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When the Personal Became Political:
First-Person Fictions and Second-Wave Feminism

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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Second-wave feminism made famous the slogan, “The personal is political.” This dissertation explores the relationship between the personal and political in fictional narratives associated with the development of second-wave feminism in the United States in the 1960s and 70s. Deeply engaged with the political movements that arose amidst this turbulent period in American history, these narratives reflect—in both form and content—the political discourses that dominated both the women’s liberation movement and the New Left.

The first-person fictions of feminist writers that emerge in this period traverse, and subvert, the boundaries between truth and fiction as well the personal and political while probing the limits of conventional literary forms. These narratives emphasize the validity of personal experience and assert narrative authenticity and "truth" despite the fictional dimensions of the text. Many of these writers turn to meta-fiction to challenge the limits of conventional novelistic forms so as to highlight the personal and political role of the woman writer within the feminist movement. The realm of psychology also features prominently as feminist writers engage with the notion of “madness” as a metaphor for both the condition of women in society and society itself.

This dissertation focuses on emblematic texts, beginning with Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar and Doris Lessing’s The Golden Notebook. These works played a critical role in shaping later feminist literary narratives such as Dorothy Bryant’s Ella Price’s Journal, a prime example of the “consciousness raising” novels that gave expression to the growing radicalization of women in the 1960s and 1970s. The impact of the civil rights and Black Power movements—and their relationship to the feminist movement—is also explored through an analysis of Octavia Butler’s Kindred. The project concludes by investigating the political trajectory from feminism to post-feminism through an analysis of Helen Fielding’s Bridget Jones’s Diary and Erica Jong’s Fear of Flying. The focus throughout the dissertation is on the political implications of each narrative and its relationship to the women’s liberation movement as well as the political implications of form, as each narrative struggles with—and defies—conventional literary forms.

For my mother,
Mary Elizabeth Behrent

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Introduction

> It is no longer possible to ignore that voice, to dismiss the desperation of so many American women. This is not what being a woman means, no matter what the experts say. For human suffering there is a reason; perhaps the reason has not been found because the right questions have not been asked, or pressed far enough . . . The women who suffer this problem have a hunger that food cannot fill. . . . We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: "I want something more than my husband and my children and my home."
>
> **—Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique,* 1963**

With these words, Betty Friedan launched the first conscious and widely recognized expression of second-wave feminism in the United States. By exposing the "problem with no name" plaguing millions of American women, Friedan's pivotal work *The Feminine Mystique* provided a decisive spark to the long-quiet but smoldering anger of women in the United States. This spark would eventually ignite one of the most important mass movements of the 1960s and challenge the social, economic, and cultural basis of American society in pursuit of women's liberation. For too long, women had been held hostage by the 1950s myth of the domestic bliss of the American housewife. As the reality of women's lives increasingly came into contradiction with the *Ozzie and Harriet* image of American womanhood, it became clear that what had been deemed "personal" was, in fact, profoundly political. And, thus, a movement was born—one in which making the personal public was crucial to politicizing the domestic entrapment of women and challenging the very notion of separate "public" and "private" spheres.

In a 2006 obituary, the *New York Times* wrote of Friedan that she "would be forever known as the suburban housewife who started a revolution with *The Feminine Mystique*. Rarely has a single book been responsible for such sweeping, tumultuous and continuing social transformation" (Fox). That *The Feminine Mystique* was a formative text for the incipient women's liberation movement is uncontestable. The larger question remains: Why, at this specific moment of history, did such a book reignite a movement which up until then had seemed dead? For all their revolutionary potency, the ideas in Friedan's work were not particularly new; they built on the work of the earlier women's suffrage movement as well as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), published in France more than a decade earlier. *The Feminine Mystique* burst onto the scene along with some notable companions from the literary world: Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), published in England, was a product of the same contradictions, as was Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962). Plath's novel is in many ways the literary counterpart of Friedan's work, chronicling the struggles of a young, educated, white woman seeking fulfillment outside the bounds of the traditional family, opposed at every step by the new traditionalists of the 1950s.

These groundbreaking feminist texts were all literary expressions of women struggling for fulfillment and liberation in a world dominated by the oppressive constraints of domesticity and second-class status. The profound impact of Friedan's work was due as much to its content as to its publication amid a perfect storm of events and texts that signaled a new epoch in feminist consciousness. At this crucial juncture, the book tapped into a radicalization that had not

yet found expression but was simmering beneath the surface, thus becoming the catalyst for a new movement. Likewise, the feminist fictions explored in this dissertation are expressions of the political aspirations and rebellions of a generation of women who gave birth to and were inspired by the women's liberation movement. This movement revolutionized our understanding of the "personal" and the "political." While many of the early writers who found a mass readership in the women's liberation movement did not identify themselves as feminists or even as "political," they produced canonical movement texts because they expressed the same hunger for something more that gave birth to the second wave of feminism. The feminist fiction of the period reflects this political trajectory: from the suppressed rage of the early feminists to the personal and political revolution that characterized the height of the women's liberation movement to a retreat into the personal after the movement's demise.

In the opening chapter of *The Political Unconscious,* the literary critic Fredric Jameson argues for "the priority of the political interpretation of literary texts." He "conceives of the political perspective not as some supplementary method, not as an optional auxiliary to other interpretive methods current today . . . but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and interpretation" (Jameson 17). Drawing on the Marxist theory of history as a reflection of class struggle, he argues for a method of interpretation which is invested "in detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative [of class struggle], in restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history" so as to "explore the multiple paths that lead to the unmasking of cultural artifacts as socially symbolic acts" (20). ." This is the type of interpretation I will put forth in this dissertation, through a history and an analysis of the development of feminist fictional personal narratives that in form and content can be read as socially symbolic acts of the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Jameson argues against distinguishing between explicitly "political" texts and those that are not, seeing this as "a symptom and a reinforcement of the reification and privatization of contemporary life (20)." Rather than focus on such a distinction which emphasizes the "gap between the public and the private, between the social and the psychological, or the political and the poetic," he insists that one begin with the recognition that "everything is 'in the last' analysis political. (20)" In making the personal public, all the texts discussed in this dissertation (and indeed feminist fiction as a whole) played a role—whether consciously or not—in breaking down this divide between "public and private," "social and the psychological," and "the political and the poetic."

From its inception in the early 1960s to its demise in the late 1970s, the texts that narrativize the women's liberation movement grapple with the political and literary problems it posed. Early novels that were not intentionally feminist per se blazed a trail for future writers who were more explicitly "of the movement." In the early years of the movement, feminist fiction was seen as expressly political, one facet of the broader struggle for women's liberation. Throughout the decade, as radical feminism was replaced by cultural feminism, feminist political fiction became subsumed into the broader genre of "women's fiction." I examine the recurring political concerns, motifs and innovations in form that I argue characterize feminist fiction in this period. I also examine the relationship between each work of literature and the women's liberation movement with a focus on how each novel enacts feminism's slogan that "the personal is political," using a fictional personal narrative to take up larger political questions of the period. If, as Ernst Fischer argues, "art is the individual's way back to the collective," the first-person fictions of the feminist movement become a crucial way in which individual experiences are narrated so as to forge a collective feminist consciousness (Fischer 57). Fischer continues, "In a decaying society, art, if it is truthful, must also reflect decay. And unless it wants to break faith

with its social function, art must show the world as changeable. And help to change it" (59). This understanding of art is illuminating with regard to the literature of the feminist movement. Writing both in protest of the stultifying world of the 1950s and in search of a new identity for "free" women, feminist fictions tell individual stories in the interest of collective change.

