poetically, and with impressive range” (628), and each had the same “consuming ambition: to ‘buy house’ and to see the children through” (629). These material ambitions are mirrored by Avey and Jerome Johnson in Praisesong; more than simply reflecting Avey’s economic outlook, these women also share Avey’s position as black women in a largely white society. This position is extremely isolating, as they are “[c]onfronted. . . by a world they could not encompass, . . . and at the same time f[ound] themselves permanently separated from the world they had known” (630). For these poets, the isolation is even stronger because of their status as immigrants – a status which Avey does not share. As will be seen, though, it is this sense of being between cultures that largely contributes to Avey’s pain. The final parallel between “From the Poets in the Kitchen” and Praisesong (tellingly published in the same year) is the women’s view of the body. Their shared opinion is summed up by Marshall in how the women address one another: “They constantly addressed each other as ‘souly-gal’ – soul: spirit; gal: the body, flesh, the visible self. And it was clear from their tone that they gave one as much weight and importance as the other. They had never heard of the mind/body split” (631). Here, Marshall makes apparent the
realization that Avey must come to in order to escape her pain – that her physical and mental pain are irrevocably tied with each other. These hard-working poets in the kitchen and their concrete ties to Avey reveal that both Avey’s pain and therefore her eventual healing process can be shared and worked through communally.

*Praisesong* opens on Avey frantically packing her six suitcases to leave both her friends and the cruise ship she is on. The sheer amount of luggage that Avey has for a two-week cruise aligns her with the “army of the upright” – focused on status and appearances. Marshall describes Avey’s packing methodically: “Her skirts, blouses and summer suits were done. The sweaters and stoles she drew around her when the weather on deck turned chilly had been packed after a fashion. . . . Her shoes were in their special caddy. Her hats in their cylindrical box. . . . All that remained were her ensemble dresses and evening gowns” (13). In fact, Avey continually uses her up-scale clothing to mark herself as above certain people around her. As she waits for a taxi to bring her to a hotel, she uses her gloves in an attempt to distinguish herself from the Carriacou travelers: “Avey Johnson had been holding her gloves in her left hand. Now, she suddenly drew them on and kept her hands folded in such a way that the gloves could not escape notice” (69). This form of protection through appearance is a tactic shared by the Johnsons, as Jerome also attempts to justify his social position through his mustache:

The mustache was his one show of vanity, his sole indulgence. It was also, Avey sensed, a shield as well, because planted in a thick bush above his mouth, it subtly drew attention away from the intelligence of his gaze and the assertive, even somewhat arrogant arch to his nostrils, thus protecting him. And it also served to screen his private self: the man he was away from the job. (93)

Here, it is clear that the Johnsons each have two “selves” – a public and a private. In this specific case, the private selves align with black culture and the public selves align with what is expected
by the white army of the upright. It is important to note that while Avey’s heritage is specifically Afro-Caribbean, she and Jerome actively participate in African American culture more generally throughout their lives, as seen by their rituals of dancing and listening to American jazz music by artists such as “Coleman Hawkins, The Count, Lester Young (old Prez himself), The Duke – along with . . . Mr. B., Lady Day, Lil Green, Ella” (94).

Although neither of the Johnsons can pass as white, they employ clothing and other means of manipulating their appearances to pass as members of the army of the upright. The army of the upright is clearly aligned with imperialistic and colonizing forces, as Woolf states that the healthy work to “civilise, to share, to cultivate the desert, educate the native” (“On Being Ill” 198). These specific references to the act of civilizing native cultures show that the army of the upright is a product of, and therefore a reflection of, white supremacist culture. By attempting to pass as members of the army of the upright, the Johnsons simultaneously try to pass as white and therefore enter into the insidious twentieth-century ideology of racial uplift. As John Sheehy argues, characters that either attempt to or are able to pass in African American literature become “the conscious, speaking center of what for the rest of the world is a largely unconscious effort to mark the borders of race, class, and self” (401). In other words, “these characters by their very existence question all assumptions about what constitutes ‘blackness’ and ‘whiteness’ in America” (414). This mixing of “alienation and assimilation” in one character is clearly a burden for that character to carry and often results in distance between the character’s mind and body (402).

This phenomenon is shown explicitly by Avey early on in the novel. On the night that her mental pain begins to manifest physically, Avey goes to dinner on the cruise in the Versailles
room, which requires her to wear an evening gown. Eating in this specific room, in these specific clothes, on this specific ship (ironically named *Bianca Pride*) requires Avey to make an attempt at passing as one of the army of the upright. As she looks around the room, the disconnection between her body and her mental state becomes obvious when she is unable to recognize herself in the mirror: “She easily recognized [her companions] in the distant mirror. But for a long confused moment Avey Johnson could not place the woman in beige crepe de Chine and pearls seated with them” (48). This moment of failure to self-recognize is not a one-time occurrence for Avey – it happens consistently once she starts passing as a member of the army of the upright. She frequently “confront[s]” this “same stylishly dressed matron” when she catches her reflection in “plate glass exteriors of stores and restaurants and the simonized bodies of cars parked along the curb as she walked past. One morning she even accosted Avey Johnson in her bathroom mirror as she raised up from washing her face” (49). This distance is caused by her attempt to become a part of the army of the upright, to assimilate completely into a white culture. As Avey’s doctor puts it with a laugh, her experience is “a sure sign. . . of money in the bank” (49). Here, Avey’s doctor makes clear that race and class status are intimately mixed, again reinforcing the ideology of racial uplift.