The Personal and the Political in the Women's Liberation Movement

The dizzying speed with which the feminist movement developed in the sixties and seventies is incomprehensible without an analysis of other social movements and the larger radicalization sweeping the nation in this period. Activists who had been trained in other movements were central to the development of the women's liberation movement. These women had been radicalized by their own experiences in the social movements of the 1950s and early 1960s, in particular the civil rights movement and, later, the antiwar movement, led primarily by Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Sara Evans convincingly argues that second-wave feminism had its roots in the civil rights movement, just as the earlier suffragist movement had its roots in abolitionism. The civil rights movement proved that struggle could lead to real change in society, challenging the most egregious forms of oppression and state-sponsored violence and intimidation. It was these women who heeded Friedan's call and transformed the growing feminist consciousness into a movement that challenged legal, cultural, economic, and social constraints on women (Evans 22–23). They learned the lessons of these struggles and developed greater strength and confidence in their own drive for equality, despite frequently feeling disillusioned by the sexism they encountered in movements that professed equality. Indeed, Friedan herself was politically influenced by her own experience as a labor activist and writer among the revolutionary left and labor-union militants (Boucher).

These forces led to the eruption of second-wave feminism as a force to be reckoned with. While the movement was inspired by a combination of the material conditions facing women and the radical social movements developing in this period, the fundamental question was that of the relationship between the personal and the political. Radical women in these movements were confronted with lingering sexism and expectations of domesticity that consigned them to second-class status. Many of these women eventually concluded that oppression could only be fought by those who had personally experienced it. The slogan "the personal is political" emerged as the core of second-wave feminist philosophy, albeit with often contradictory meanings. The challenge of the feminist movement was to build a political movement that could contest the separation of these spheres. To do so, the "personal" nature of women's oppression could no longer remain individual or private. It had to be made public.

Both inspired by and provoked by the New Left, feminist activists brought the revolutionary impulses of "the movement" into the realm of the personal by challenging the subjugation of women through campaigns for equal pay, child-ins demanding daycare, the fight for abortion rights and battered women's shelters. In 1968 alone, as the broader movement of the New Left peaked and began its long decline into oblivion, radical women in New York protested the Miss America Pageant, the first national conference on women's liberation was held in Chicago, and both the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) and the National Welfare Rights Organization were formed.

The impact of the feminist movement shook American society to its core, fundamentally challenging the exclusion of the "personal" from the realm of political discourse, action and struggle. A 1970 cover story from *TIME* magazine's provided an unenthusiastic testament to the movement's reach, with an opening line that ominously declared:

> These are the times that try men's souls, and they are likely to get much worse before they get better. It was not so long ago that the battle of the sexes was fought in gentle, rolling Thurber country. Now the din is in earnest, echoing from the streets where pickets gather, the bars where women once were barred, and even connubial beds, where ideology can intrude at the unconscious drop of a male chauvinist epithet. (*TIME* "Who's Come a Long Way, Baby?")

The movement's encroachment on the previously off-limits personal space of the bedroom was indeed one of its greatest threats: feminism challenged not only women's exclusion from the public realm but also the political foundations of the home, the family, and women's subjugation within them. Deborah Siegel describes the period as one in which

> all the commonplace assumptions about femininity, sexuality and domesticity that a baby girl could expect to inherit were under siege. Everyday choices, like wearing stilettos or tying the knot, now had significant political implications. Family life, standards of beauty, and relations with men were no longer private matters of individual choice or social custom but issues of national import.
>
> *The personal had become political.* (Siegel 1–2)

At its best, this insistence on the idea that the "personal is political" transformed consciousness by insisting on the need to understand the social, economic, cultural, and political oppression of women as the basis for all "personal" problems that afflicted individual women. At its most extreme, however, it led to a rigid understanding of feminism that insisted that no person could fight a form of oppression he or she did not personally experience. This logic relied on forms of patriarchy theory that saw all men, regardless of their own oppression or exploitation, as complicit in the oppression of women. The dual ideologies contained in the slogan point to both the revolutionary nature of the claim; they also contain the roots of its ultimate downfall, as during its later years the feminist movement itself collapsed amid myriad internal divisions. The idea that the personal is political was initially used to argue that the public/private divide was a false distinction made to justify women's oppression. This was later transformed into a political theory that argued that, to transform political oppression, one had only to transform the personal. What began as a recognition of the ways in which the political permeated every aspect of women's personal or individual lives gave way to an ideology that consciously advocated for individual or personal change as a solution to collective problems. These tendencies within the movement brought to the fore the contradictions of the political basis of the movement itself; they also reified "the personal is political" into a mantra that elided real political differences in ideology and strategy. As the notion of the "personal" became increasingly dominant, so too did ideologies that sought to transform oppression by personal discoveries, recognitions, and transformations. All too often, however, these efforts ignored the real obstacles that the political world imposed on personal decisions and on the possibility of personal liberation. Neither this tension nor its ultimate conclusion was a predetermined *fait accompli*. This historical period both inspired a new radicalism and limited the expression and fulfillment of that radicalism; understanding its trajectory is crucial for a materialist understanding of this history.

Toward a Literature of Their Own

From its inception, the second-wave feminist movement was profoundly literary in nature. "Consciousness-raising" became a crucial term; it meant both a need to develop theoretical and literary responses to the sexism women faced on a daily basis and also an insistence on the primacy of a "personal" revolution for women seeking to transform their lives and worlds in a radical milieu that frequently ignored their concerns. Fiction played a particularly important role in this process. Because literary texts often emphasized the personal or the subjective experience of women's oppression, they could "serve as a forum for women" and "assist in humanizing and equilibrating the culture's value system, which has historically served predominately male interests"(Cheri Register cited in Hogeland *Feminism* x). For Register, these texts must be read side by side theory and texts deemed more 'factual' if they were to raise consciousness, but, in many consciousness raising groups reading fiction alone performed this function. Women formed consciousness-raising groups throughout the country, seeking to understand their own oppression and discuss strategies for resistance. Indeed, *The Feminine Mystique* itself "described the housewife's malaise as a loss of memory . . . This explains why consciousness raising was—and is—crucial in feminist efforts. Consciousness raising is a re-membering, a bringing to mind of repressed parts of the self and experience" (Greene 300).

In remembering this "past" and constructing new narrative texts framed by the relationship between the personal and political, women sought to transform individual experience into a collective history and experience. These texts could then form the basis for more widespread consciousness-raising and play a role in mobilizing more women to take part in the personal and collective revolutions to which they gave voice. While feminist texts were initially seen as a means to engage newly radicalizing women in political activism, Hogeland is right in asserting that as consciousness-raising began to take on a life of its own, writing and reading themselves began to be seen as political acts. For Jo Freeman this tendency "was inherent in the structurelessness" of these groups (Hogeland *Feminism* 26). As will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three, the increasing debates about the political role of consciousness-raising (CR) was reflected in Claudia Dreifus's distinction between "soft" CR focused almost exclusively on personal experience and "hard" CR which emphasized theory and political activism (Hogeland *Feminism* 27). This points to some of the contradictions within the very idea of "consciousness-raising," which for some feminists was a *strategy* in the fight for women's liberation, and for others the ultimate *goal*.

The decade and a half following the publication of Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar,* and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* witnessed an outburst of feminist activity, writing, and theorizing that served to radicalize a growing feminist audience and challenge women's historic exclusion at every level of American society. Indeed, by 1970, four years after the creation of the National Organization for Women (NOW), Friedan's book had sold more than 5 million copies. In that same year, both Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* were published and read widely both inside and outside academia. The first women's studies programs were created in universities in the late 1960s; between 1970 and 1975 alone, 150 of these programs were founded (Boxer "For and about Women" 665). By 1977, Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* and Ellen Moers's *Literary Women* were posing new challenges to the world of literary theory and history with their groundbreaking studies of women writers. The new genre of feminist fiction also arose in this period, beginning with Sue Kaufman's *Diary of a Mad Housewife* (1967) and Alix Kates

Shulman's *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen* (1969), which inspired a rapid succession of works, including Marge Piercy's *Small Changes* (1972), Dorothy Bryant's *Ella Price's Journal* (1972), Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973), Lisa Alther's *Kinflicks* (1973), and Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* (1977), to name a few. As Greene argues,

> The early seventies was a period of enormous productivity for women writers, British, American and Canadian . . . That the early seventies was also the time when the women's liberation movement was at its height and when feminist literary criticism came into existence is no coincidence, for both fiction and criticism were responding to the same social and intellectual climate; women were experiencing a new sense of possibilities, a breaking away from the constraints of the past, and this shaped both the literature they were writing and the criticism they were developing. (Greene 82)

Indeed, at every level, the burgeoning field of feminist fiction and literary theory was intrinsically engaged with the wider political movement.

Within that movement, activists saw such texts as consciousness-raising tools and as a means of mobilizing women into further action. For many feminists, writing itself constituted a form of political struggle. As one American feminist author writes:

> I contend that feminist fiction is a political act. . . . As feminist fiction writers, our work ranges from propaganda to therapy, from incantation to public testimony. . . . Those of us who regard our art as activism consider writing no less—and no more—of a political contribution than that of abortion counselors, trade unionists, mothers. Writing is our work in the women's movement. (Miner "Writing Feminist Fiction" 26)

Miner's words resonated with many feminist literary pioneers who were themselves major players in the movement. Piercy was an early activist in SDS; Alix Kates Shulman was an important activist in the radical wing of the feminist movement in NYC who helped to organize the 1968 Miss America protest; Kate Millett's political activism is well documented in her memoirs, most notably 1974's *Flying;* Rita Mae Brown not only wrote the movement's first lesbian coming-of-age narrative but, as a veteran of SDS and NOW, also led the charge against NOW for its exclusion of lesbians and formed the Furies Collective. Like Miner, many feminist writers saw their work as a contribution to the movement. Nonetheless, at the height of second-wave feminism the revolution in the realm of literature went hand in hand with the feminist revolution in society at large. As the movement in the streets declined, feminist writers and activists turned toward fiction as their primary—and sometimes only—means of enacting political change.

While feminist fiction was concerned with transforming reality and creating a new future for women, it was also committed to a project of revising and re-envisioning the past in search of a history of women's resistance and a female literary tradition. This was behind the impetus for many women's studies programs, which were inspired by the free universities of the New Left and the civil rights movement's demands for Black studies program. Boxer notes that "women's studies was a necessary part of women's 'struggle for self-determination'; its goal was 'to understand the world and to change it'"(664). The demand for women's studies programs was

one battle in the war to transform universities from defenders of "Western civilization" into sites of radical critical inquiry.

In the field of literary studies and theory, this movement led to the rediscovery of texts by women writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Kate Chopin, and Tillie Olsen who had been omitted from the canon. At the same time, this search for a "tradition" sparked the research of pioneering feminist literary historians and theorists such as Moers, Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar. The rapid development of the field of feminist literary criticism was spurred on by the "catalyzing force of an ideology that, for many of us, helped to bridge the gap between the world as we found it and the world as we wanted it to be" (Kolodny 172). Kolodny continues by arguing,

> So powerful was that impulse that we experience it, along with Adrienne Rich, as much "more than a chapter in cultural history": it became, rather "an act of survival." What was at stake was not so much literature or criticism as such, but the historical, social, and ethical consequences of women's participation in, or exclusion from, either enterprise. (172)

Like their fiction-writing counterparts, feminist literary theorists saw their work as intimately connected to the women's liberation movement as a whole. Elaine Showalter, who coined the term "gynocriticism," was radicalized by the May 1968 uprising in France and subsequently participated in antiwar protests at the Modern Language Association in 1968 before joining NOW in 1969. By 1970, she was "president of the group, had started writing for *Radical Feminism,* had joined the advisory board of the Feminist Press and was editing an anthology called *Women's Liberation and Literature"* (Showalter "Twenty Years On" 399). Barbara Smith, a prominent African American feminist lesbian activist and literary theorist who founded the Combahee River Collective in 1975, aptly describes the "vital relationship" between feminist literary scholarship and activism: "Activism has spurred me to write the kinds of theory and criticism I have written and has provided the experience and insights that have shaped the perceptions in my work" (Smith "The Truth that Never Hurts" 788).

The work of feminist literary scholarship was thus intimately connected with the political goals of the feminist movement as a whole—although, as in the broader movement, these goals and the strategies with which to accomplish them were hotly contested. Nonetheless, in recovering lost texts and reconstructing gynocritical histories of lost female artistic traditions, literary theorists of the 1970s sought to participate in the broader feminist movement—a process of recovering and revising the past so as to uncover and unleash the potential of a feminist future. As Nina Baym, author of the influential *Woman's Fiction* (1978) explains, "We thought of this lost work as a legacy, an inheritance that had been denied us. We took it for granted that the women we rediscovered would delineate an admirable, specifically female literary tradition, through which we ourselves would find strength and inspiration" (cited in Showalter *A Jury* 442). This belief was somewhat naïve and was certainly steeped in a politics of identity that uncritically laid claim to a "female" past and tradition, clinging to a notion of "sisterhood" that was rapidly challenged. Nonetheless, it also reflected a larger paradigm shift in the study of history and an attempt to recover the history of the oppressed who had too often been silenced.