The dual nature of the Johnsons (and the poets in the kitchen) is clearly explained by Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of “*mestiza* consciousness” (303). Anzaldúa explains that the mixing of cultures results in a new type of consciousness: “From this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollinization, an ‘alien’ consciousness is presently in the making – a new *mestiza* consciousness” (303). Although Anzaldúa uses the term *mestiza* in a specifically Chicana context, Avey can also be considered an African American *mestiza* due to her existence
on the border between her Afro-Caribbean heritage and the dominantly white American culture that she now lives in. The central conflict of *Praisesong for the Widow* is Avey’s mental fight to come to terms with this “alien consciousness,” to mix both her Afro-Caribbean and American cultures. For Anzaldúa, this mixing results in “a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts” (305). In other words, for Avey to heal she must realize that she does not have to choose between sides of her consciousness and instead combines them to create a unique, third option. Anzaldúa notes that this process of combining cultures “is a source of intense pain” (305). As two or more cultures give a *mestiza* “multiple, often opposing messages” (304), “the clash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity. . . . The *mestiza*’s dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness” (303). A *mestiza* must begin “by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity” (304) – a skill that Avey does not possess at the open of the novel.

Avey begins to realize that she is a *mestiza* after a dream about her great-aunt Cuney, who is a physical manifestation of her African heritage. Aunt Cuney continues the African tradition of oral storytelling and tries to pass this culture on to Avey through their twice-weekly walks to “the Landing” in the summer (37). The Landing is the site where a slave ship landed and, according to a family legend, the slaves got off the ship and walked back to Africa. As Aunt Cuney puts it, “Those Ibos! Just upped and walked on away not two minutes after getting here!” (39). The originator of the Ibo family legend is Aunt Cuney’s grandmother, Avatara, whom Avey is named after. Aunt Cuney makes the connection between the two Avataras clear, signaling early on (in both the novel and Avey’s life) that Avey is destined to be a similar storyteller: “There was the story of how she [Aunt Cuney] had sent word months before her birth
that it would be a girl and she was to be called after her grandmother who had come to her in a dream with the news: ‘It’s my gran’ done sent her. She’s her little girl’” (42). Aunt Cuney’s semi-prophetic dream puts even greater emphasis on the dream that Avey has of her.

Avey begins her description of the dream with an emphasis on the different clothing that she and Aunt Cuney are wearing – a clear signal that each woman represents a different side of Avey’s mestiza consciousness. Aunt Cuney is “unmarked by the grave in the field hat and the dress with the double belts, beckoning to her with a hand that should have been fleshless bone by now: clappers to be played at a Juba” (40). In stark contrast, Avey is wearing “the new spring suit she had just put on to wear to the annual luncheon at the Statler given by Jerome Johnson’s lodge. . . and the open-toed patent-leather pumps she was wearing for the first time” (40). In this dream, the two sides of Avey’s consciousness literally brawl with one another – Aunt Cuney wants to take Avey to the Landing, but Avey wants to go to the luncheon with her husband. Aunt Cuney grabs her and begins to pull her toward the Landing, but Avey resists “and a locked, silent tug-of-war began between them” (43). This tug of war eventually turns into a fist fight, and Aunt Cuney begins to tear at Avey’s clothing. The loss of her “fur stole” is the tipping point for Avey. When it is dropped, she laments that the fur stole is “like her hard-won life of the past thirty years being trampled into the dirt underfoot” (45). Enraged by this loss of her hard work, and therefore status, Avey begins “hammering away at [Aunt Cuney] with renewed fury. . . with the whole of North White Plains looking on” (45). Avey’s white neighbors gathering around to watch her literally beat her heritage reveals the immense pressure that she feels from the army of the upright to hide the African side of her mestiza consciousness. At this point in the novel,
however, Avey is still unable to fully recognize both her status as a *mestiza* and the significance of this dream, so her mental pain continues.