Like their white counterparts, the African American feminist literary theorists, scholars, and writers of this period sought to recuperate texts ignored by the stalwart guardians of the mostly white male literary canon and to revise literary history to include the previously ignored

history and artistic traditions of African American women writers and artists. Alice Walker, one of the first African American feminist writers of the period, played a crucial role in resuscitating and granting new prominence to the work of Zora Neale Hurston. The rediscovery of texts by authors such as Hurston, Jessie Fauset, and Nella Larsen, along with a growing "canon" of prominent new authors, from Gwendolyn Brooks to Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, was an important part of the political movement. This facet of the movement challenged women's exclusion from the literary canon and engaged deeply with texts, as a means of both raising consciousness and countering women's erasure from history generally and the history of art and literature more specifically. Nellie McKay, a pioneer in the field of Black women's literary history, argues,

> From the perceived utility of the slave narrative of antebellum days to the more highly crafted and sophisticated forms of the present time, black women have told their own stories both as a way of self-confirmation and a means of correcting the erroneous white and male record of their inner reality. Black women writers project a dynamic "I" into the canon, one that makes more complete the reality of the multi-faceted American experience. (McKay 161)

The sixties gave new power to this concept, as the feminist movement in particular harnessed the literary "I" to tell a collective story of struggle.

Nonetheless, as many literary theorists discovered, the attempt to recapture and render visible an African American female literary and artistic tradition was rendered far more difficult by the persistent legacy of slavery, which had for centuries denied African American women access to the basic tools necessary for artistic expression. In a question that resonated with many other African American feminist theorists and critics, Barbara Christian asked, "Confronted by centuries of Afro American women who, but for an exceptional few, lived under conditions antithetical to the creation of Art as it was then defined, how could she claim a creative legacy of foremothers, women who after all had no access to the pen, to paint, or to clay?" (Christian 51). Similarly, Alice Walker asks,

> What did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers' time? In our great-grandmother's day? It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood.
>
> Did you have a genius of a great-great-grandmother who died under some ignorant and depraved white overseer's lash? Or was she required to bake biscuits for a lazy backwater tramp? When she cried out in her soul to paint watercolors of sunsets, or the rain falling on the green and peaceful pasturelands? Or was her body broken and forced to bear children (who were more often than not sold away from her)—eight, ten, fifteen, twenty children—when her one joy was the thought of modeling heroic figures of rebellion, in stone or clay? (Walker *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens* 233)

The search for a "literature of one's own" was a part of wider trend toward a radical re-envisioning of history, as radicals sought to reclaim a "history from below" that privileged all those who had been silenced by and excluded from history as it had previously been conceived. At the same time, the feminist movement's commitment to consciousness-raising made the

discovery and discussion of such texts all the more crucial. Within these groups, texts played a central role in attempts to forge a new feminist consciousness.

Early or pre-feminist writers such as Plath and Lessing provided important models for the writers who emerged from the movement in the 1970s. For example, Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* contains a plethora of references to Plath's poetry; Dorothy Bryant's Ella Price is given Lessing's *Golden Notebook* by a feminist friend to nurture her developing feminist consciousness. Kate Millett's *Flying* contains a crucial scene in which the author meets Lessing, who encourages her to write about her own personal life, telling her that "you cannot be intimidated into silence. Or the silence is prolonged forever"(358)." While Millett praises Lessing's work, saying, "Just think of what *The Golden Notebook* has meant to the thousands of women who have read it," Lessing says of *Sexual Politics*, "Books like that make change" (Millett 357–58). This conversation is a testament to the intimate link between the new generation of writers and their feminist literary precursors; it also accentuates the importance of literature to the nascent movement. Indeed, in many of these texts, reading figures prominently as a process through which the heroine's awakening takes place. This is perhaps most notable in the case of Ella Price, the protagonist of one of the most emblematic narratives of the feminist consciousness-raising novels: for Price, reading books by and about women opens the door to her developing political consciousness and makes possible her ultimate political awakening and rejection of the her roles of wife and mother in favor of a new feminist identity.

Nonetheless, the search for past traditions of female resistance is complicated in the realm of fiction, as the search for a new feminist future requires both a recovery and a rejection. The role models of the past must be cast aside to make space for a far more radical and as yet only imagined future in which the emancipation of women can go beyond the "revolution within" to create a "revolution without." Thus, just as Plath's Esther in *The Bell Jar* must try on and ultimately reject the identities of her many doubles, so, too must Ginny, the protagonist of Lisa Alther's *Kinflicks,* adopt and ultimately discard a variety of identities as she learns to forge her own, independent of both her mother and her multiple relationships with men and women who attempt to fashion her in their own images. The figure of the mother in many of these works is frequently central, often functioning as a stultifying symbol of the fifties housewife *par excellence* who must be rejected to make way for a new feminist consciousness. As Showalter argues, this rejection has its roots in earlier1950s fiction. "Hating one's mother was the prefeminist enlightenment of the fifties, as women writers attempted to resolve their sense of freakishness and anger by exorcising what Adrienne Rich called the 'victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr'" (Showalter *A Jury* 401). Indeed, mothers loom large in *Bell Jar*, *Ella Price's Journal, Fear of Flying*, and *Kinflicks*, as feminist daughters seek to break with the domestic tradition and forge a new self. In part, this change in consciousness was a reflection of material changes in women's lives—in particular women's increasing entrance into the workforce and access to contraception. These changes led many women to break with the feminist mystique of their mothers' generation, nonetheless, the way forward was far from clear. As Margaret Drabble explains, "We do not want to resemble the women of the past, but where is our future? This is precisely the question that many novels written by women try to answer . . . never before . . . have women had so much to say, and so great hope of speaking to some effect" (cited in Greene 83). Drabble's question became increasingly central to feminist writers as they ran up against the limits of consciousness-raising. Its answer proved elusive.

The "Reassertion of the Personal" and the New Left

In its search for a new narrative form, the feminist literary movement was influenced by the politics of the broader political movements from which it sprang. The radical student movement, of which SDS was the clearest voice, was inspired by theorists from Camus to Mills to Marcuse in their concern with concepts of alienation and authenticity, and their quest for a new form of "participatory democracy" in which a "reassertion of the personal" would be possible. Indeed, the slogan "the personal is political," had its roots in SDS and in the theories of C. Wright Mills, whose "belief that feelings of personal frustration and powerlessness ought to be connected to public issues . . . [became] one basis for the characteristic assertion by the New Left (and later by feminists) that 'the personal' is 'political'" (Miller *Democracy in the Streets* 87). This tension was central to the larger questions of revolutionary theory and collective struggle. It also reflected a rejection of the old left, discredited by the legacy of Stalinism, and a broader repudiation of class politics. Raised in the post-war period of economic prosperity and rising working class living standards, the personal gained primacy over class as a site of struggle. At the same time, the New Left found inspiration in national liberation struggles that erupted around the world—most notably in Vietnam. As students participated in civil rights struggles and antiwar protests, they ran up against the failure of mass media, popular art, and the academy to give voice to the real experiences of oppressed people crushed under the weight of racism, imperialism, and power both in the United States and abroad. A search for "truth" and "authenticity" emerged from these early movements, as students and radicals rejected the *Leave It to Beaver* narratives they had been raised with as well as McCarthyite narratives of the US as a beacon of democracy fighting the worldwide threat of Communist annihilation. SDS activist Tom Hayden's early work covering voter registration efforts in the Jim Crow South reflected a larger concern with truth among writers of the period who sought to "make facts real," not only to "evoke . . . reader interest but productive commitment" (cited in Miller *Democracy in the Streets* 59). Such activists often encountered a sense of "despair at adequately conveying the 'real' truth—that is, the moral urgency of the situation" (Miller *Democracy in the Streets* 59). In pursuit of this "truth," sixties radicals sought to highlight the testimonies and narratives of the victims and eyewitnesses of the horrors they struggled against. From the Berkeley Free Speech Movement to the Winter Soldier hearings to "speakouts" against abortion laws, they used testimonial narratives to "speak truth to power" and give voice to the real experiences of ordinary people.

The countercultural movements that flourished in this period likewise shared an emphasis on democratizing and politicizing art while asserting the role of the personal and the subjective in expressing political commitment and collective outrage at a world gone mad. In both content and form, the period saw a radicalization in literature that was intimately tied to protest movements. In theater, poetry, and fiction, traditional forms were thrown out and new forms created that were deemed better suited to the revolutionary counterculture. All of these literary works participated in a democratization of literature, centrally concerned with what Marianne deKoven characterizes as an "egalitarian and diverse thrust"(5), as well as the idea that "the political has come to be lodged primarily in questions of subjectivity"(17). The increasing dominance of identity politics[1] within the movements of this period had its roots in the emergence of what she terms a "politics of experience" and a "politics of the self" in which the

[1] While the term identity politics is widely contested, at its core it refers to political analysis, theory and activism rooted in personal identity and experience, particularly the specific experience of oppression.

"truth" and "authenticity" of literary narratives were crucial if they were to function as testimonial narratives of the authentic experiences of their subjects.

The emphasis on "personal" revolutions and consciousness-raising reflected a mixture of dominant political ideas in the New Left—from the influence of Maoism to Frankfurt School philosopher Herbert Marcuse and Scottish psychiatrist R. D. Laing—as feminism raised the idea of the personal as the site of struggle and revolution for the collective emancipation of women as a whole. This also reflected women's disillusionment about the possibility of struggling for liberation in the atmosphere of the New Left, which was frequently plagued by sexism. This contradiction became evident at the 1967 SDS convention, when women who proposed that SDS take up the demand for women's liberation were jeered at, although the resolution was ultimately passed. Two years later, Rufus "Chaka" Walls, a member of the Black Panthers speaking from the stage of the SDS convention launched an attack on the women's liberation movement arguing that their "strategic position in the revolution (….) is *prone*"[2](Sale 567). The experience of the 1967 convention led Beverly Jones and Judith Brown to conclude in their manifesto "Toward a Female Liberation Movement," published shortly after the convention, that "people don't get radicalized . . . fighting other people's battles"; therefore, "for their own salvation and the good of the movement, women must form their own group and work primarily for female liberation" (Jones & Brown 18–19). Jones and Brown were not themselves involved in SDS and in fact saw the women of SDS as part of the problem, arguing that they rejected identifying with their own sex and used "the language of female power in an attempt to advance themselves personally in the male power structure" of SDS (Jones & Brown 18-19). Nonetheless, their manifesto reflects the conclusions drawn by many women who were themselves radicalized by fighting "other people's battles" but nonetheless faced difficulty finding allies in the battle for women's liberation.

Although the women's movement had erupted from the broader radicalization of a generation, feminists increasingly pitted oppressions against one another and degenerated into individualism and cultural feminism as a way out of political struggle altogether. Emerging just as the other movements that had inspired it began to decline, feminism often mirrored the New Left's tendency toward voluntarism and Maoism, which "viewed ideological transformation rather than economic development linked to the development of the grassroots-empowering democratic institutions as the key" (Elbaum 164). While the Maoism of the New Left frequently subordinated "personal concerns to political tasks," its

> assumption that changing the world required submitting individual behaviors to group examination was, for example, at least as widespread within the radical wings of the gay/lesbian and women's movements as it was among Marxist-Leninists. Indeed, within the women's movement there was considerable overlap between activists promoting the idea that "the personal is political" and those most enthusiastic about Mao's dictums to practice criticism-self-criticism and "combat liberalism."(166)

[2] Walls attributed this comment to Stokely Carmichael although there is some dispute whether or not Carmichael actually said this. Nonetheless, the comment is often misattributed to Carmichael.

For Maoists, the drive to proletarianize increasingly led to lifestyle politics[3] and reactionary conclusions such as, for example, promoting marriage and repudiating homosexuality in search of a perceived (and illusory) working-class identity. In a similar fashion, the women's movement's emphasis on personal politics led to increased reliance on lifestyle politics and a vision of cultural feminism that negated the need for political action or movements. As Alice Echols argues,

> More than ever, how one lived one's life, not one's commitment to political struggle, became the salient factor. One can even see this illustrated in the increasingly popular term "woman-identified," which seemed to suggest that one's attitude and behavior mattered more than one's political philosophy and stance. . . . Moreover, the focus shifted from building a mass movement to sustaining an alternative women's culture and community"(240-1).

Echols's *Daring to Be Bad* provides an important and compelling history of radical feminism and its trajectory toward cultural feminism. In this process, the radical content of feminism is lost as being a woman writer *itself* becomes an act of feminism—regardless of the actual politics of the work. The result is that throughout the decade, "feminism itself thus became individualized, psychologized, and apoliticized" (Hogeland "Men Can't be that Bad", 294). This broader trend is reflected in the reinterpretation of the movement's central slogan that "the personal is political."

From Consciousness-Raising to Identity Politics: The Perils of Politicizing the Personal and Personalizing the Political

In her 1970 essay "The Personal is Political," which helped to launch the slogan, Carol Hanisch explains the dilemma at the heart of consciousness-raising as a political strategy. She defends the political role of "therapy" groups, which were precursors of consciousness-raising groups, arguing that

> these analytic sessions are a form of political action. I do not go to these sessions because I need or want to talk about my "personal problems." . . . As a movement woman, I've been pressured to be strong, selfless, other-oriented, sacrificing, and in general pretty much in control of my life. . . . So I want to be a strong woman, in movement terms, and not admit I have any real problems that I can't find a personal solution to (except those directly related to the capitalist system). It is at this point a political action to tell it like it is, to say what I believe about my life instead of what I've always been told to say. (Hanisch 113)

In this context the personal becomes political, as women radicalized by the movements of the fifties and sixties face opposition to their own demands. They become compelled to "tell it like it is" and transform personal actions, thoughts and experiences into collective demands and a collective struggle.