The pressure to withhold or repress the African side of her consciousness does not just come from the white people around Avey; it also comes explicitly from her friend Thomasina Moore and from her husband. Thomasina’s skin is described as a “witness”: “black that was the near-white of a blanched almond or the best of ivory. A color both sacred – for wasn’t it a witness? – and profane: ‘*he forced my mother my mother/late/One night/What do they call me?*’” (19). Here, Marshall is referencing Nina Simone’s song “Four Women.” The verse that Marshall pulls from is about a woman named Siffronia, who is stuck “[b]etween two worlds” because her “father was rich and white” and raped her African American mother (12, 14). Thomasina represses this cultural trauma of rape by white men during slavery and Reconstruction, however, and throughout her time in the text distances herself from her blackness and attempts to use Avey’s race to guilt her into staying on the cruise. When arguing with Avey over leaving the ship, Thomasina says that Avey has “[g]ots to be . . . out of her cotton-pickin’ mind” (24). This comment distances Thomasina from Avey on the basis of both racial and class status, implying that Avey is below her and therefore the person who would have worked in the fields. The clearest example of Thomasina’s simultaneous distancing and shaming comes when Avey makes it clear that she will be leaving the cruise ship. Thomasina points out the money that Avey will be wasting and then declares, “That’s why if I’ve said it once I’ve said it a thousand times: it… don’t… pay… to… go… no… place… with… *niggers*! They’ll mess up ever’ time!” (27). Thomasina’s outburst reveals that, for her, “*niggers*” are a separate group of black people from her – a lesser and unreliable race and class.
Similarly, Jerome separates himself and Avey from the other African American people who surround them while they live on Halsey Street in order to set himself above them. As Jerome becomes more and more enmeshed in the army of the upright, taking on longer hours at work and acting differently when he returns home, Avey suspects that he is being unfaithful. When she finally confronts him about her fears, she has become so upset and distanced from herself that she “defiantly” screams in his face, “Goddamn you, nigger, I’ll take my babies and go!” (106). In this moment, for Jerome, Avey becomes like the nameless woman who has to retrieve her husband from the bar every night. This woman is clearly othered by the Johnsons. When Avey imagines the woman standing over her in bed, the woman knows that Avey “thought she was better. She didn’t want anything to do with her kind. She couldn’t wait till she could move from around them” (108-9). After yelling at Jerome, Avey takes on the role of this woman in his eyes: “‘Do you know who you sound like,’ he whispered, choked, appalled, ‘who you even look like?’” (106).

As Avey makes this transformation, which compromises her class status in Jerome’s view, he attempts to compensate by delving even deeper into the army of the upright by taking on multiple jobs, beginning night classes, and eventually opening his own business. While these acts are not in and of themselves negative, the change that they cause in Jerome is. The man who Jerome “used to become at home, who was given to his wry jokes and banter, whose arms used to surprise her as they circled her from behind, gradually went into eclipse during the years following that near-fatal day” (116). At the time of his death, he is unrecognizable to Avey. At his funeral, she sees another face in the coffin:
And there it had been, as she had feared, staring up at her from Jerome Johnson’s sealed face: that other face with the tight joyless look which she had surprised from time to time over the years. Jerome Johnson was dead, but it was still alive; in the midst of his immutable silence, the sound of its mirthless, triumphant laughter could be heard ringing through the high nave of the church. (133)

Jerome, however, is not the only one to blame for this portion of Avey’s mental pain. Having also become a member of the army of the upright, she therefore does not notice how much both she and her husband were changing: “Avey scarcely noticed the changes, she was kept so much on the run. Or more truthfully, she noticed them but did not dare to stop and reflect; there was no time for that kind of thing, she told herself; there was just too much else she had to do” (116). As noted by Courtney Thorsson, Avey loses her connection to her “diasporic consciousness” (645), or her mestiza consciousness, as she and Jerome become more immersed in the army of the upright. It is not until the end of the novel that, as Thorsson states, Avey “realizes these rituals [with Jerome that were lost] are incredibly important to maintaining the sense of self she rediscovers in her island dance [the Beg Pardon], largely because they connected her to a cultural diaspora that reached well beyond the couple’s home” (647). The loss of this “cultural diaspora” underlies Avey’s pain throughout the novel, and as will be seen, it is her recovery of this lost culture that allows her to find healing through bodily reconstruction.

Although Avey’s pain is caused by a mental disconnection between the two sides of her mestiza consciousness, her pain manifests physically, showing that for Marshall, like the poets in the kitchen, the mind and the body are intimately connected. Marshall describes Avey’s pain as an “odd unpleasant sensation in her stomach” (25) and compares it to a “mass of undigested food stalled not only in her stomach but across the entire middle of her body” (51). Significantly, this physical manifestation of Avey’s pain begins the day after her dream about Aunt Cuney, as
she is given “Peach Parfait a la Versailles” at dinner (49). Despite the fact that Avey is unable to recognize that the dream and her trip on the cruise (which becomes symbolized by the parfait) represent the two sides of her consciousness, she is able to tell that “the two things were linked . . . in some obscure but profound way, with her decision to leave” the ship (31). In addition to revealing the connection between Avey’s mind and body, the fact that her pain comes across physically points to the unspeakability of her mental pain: “She couldn’t explain it. She could make no sense of it” (28). By bringing Avey’s pain into the realm of the physical, Marshall uses the same written language of the body as Woolf in order to describe Avey’s pain and allow her to move toward healing.