For this reason, the texts of the feminist movement were defined by their commitment to analyzing the relationship between the personal and political. For writers like Plath and Lessing,

[3] As Elbaum argues, Marxist-Leninists influenced by Maoism sought to integrate themselves into working class jobs and communities and to create a culture attractive to workers. This led to an emphasis on emulating the lives and lifestyles of the working class.

this was not necessarily a consciously formulated political theory but rather a reflection of their own growing realization that the external world of the political is intrinsically linked to the internal world of the personal and psychological. Later feminists would make a conscious argument that personal actions could also constitute political activism and revolutionary change. Lessing and Plath became key figures not because of any deliberate participation in the movement or because they set out to articulate this new feminist consciousness but rather because their works reflected this insistence on the relationship between the personal and political, particularly in understanding women's oppression. Their works became part of the "feminist canon" of the time, in spite of Lessing's protestations and Plath's ambivalence, because they tapped into the political momentum and ideas shaping the incipient feminist movement.

Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* likewise shared what would become a point of unity among the majority of second-wave feminist texts: a frequent disillusionment with movements and overt forms of revolutionary political organization. From Lessing's depiction of the Communist Party to negative depictions of "liberated" men in later feminist texts (for example: Dan Harkan in *Ella Price's Journal*, Bennett Wing and Adrian Goodlove in *Fear of Flying*, and even Buddy Willard in *Bell Jar*), much feminist criticism took aim not at traditional macho patriarchal figures, but rather the latent sexism of "liberated" and "radical" men in and around traditional political movements. These texts echo Lessing in their frustration with the sexism that persisted even among the most radical members of a radical generation. In this context, the personal is once again privileged as women are forced to confront the ways in which sexism permeates personal relationships, even in the radical milieux of political movements and collective struggles. Despite the slogan she coined, Hanisch was clear that consciousness-raising alone could not transform the oppression of women in their personal lives. Her philosophy insisted on collective struggle, not individualism: "There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution" (114). For Hanisch, consciousness-raising groups could not solve the problems women faced in society or provide alternatives to women's oppression, nor were they meant to. While recognizing the family and women's conventional role within it as one source of the "political" oppression women face in their "personal" lives, Hanisch rejects "alternative life-styles" as a means of escaping the oppression of women within the family:

> We came to the conclusion that all alternatives are bad under present conditions. Whether we lived with or without a man, communally or in couples or alone, are married or unmarried, live with other women, go for free love, celibacy or lesbianism, or any combination, there are only good and bad things about each situation. There is no "more liberated" way; there are only bad alternatives. (114).

While Hanisch's arguments presciently anticipated the arguments of later cultural feminists and some radical feminist groups, they provide little in the way of a strategy for political liberation. As the revolution failed to materialize, many women became impatient and sought shortcuts to liberation. As one advocate of consciousness groups argued, "We weren't going to wait for a revolution before we tried to change our lives. . . . The more we could transform ourselves, our relationships, our consciousness, the more we would move towards a possibility for fundamental change" (O'Sullivan, cited in Adams 24). Too often consciousness raising led not to collective

action but to individualism, ultimately, as will be discussed further in the Epilogue, paving the way for the self-help books and power feminism of the 1990s.

As many feminists learned, consciousness-raising groups could also lead to internal struggles within movement groups, which negated their liberatory potential. As bell hooks argues, "the ability to see and describe one's own reality is a significant step in the long process of self-recovery; but it is only a beginning" (cited in Adams 26). As Zimmerman notes, the focus on identity politics increasingly led groups to fragment on the basis of identity: "The distinction between autonomy and separatism is a delicate one. . . . As personal politics creates more and more specialized groups the tendency toward fragmentation grows" (cited in Adams 27). Consciousness-raising groups began to focus on creating hierarchies of oppression and focused on fighting biases within the women's movement itself, a shift that reinforced individualism and encouraged endless self-analysis, internal debate and fragmentation.

In *Utopia Limited*, Marianne DeKoven argues that this paradigm shift in the women's movement is the most clearly formulated expression of a broader shift from modernism to postmodernism that she locates in the 1960s. In defining the poles of reference in this political trajectory, she argues, "Where modernism represented fragmentation but yearned, in the light of master narratives, for unity, wholeness, and synthesis, postmodernism, in its decentering and diffusion of dualistic structures of domination, generally embraces fragmentation" (DeKoven 16). While DeKoven sees value in both modernism and postmodernism and makes clear that her interest is not in a polemic but rather in the shift between these two political modalities, her depiction of the postmodern as "progressive, egalitarian, diverse" in contrast to the "totalizing, hierarchical master narratives of sixties modern utopianism" reflects a clear political valorization of the postmodern (4). The depiction of all sixties philosophies of political transformation as utopian assumes the impossibility of fundamental political change. It is hardly surprising that she sees the emergence of identity politics as a "revolutionary concept" which though "steeped" in "dominant universalist revolutionary goals...was a crucial pivot to the postmodern repudiation of these universalist emancipatory goals of modernity" (DeKoven 25). Thus, she argues, "the revolutionary modern 'the personal is political' became the subversive postmodern 'the political is personal'" (DeKoven 262).

The emphasis on identity politics was, in part, a reaction to the biases of liberal mainstream feminism, which focused primarily on upper-class white women to the exclusion of women of color, working-class women, and particularly lesbian women, whom Betty Friedan famously depicted as a "lavender menace" to the movement. Radical feminism challenged liberal feminism early on for these limitations and biases; it subsequently broke from the more liberal wing of the movement to create "a political movement dedicated to eliminating the sex-class system" (Echols 6). Liberal feminism's failure to take up the struggles of marginalized women within the movement exacerbated the sense that only the victims of oppression could organize to fight their own oppression. As the Combahee River Collective declared:

> We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation is us. . . . This focusing on our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end someone else's oppression. (cited in Adams 23)

While many radical feminists thus embraced identity politics as a means of empowering the marginalized, by a vicious twist of logic, the same politics gave more privileged sections of the movement an excuse to ignore larger questions of oppression within the movement. As hooks pointed out, "slogans like 'organize around your own oppression' provided the excuse many privileged women needed to ignore the differences between their social status and the status of masses of women" (cited in Adams 27–28). In turning toward identity politics, many of the most radical feminists abandoned any possibility of organizing across class or racial lines. In doing so, they left the terrain of mainstream feminism firmly in the hands of upper-middle-class white liberal feminists, who were thus absolved of any responsibility to engage in struggles beyond their own demographic.

While DeKoven argues against this "familiar narrative of a depoliticizing fall from radical to cultural feminism" because it does "not allow us to understand this shift of the postmodern from emergent to dominant formation,"(262) the emergence of postmodernism itself, is arguably a product of a similar political trajectory. Ellen Meiskins Wood who historicizes the development of postmodernism in her work, *The Retreat from Class*, provides a useful historical context within which to locate these theoretical developments. While Woods focuses entirely on the development of postmodernism in Europe, her overall framework is relevant in the United States – and, indeed shares much with DeKoven's analysis of the broader political shifts of the period, particularly in its understanding of the postmodernism as a philosophy born out of a rejection of the 'old left,' Marxism and class politics. Woods argues that theoretical developments in the 1970s and 1980s associated with postmodernism and/or postmarxism are characterized by "the autonomization of ideology and politics from any class foundation"(Wood 2). This shift is a retreat from any possibility of radical social change in favor of politics based on subjectivity and personal politics.