In the second section of the novel, “Sleeper’s Wake,” it becomes clear that Avey was once able to combat the cultural inscriptions of the army of the upright through the use of her deviant sexuality, but this ability was eventually lost and must be regained. Avey describes her and Jerome’s bodies as using “[a] more powerful voice[, an]other kind of poetry,” during sex early in their marriage. Her orgasms are described in fully physical terms:

And then, without warning, a nerve somewhere in her body which had never before made itself felt would give a slight twitch, and growing stronger take over the work of the pulse at her wrists and temples and throat, and begin beating. But in a more forceful way. And in a swift chain reaction – all of it taking less than a second – the upheaval would spread to a host of other nerves and muscles, causing them to erupt also. Until pulsing together they brought to life the other heart at the base of her body. (128)

This physical reaction that her body has then triggers a mental change for Avey. She is able to at least momentarily reconstruct her body for herself – to “g[iv]e the slip to her ordinary, everyday self. And for a long pulsing moment she was pure self, being, the embodiment of pleasure” (128). Here, the “pure self” that Avey refers to is the self that she is able to construct as opposed to the “everyday self,” which conforms to the cultural inscriptions of the army of the upright.
Even though in this moment Avey is having sex with Jerome, she realizes that the “miracle” of becoming her pure self is “strictly a private matter, that had only to do with her” (128). In other words, similarly to Jinny in *The Waves*, Avey does not necessarily need a sexual partner in order to reconstruct herself. Her reconstruction process can be undergone alone; it is a process that “ha[s] only to do with her” because she is not attempting to incorporate the cultural inscriptions of those around her.

This ability to self reconstruct through the use of her sexuality becomes lost to Avey as she and Jerome become immersed in the army of the upright. Once Avey becomes so busy that she “did not dare to stop and reflect” on the changes occurring between her and Jerome, she begins to see her sexuality through the cultural lens of the army of the upright. Judith Butler argues that cultural values fundamentally shape conceptions and discourses of the body: “Those sexual practices in both homosexual and heterosexual contexts that open surfaces and orifices to erotic signification or close down others effectively reinscribe the boundaries of the body along new social lines” (468). The dominant view of sexuality that the army of the upright holds is heteronormative and, as Butler shows, construction of the female body works “in the interests of the heterosexual construction and regulation of sexuality within the reproductive domain” (470-1). If sexuality is valued only for its ability to create children, it would follow that Avey would come to see expressing her sexuality by herself as deviant and unacceptable. This configuration of sexuality also lessens Avey’s ability to reconstruct even with the help of Jerome when they begin to use contraceptives: “[T]here was eventually only his anxious question at the beginning: ‘Did you remember to put in that thing…?’” (129). When Avey comes to see herself through the
cultural inscriptions of the army of the upright she loses both the pleasure that she once gained from sex and her ability to self-reconstruct her body.

As Avey’s mental pain is deeply rooted in her conception of her body, her healing process is also rooted in physicality. The first step in expelling the “mysterious clogged and swollen feeling” from her stomach comes when she is on the boat to Carriacou (52). Avey awakes suddenly from a nap and becomes violently sick over the edge of the boat. Marshall’s description does not shy away from the physicality of this action: “And then she would be hawking, crying, collapsing as her stomach convulsed and the half-digested food came gushing from her with such violence she might have fallen overboard if it were not for the old women” (205). In this section of the novel, the relationship between Avey’s mental pain and the seeming lump in her stomach becomes apparent. The contractions of Avey’s illness are described as trying to eliminate the “strange oppressive fullness. As if there was actually something there, some mass of overly rich, undigestable food that had lodged itself like an alien organ beneath her heart and needed to be expelled” (207). These contractions then shift direction, and Avey releases the lump, or “whatever was left of it” (207), by defecating on deck. Both the fact that Marshall notes that some part of the lump in Avey’s stomach was already gone and the description of her defecation as “almost pleasurable” reinforce that these physical acts are a part of Avey’s healing (207). As Barbara Christian explains in her essay “Ritualistic Process and the Structure of Paule Marshall’s Praisesong for the Widow”, “[I]like her mind, [Avey’s] body must be healed” and her “expulsion of artificiality is sensual in a horrifying way” (81). For Christian, Avey’s vomiting is sensual because even as her body “relieves itself” she is thinking of “her relationship to those around her, through history, memory, and experience” (81). By thinking
through her cultural “history, memory, and experience” at this point, Avey begins to do the mental work of the mestiza as described by Anzaldúa; Avey begins to put “history through a sieve, winnow out the lies” (307).

In addition to starting the process of creating Avey’s mestiza consciousness, by having Avey vomit and defecate to get out her mental pain, Marshall allows Avey to once again momentarily reconstruct her body, to once again reach that state of “pure self” (128). Here, Marshall is manipulating the distinction between inner and outer as discussed by Butler. For Butler, the boundary between the body and the outside world is a “boundary tenuously maintained for the purposes of social regulation and control” (469). There is no true distinction between the inside and outside of the body; instead, this boundary is culturally constructed. This fact is highlighted by “those excremental passages in which the inner effectively becomes outer” (469). Clearly, Marshall is playing with this same boundary making by having Avey’s inner pain become manifested in physical excrement. Further, Butler notes that “[a]ny discourse that establishes the boundaries of the body serves the purpose of instating and naturalizing certain taboos” (467). In a white, American cultural context, Avey’s physical act of healing would have been viewed as taboo by those around her because of American discourses surrounding the body. In this Afro-Caribbean cultural context, however, her actions are actually encouraged. The two old women cheer on Avey’s expulsion, seeming to recognize the healing process: “‘Bon,’ they murmured as the gouts of churned up, liquefied food erupted repeatedly, staining for a moment the white spume on the waves below. ‘Bon,’ they whispered at the loud hawking she was helpless to control and at the slime hanging in long tendrils from her mouth. ‘Bon,’ at the stench” (205). These women quietly chant “good,” as Avey vomits into the water and this act shows that
they recognize the benefits of Avey’s sickness. The fact that Avey is in a cultural space that contains different discourses of the body than she is used to allows her to begin healing. Being in any space beyond the cultural inscription of white America would give her the opportunity to reconstruct her body again. Significantly, though, this space that she has entered also allows her to connect to the other side of her mestiza consciousness and begin the process of mixing cultures.

After her sickness on the boat, Avey’s healing process continues when she reaches Carriacou. Avey wakes up to find herself in the home of Rosalie Parvay, the daughter of her guide to Carriacou, Lebert Joseph. Rosalie meticulously bathes Avey in a way that allows her to drop some of the anxieties that she has built up over time. At the start of the bath, Avey protests by saying that “[t]here was no need, she could do it herself, she no longer felt weak – speaking out of her obsessive privacy and the helpless aversion to being touched she had come to feel over the years” (219). Eventually, though, Avey relaxes and the bath begins to remind her of the tub “out in back of the house in Tatem” where Aunt Cuney lived (221). This recognition of her past and her African heritage is the first cue that Avey is beginning to come to terms with her mestiza consciousness. Now that she has gone against the values of white American culture, she begins to recognize and appreciate the other side of her consciousness again. This bath also reveals to Avey the connection to her body through sexuality that she had lost. When Rosalie begins to massage Avey’s upper thighs, her body and sexuality begin to re-awaken: “under the vigorous kneading and pummeling, Avey Johnson became aware of a faint stinging as happens in a limb that’s fallen asleep once it’s roused, and a warmth could be felt as if the blood there had been at a standstill, but was now tentatively getting under way again” (223). These feelings spread up
Avey’s entire body until “finally they reached her heart. . . . All the tendons, nerves and muscles which strung her together had been struck a powerful chord” (224). This description echoes the previous description of Avey’s orgasms with Jerome, which reveals that Avey can be sexual without the presence of her husband. Rosalie is able to re-awaken Avey’s body and make her experience a “feeling she had long forgotten” (224). With her rediscovered sexuality, and therefore rediscovered tool for self-reconstruction, Avey is able to begin healing from her mental pain.

At the conclusion of the novel, Avey seems to have come to terms with her mestiza consciousness. Her journey to Carriacou allows her to, as Anzaldúa suggests a mestiza should, “put history through a sieve, winnow out the lies” (307). Experiencing this healing process allows her to recollect and reflect on memories that she had not thought about for years. With this new knowledge, she decides to take on the role of Aunt Cuney – to tell her story to the next generation. In her essay “The Highs and Lows of Black Feminist Criticism,” Barbara Christian discusses the concept of “rememory” or of “reconstruct[ing] our past” (240). Now that Avey has done this type of “rememory” for herself, she will pass on her knowledge to those around her. By choosing to become a storyteller, Avey recognizes that “storytelling is a dynamic form of remembering/re-creating” (Christian 241). Although not necessarily valued in the dominant culture in which she lives, Avey hopes to spread her storytelling throughout her community. She plans to “take it upon herself to speak of the excursion to others elsewhere. Her territory would be the street corners and front lawns in their small section of North White Plains. And the shopping mall and train station. As well as the canyon streets and office buildings of Manhattan. She would haunt the entranceways of the skyscrapers” (225). Her decision to return to New York
reveals that Avey has fully created the “third element” of her *mestiza* consciousness (Anzaldúa 305). Instead of treating Tatem as her Afro-Caribbean space and New York as her American space, Avey has created a mixture of her two cultures and will be able to take this new consciousness with her wherever she is geographically.
CHAPTER 4