For many people, identity politics and the politics of the personal became a way out of politics altogether. The vibrancy of the early women's movement flowed from a radical reappraisal of the personal as something that was inherently political. Feminism and consciousness-raising was a way into politics, not out. As the feminist movement began its long decline, the emphasis on the personal increasingly gave way to a politics of identity which saw the personal as the sole realm of political action.

The Woman Writer in Search of a Form of Her Own

The role of the woman writer herself ,who frequently occupies a central role within the narratives studied here, was central to the development of feminist fiction in the 1960s and 1970s. In a highly literary political movement, fiction and narrative became crucial as women writers sought to escape the narrative representations of women that dominated the media, consumer culture, and conventional literary forms. Both Plath and Lessing played a pioneering role in thematizing the struggle of the woman writer in search of a new literary form. This was a new literary development, with roots in the broader radicalization of the period, that challenged artistic domains previously dominated by men. As Linda Huf argues in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman* (1), prior to the feminist movement, there were few female-authored "autobiographical novels depicting their struggles to become creative artists." This began changing, however, in the 1960s. Within these narratives, the "artist heroine" is divided, "torn between life and art, more specifically between her role as woman, demanding selfless devotion to others, and her aspirations as an artist, requiring exclusive commitment to work" (5). For Huf,

these works are distinguished from their male-authored counterparts by the "radicalism" inherent in the artist heroine's dual struggle as an artist and as a woman who must challenge her oppression in society (10). While these narratives are undeniably political, to say that they are inherently radical veers toward cultural feminism and an argument that fiction by women is inherently radical on the basis of its authorship. There is, in fact, a wide variation in the radicalism of these works—though, by necessity, the struggle of the woman writer raises larger political questions.

These narratives' concern with form and use of metafiction reflects an attempt to problematize and challenge the limitations of both literary and social conventions that limit the woman writer. Greene argues that metafiction

> is a powerful tool of feminist critique, for to draw attention to the structures of fiction is also to draw attention to the conventionality of codes that govern human behavior . . . Like the women's writing described by Mary Jacobus, feminist metafiction is "a process" played out across literary and ideological boundaries, a "transgression of literary boundaries" "that exposes those very boundaries for what they are—the product of phallocentric discourse." (Greene "Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory" 293)

For Greene, feminist fiction is in fact defined not only by "its analysis of gender as socially constructed and capable of being reconstructed" but also by "its enlistment of narrative in the process of change" ("Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory" 291). While narrative as a literary form is always, in Greene's analysis, informed by an emphasis on change, this transformation is imbued with greater political force in texts that are deeply concerned with ideas and theories of liberation:

> The feminist fiction that flourished in the late sixties and early seventies came out of a liberation movement, the so-called second wave of feminism in this century, and focused on women's effort to liberate themselves from structures of the past. . . . The most revolutionary feminist fiction is so by virtue of textual practice as well as content, and is unsettling not only formally and structurally but in unsettling our relation to the past, in revealing the past as changing in response to the present and as capable of transforming present and future as well ("Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory" 291–92).

Greene's argument resonates with Raymond Williams's analysis of changes in "structures of feeling," in which he argues that the separation of the social from the personal is also a separation between past and present. Thus, "the social is always past" and "all that is present and moving, all that escapes or seems to escape from the fixed and the explicit and the known, is grasped and defined as the personal: this, here, now, alive, active and 'subjective'" (Williams 128). He continues, "The idea of structure of feeling can be specifically related to the evidence of forms and conventions—semantic figures—which, in art and literature, are often among the first indications that such a new structure is forming" (133). Thus, the feminist movement's enlistment of first-person fictional narratives in the service of a wider transformation of consciousness is connected to a broader social transformation which has yet to find full articulation.

In *The Necessity of Art*, Ernst Fischer argues that form evolves as a result of changes in social content—the latter a product of larger sociopolitical changes in society. Fischer writes that "a new set of subjects, new forms of expression, a new style, are evolved as a result of changes in social content" (167). Thus, he argues, "Form is not something accidental, arbitrary, or, inessential"; rather, "form is the expression of social purpose. . . . *Form is social experience solidified"* (173, emphasis in original). Greene's argument that the form of feminist fiction is as revolutionary as its content is consistent with Fischer's argument. Indeed, to use Fischer's thesis, it is because of the revolutionary content of the feminist fiction of the 1960s and 1970s that the form must adapt, transform, and challenge existing literary conventions. In other words, feminist fiction radically alters the form of the novel because its social purpose cannot be otherwise expressed.

As discussed earlier, the role of the "I" in these texts is central, as it is indicative of the broader movement's "reassertion of the personal" in the realm of political discourse as well as an attempt to use testimonial narratives to expose power structures that stunt human development and constrain the individual's quest for true liberation. Like the abolitionist movement a century before, sixties radicals sought to harness the narratives of individual victims of oppression to mobilize a political movement. This new literature sought to give voice to the voiceless and power to the powerless. Within the feminist movement, this emphasis on the personal and the subjective experience and voice of the narrative was crucial; it served to politicize and universalize "personal" experiences of oppression and make them public. As Adelaide Morris put it,

> An "I" centered narrative that we might call the "room of one's own" plot links a series of writings otherwise . . . diverse. . . . In spite of their sometimes droll or macabre details, these documents were read as realistic accounts of the actions of recognizable women in familiar social contexts. Whether bildungsroman, künstlerroman, coming-out story, or personal/critical essay, each of these writings charts the gradual emergence of a unitary subjectivity the protagonist recognizes as her "true" self. Since the authenticity of this self is most persuasively guaranteed from within, it is not surprising that "room of one's own" narratives tend to be told in the autobiographical or pseudo-autobiographical first-person singular, an intimate, urgent voice that imparts information about life, demonstrates how the personal can become political, and supports an implied or overt claim about inner-directedness. The first-person singular enacts the crucial feminist shift from "she" who is object to "I" who experience myself as subject. It certifies the protagonist as a woman who has "found the courage . . . to use the pronoun 'I.'" (Morris "First Person Plural" 12–13)

The "I" marks the text as personal even as it grants agency and subjectivity to the protagonist. While feminist memoirs and autobiographical writing flourished, many feminist writers turned to the realm of fiction for greater flexibility in constructing narratives that could give voice not only to the personal experiences of those on the forefront of a new liberation movement, but also to those who had yet to be or were in the process of being radicalized by the newly forged feminist consciousness. The "I" in these narratives remains central; it provides an aura of authenticity that helps to underline the narrative's collective and political "truth," even if its characters and events

are fictional constructions. Such narratives trouble the boundaries between truth and fiction, drawing on personal experiences and focusing on the development of a new subjectivity while borrowing fictional narrative conventions to tell their stories.