COLONIZATION AND THE BODY’S RESISTANCE

Woolf’s concept of “the army of the upright” reaches across both temporal and cultural divides as its imperialistic impulses are not limited to the colonization of other countries; the army of the upright also manifests itself in power structures that women encounter every day. In both *The Waves* and *Praisesong for the Widow*, the army of the upright appears in multiple forms. In Woolf’s novel, the army of the upright is a colonial power working to colonize India; it is also at work in the beauty culture that tells Jinny she must remain young and in the internalized heterosexism that tells Rhoda she must be heterosexual. For Marshall, the army of the upright is behind slavery and therefore the cultural memory of trauma that Avey holds, as well as the classism that forces Avey and Jerome apart. These more subtle manifestations of the army of the upright are still dangerous, as they have the power to affect large numbers of women in seemingly innocuous ways. As shown by Ehrenreich and English, the medical institution actively works to colonize the female body:

Everything that seems uniquely female becomes a challenge to the rational scientific intellect. Woman’s body, with its autonomous rhythms and generative possibilities, appears to the masculinist vision as a ‘frontier,’ another part of the natural world to be explored and mined. A new science – gynecology – arose in the nineteenth century to study this strange territory and concluded that the female body is not only primitive, but deeply pathological. (23)

As these “experts” also found the source of women’s pain in their reproductive organs, all women’s pain could be described as “uniquely female” and therefore an entire gender could be
pathologized. As medicine and other male-dominated institutions such as motherhood, marriage, and the legal system (to name just a few) all participate in the army of the upright, real women must also forge resistances that are similar to those forged by Jinny, Avey, and Rhoda.

As shown in the previous chapters, Jinny, Avey, and Rhoda each had to attempt to forge their own resistance because they are all women in pain. Woolf and Marshall, in addition to highlighting these resistances with the use of deviant sexuality within their novels, had to forge resistances of their own in order to communicate pain through written language. In “On Being Ill,” Woolf argues that there is a “poverty of the language” when it comes to expressing pain, which is clear in that “[t]he merest schoolgirl, when she falls in love, has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her; but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry” (196). Both Woolf and Marshall overcome this “poverty of the language” by taking language out of the realm of the theoretical and putting it directly onto the bodies of their characters. Jinny, Avey, and Rhoda are able to communicate to the other characters around them in their novels with their bodies; additionally, Woolf and Marshall communicate their characters’ pain to the reader by using fully physical, bodily terms to describe their pain. This creates a dual resistance, where characters resist the institutions that cause them pain while authors simultaneously resist the English language and its limitations.

This dual resistance in each novel is seen in many other female-authored novels. In this regard, looking specifically at the language of the body used by female novelists can illuminate a large range of work, crossing temporal and cultural divides. For example, many other novels by Woolf use this same language of the body, including The Voyage Out and Mrs. Dalloway. In addition to the types of pain discussed here, both Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale
Hurston and *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin use pain to critique the institution of marriage and, in Chopin’s novel specifically, the institution of motherhood. Additionally, *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* by Tillie Olsen positions these institutions of power within a specifically working-class context. *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath overtly uses mental health and the medical institution as sources of pain. *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* by Eimear McBride explores the pain caused by sexual assault and exploitation. This list of novels is by no means comprehensive of all the female-authored novels that use a language of the body to describe pain. Significantly, however, in all of the novels mentioned here, female characters look to sexuality as a way to momentarily escape their pain.

For these women, sexuality is more than an action – it is a cultural practice that they are able to construct for themselves and then use in new ways. In *How to be Gay*, David Halperin puts forth this same view of male homosexuality. He states that there is an “initiatory process internal to gay male communities whereby gay men teach other gay men how to be gay. . . by showing them how to transform a number of heterosexual cultural objects and discourses into vehicles of gay meaning” (7). Halperin calls this process of transforming cultural objects “counter-acculturation” (7, italics in original), and he argues that “homosexuality itself, even as an erotic orientation, even as a specifically sexual subjectivity, consists in a dissident way of feeling and relating to the world” (13, italics in original). This process of “initiation” into male homosexuality is akin to the process that Jinny, Avey, and Rhoda undergo in order to reclaim their own sexualities. The “cultural objects” that these women try to transform are their own bodies and this transformation allows them to work against the cultural inscriptions of the army of the upright, or to practice “counter-acculturation.”
Thinking about sexuality as a cultural practice rather than a physical act opens up the possibility for discussion of asexual (or ace) identities. While none of the women discussed here identify as ace, the fact that many of them are able to use their sexuality to reconstruct whether or not they are having sex raises questions about new conceptions of ace identities. As Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks explain, “The modest attention human asexuality has received has come mainly from medical and psychological discourse, which has acknowledged asexuality only relatively recently, and then solely in pathologizing terms” (653). Just as the nineteenth-century “experts” pathologized overactive female sexuality, the medical field is currently pathologizing underactive sexuality. That ace identities are treated in the same way as “hyperactive” sexual identities reveals that ace identities, too, are deviant. Rather than “threaten[ing] to remove sex from politics all over again,” the large spectrum of ace identities “challenge[s] the ways we think about sex and desire even within queer communities” (Cerankowski and Milks 661). Recognizing the potentially radical power of ace identities requires reconfiguring the “definition of what constitutes radical sex” (661) and shifts sexuality’s focus from partner-to-partner relationships to a person’s relationship to his/herself and his/her position in the surrounding cultural world.

In order to show that this mode of analysis is useful across multiple texts, I will briefly look at two other novels that use a language of the body: *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Awakening*. The impulse to colonize patients’ bodies is the most apparent in *Mrs. Dalloway*’s Septimus Warren Smith. Septimus suffers from shell shock and he and his wife, Rezia, are looking for help from the medical system. When the couple goes to see Sir William Bradshaw for a second opinion on Septimus’s condition, the doctor tells Rezia that “he never spoke of ‘madness’; he
called it not having a sense of proportion” (94). As Bonnie Kime Scott explains in her notes on *Mrs. Dalloway*, Bradshaw’s “proportion” comes directly from advice that Woolf herself received from a doctor: “Woolf’s consultation with a Harley Street physician, Dr. Sainsbury, in August 1922 brought the advice ‘practise equanimity, Mrs. Woolf,’ recorded sarcastically in her diary (*Diary 2*: 189), and revised slightly as [a sense of proportion]” (209). This connection between actual medical advice and the advice given in the literature again points to the need for real people in pain to forge resistances. After the consultation with Bradshaw, Rezia reflects on “divine proportion, Sir William’s goddess,” and Woolf directly connects him with the eugenics movement: “Worshipping proportion, Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion” (97). The verbs “secluded,” “forbade,” and “penalised” each reveal that the power in the patient/doctor relationship lies exclusively with Bradshaw himself. In order to be Bradshaw’s patient, Septimus must hand over all control of his body and mind. This loss of control over his own fate is resolutely summed up in Bradshaw’s advice to “[t]ry to think as little about yourself as possible” (96).

This power dynamic between doctor and patient becomes even clearer in the novel’s assertion that the goddess Proportion has a sister, Conversion, who “feasts on the wills of the weakly, loving to impress, to impose, adoring her own features stamped on the face of the populace” (98). Rezia senses that conversion is Bradshaw’s true goal in doctoring his patients: “This lady too (Rezia Warren Smith divined it) had her dwelling in Sir William’s heart, though concealed, as she mostly is, under some plausible disguise; some venerable name; love, duty, self
sacrifice. . . But conversion, fastidious Goddess, loves blood better than brick, and feasts most subtly on the human will” (98). Here, Bradshaw’s place in the army of the upright is apparent. He actively attempts to colonize Septimus’s mind and convert it to his idea of normalcy. In this way, Septimus’s suicide is an attempt to escape the colonizing efforts of the army of the upright. While Septimus appears reluctant to commit suicide, or what he describes as “their idea of tragedy” (146), it is his one tangible escape from confinement in Bradshaw’s colonizing rest home.

Septimus does attempt other resistances to his pain, but they are unsuccessful largely for the same reasons that Rhoda fails at reconstruction. After fighting in WWI, Septimus realizes that he is unable to feel. His inability comes from his shell shock and the death of his officer, Evans, whom Septimus is romantically attracted to. When Septimus realizes that something is wrong, he attempts to heal himself by marrying Rezia: “He became engaged one evening when the panic was on him – that he could not feel” (85). He attempts to use his sexuality to heal by marrying Rezia, but instead his marriage represses his true sexual desires for Evans and only contributes to his pain. Like Rhoda, Septimus cannot accept his queerness, and as a result, they both meet the same fate. The fact that each of these queer characters in Woolf’s fiction fall victim to the army of the upright points to a pressing need for more critical exploration into successful reconstruction by queer characters in literature.

In addition to the medical field, marriage is another important institution where the army of the upright makes its presence known, as I have shown in my discussion of Praisesong for the Widow. In The Awakening, Edna Pontellier’s pain is caused by her marriage and the restrictive social and gender roles that it imposes on her. Edna and her husband are not partners; instead,
Edna’s husband treats her as if she is his property to be watched over. When Edna returns to the hotel with a sunburn early in the novel, her husband accosts her for getting burnt, and he looks “at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage” (4). Léonce has clear expectations of Edna and how she should behave as both a wife and a mother: “He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother’s place to look after children, whose on earth was it? He himself had his hands full with his brokerage business” (7). Edna is not fulfilled by this role that is forced onto her and she distances herself from the other “mother-wom[e]n” who surround her (9). Mother-women are those who “idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (9). Just as Bradshaw advises Septimus to think of himself as little as possible, the perfect mother is supposed to forgo her individuality and submit herself completely to the role of being a mother and a wife. The patriarchal, heterosexist institution of marriage, then, can also be seen as a colonizing force, working to convert women into submissive mothers and wives.

Chopin, like Woolf and Marshall, uses a language of the body in order to express Edna’s mental pain. After fighting with Léonce over not being home to accept guests on a Tuesday afternoon, Edna reacts physically in order to show her pain:

She carried in her hands a small handkerchief, which she tore into ribbons, rolled into a ball, and flung from her. Once she stopped, and taking off her wedding ring, flung it upon the carpet. When she saw it lying there, she stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it. . . . In a sweeping passion she seized a glass vase from the table and flung it upon the tiles of the hearth. She wanted to destroy something. (51)

Edna’s attempt to release her pain is similar to Avey’s violent sickness on the boat; each of these women attempt to get rid of physical symbols of their pain. While Avey expels the lump of pain
that has been sitting in her stomach, Edna removes from her body the symbol of her marriage, her wedding ring. In addition, she smashes a glass vase, which is a symbol of her and her husband’s social status and therefore the social expectations of her as an upper-class wife and mother. Rather than describing Edna’s pain in fully physical terms in the way that Woolf and Marshall do for their characters, Chopin uses Edna’s physical actions to reflect the internal conflict and pain that she is experiencing. While a different use of a language of the body, Chopin still adds to the new language that Woolf calls for, a language that is “more primitive, more sensual, more obscene” (“On Being Ill” 196).

Edna attempts to fight back against the colonizing force of marriage by reclaiming her sexuality for her own use. The first person that she attempts to do this with is Robert. She does not actually have sex with him but calls herself “infatuated” with him and finds herself thinking about him often. For Edna, Robert as a sexual partner is not especially important. Instead, Robert is a pathway for her to reclaim agency and control over her sexuality. As Edna thinks about him she realizes that “the thought of him was like an obsession, ever pressing itself upon her. It was not that she dwelt upon details of their acquaintance, or recalled in any special or peculiar way his personality; it was his being, his existence, which dominated her thought” (52). In other words, Edna looks to Robert as Jinny looks to her suitors – simply as an opportunity to express her sexuality for herself. When Edna has sex with Arobin, she is able to self-reconstruct and move beyond the cultural inscriptions that are put on her body, but this escape is fleeting. She says that “[a]bove all” she felt “understanding”: “She felt as if a mist had been lifted from her eyes, enabling her to look upon and comprehend the significance of life, that monster made up of beauty and brutality” (80). Although she has this positive moment, it is almost immediately
qualified by self-policing her sexuality. She begins to think about “her husband’s reproach looking at her from the external things around her which had provided for her external existence” (80). Despite feeling “neither shame nor remorse,” she does experience a “dull pang of regret” because it was not the love of her husband that “held this cup of life to her lips” (80). This mix of emotions shows that Edna is still stuck between reconstructing herself and the constructions of the army of the upright. Significantly, Edna does not feel this same remorse when she uses her sexuality nonphysically in her thoughts about Robert, showing that the actual act of sex is not inherent to the use of sexuality.

Using this new language of the body sets these novels apart from literature as described by Woolf. In “On Being Ill” she argues that literature figures the body as “a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear, and . . . [that it] is null, and negligible and non-existent” (195). These female authors, however, forge a resistance against the English language which is dominantly used to describe the mind. The struggles that women face when writing their resistances are summed up in these questions from Gilbert and Gubar:

What does it mean to be a woman writer in a culture whose fundamental definitions of literary authority are, as we have seen, both overtly and covertly patriarchal? . . . . If the Queen’s looking glass speaks with the King’s voice, how do its perpetual kingly admonitions affect the Queen’s own voice? Since his is the chief voice she hears, does the Queen try to sound like the King, imitating his tone, his inflections, his phrasing, his point of view? Or does she ‘talk back’ to him in her own vocabulary, her own timbre, insisting on her own viewpoint? (10)

The authors examined in this thesis are “talking back” to the dominant literary tradition by creating a new language of the body. Just as their characters work against the colonization of their bodies and minds by the medical field and other male-dominated institutions, these authors forge their own resistances in the literary field. As Gilbert and Gubar argue, female authors are
“the daughter[s] of too few mothers” (13) and must actively work to create a new female-oriented literary tradition. By tying this literary fight for recognition to the fight for bodily autonomy and empowerment, these authors and their characters become “foremothers” from whom other women can build their own resistances. Even failed attempts at self-reconstruction contribute to this resistance because these attempts reveal certain institutions that construct the body, and these characters still point to a new epistemology – one in which the body is a source of knowledge and therefore power.
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