In enacting the feminist slogan that "the personal is political," these novels frequently rely on a form that borrows from autobiography to assert a degree of veracity and truth to the personal tales of the protagonists. As fictional protagonists who are also representational characters standing in for women's experiences more generally, their narrators hover between the fictional voice of the novel and the "I" of autobiography, blurring the lines between fiction and truth and yet claiming a narrative authenticity based on personal experiences that transcend the fictional nature of the work. Rosalind Coward notes,

> One striking feature is the frequency with which we meet with the quasi-autobiographical structure. *The Women's Room*, *Fear of Flying*, *Kinflicks*, *Sita*, all foreground the writer, struggling to turn her experience into literature, even if this figure loiters in the background in god-like omnipotence as in *The Women's Room*. Moreover the "voice" of the central protagonist, if not presenting itself directly as the author's voice, frequently offers itself as "representative" of women in general (58).

As a form of metafiction, these works thus problematize conventional forms and narratives: literature itself. As Greene argues, these metafictions are distinct from later "postmodern" narratives in that they are informed by a feminist critique of literary conventions and a concern with the relationship between form and content. This concern is all the more imperative as feminist writers seek to challenge the political limits of conventional literary narratives on female subjectivity, agency, and liberation. As a result, they espouse clear concerns about the limits of fiction, language, and literary tradition, writing stories steeped in the liberatory potential of fiction to raise consciousness and participate in the struggle for women's liberation.

For Coward, feminist fiction has its roots in the confessional novel, borrowing elements of form and structure as well as the centrality of experiences of sexuality to the genre. However, feminist fiction expands the genre through its insistence that the personal experiences are not individual but can be used to analyze society as a whole. Such fiction points to the intersections between the realm of personal experience and the political, historical and social structures more commonly associated with the public realm. In doing so, feminist writers brought the personal into the public realm and turned the private lives of women into stories of public concern, imbued with political importance.

The structural similarities between many of these narratives are remarkable, as they mark the construction of a new genre. This new genre is in many ways, I would argue, a modern captivity narrative which charts the protagonist's progress from captivity within the oppressive grip of domesticity to a new consciousness and personal (albeit limited) liberation. As foundational myths of American identity, captivity narratives employed female bodies and sexuality "to serve the territorial and political purposes of white men and their claim to dominance"(Faery 10). As foundational texts of the feminist movement, the housewife fiction of the 1970s reclaims those bodies and sexuality, liberating the suppressed feminist consciousness that had been held captive by 1950s domesticity, to forge a new feminist identity. Most of these narratives share a basic plot structure: the female protagonist begins the narrative unconscious (or only vaguely conscious) of the ways in which her personal life is constrained and stunted by

oppression. Like later feminist fiction, the narrative is structured around the protagonist's gradual recognition of oppression and exploitation and the myriad ways in which the political impacts the personal. This growing consciousness leads to some form of breakdown or fragmentation from which a new self is reconstructed or reborn and some kind of personal empowerment is achieved. While Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* provided a crucial early model for this genre of literature, it is also notable for its departure from this model. It begins with "free women" who quickly discover that they are not as "free" as they thought. Nonetheless, even this exception to the rule played an important role as a template, as it contains many of the structural and thematic elements that would define the genre. In these narratives, the relationship between the personal and political is central: political empowerment begins with empowering the self. The self in these narratives is "the self solicited by consciousness-raising rituals, a self whose slow struggle to the surface is named, in another major trope of the 1970s, 'the awakening'" (Morris 13). Nonetheless, as these protagonists seek individual solutions to their collective problems, the narratives themselves reflect a collective movement to forge a new consciousness and fight for women's liberation.

These narratives radically alter and overthrow the structure of conventional romance plots by rescuing women from their towers and making them the subjects, not objects, of the narrative. Likewise, they reject the conventional endings of such narratives in marriage or death, depending on the protagonist's willingness to abide by the conventions of female domesticity. As Morris argues,

> in these renditions, marriage *is* death, as withering to a woman's creativity as poverty or prejudice. The "room of one's own" plot starts with the suppression of a woman who yearns to write or paint or sew or sing or lead a revolution but who must instead rest, raise children, cook dinner, or work on a line at a factory. Even when this story is not narrated in the imperiled first person, it portrays the "I" as a sealed space, an intact essence that has been threatened, broken into, violated, all but ruined. Success in this plot is the retrieval of the battered "I" (14).

While the retrieval of the "battered 'I'" may be deemed a step forward for feminist fiction, as it enacts the first step in the consciousness-raising process, to call it "success" and end it there leaves the larger quest for liberation unfulfilled in the material world. Thus these narratives continue to struggle with the problem of endings and the limits of conventional forms to give voice to a struggle that has not yet achieved its ultimate goals. These novels search for an alternative literary convention to express the liberation of the new female self. While the female protagonist emerges from these narratives with a newly forged consciousness, there is nowhere for her to go as long as this consciousness is only internal and continues to be denied by the material realities, social oppression, and economic constraints of society at large. While they testify to the revolutionary impact of feminism on the realm of the personal, these narratives struggle to provide a way forward while the power structures that perpetuate women's oppression remain more or less intact, limiting any possibility of liberation beyond the construction of the self. Many provide little resolution to the problems and conflicts they explore. Where there is any resolution at all, it is often a self-reflexive one in which writing and/or the construction of new narratives is the key to setting one's self free. In other words, personal empowerment comes up against the limits of social oppression. The "revolution within"

advocated in these novels has trouble moving beyond the realm of the personal to accomplish a revolution in society at large.

While these realist first-person narratives were praised by feminist critics of the 1970s as "the correct literary representation of feminism" (Hogeland "Men Can't be that Bad" 298), other critics such as Ellen Morgan argue that realism is inherently limited because it makes it difficult to represent "what it is like to live as a free and fully human female being in a patriarchal society" (cited in Hogeland "Men Can't be that Bad" 298). Many writers of feminist fiction likewise came to similar conclusions. Writers such as Bryant, Lessing, and Piercy increasingly abandoned realist personal tales of feminist political awakening and turned toward utopian forms of fantasy and science fiction to play out potential solutions and create a space for an imagined world in which the hopes of their politically awakened female protagonists can finally be fulfilled. Barring the attainment of liberation in the material world, fiction must rely on indeterminate endings that reflect the unachieved hope of the movement or resort to creating alternative worlds through fantasy or science fiction.

As Fischer argues, formal problems in art are related to their political content (170). Citing Hauser, he argues that formal problems are central, but that we must understand that "the works of art are not brought into being in order to solve these problems; the problems turn up in the course of creating works that answer questions having little connexion with formal and technical problems—questions of world outlook, of the conduct of life, of faith and knowledge" (171). In other words, the formal problems feminist fiction writers encounter are not simply questions of form, but of politics. To challenge literary convention and achieve a liberated ending in a realist novel with a fictional female protagonist requires fighting for liberation in the material world. This is not a literary problem, but a political and sociological one.

Later works frequently resort to disillusionment—or leave us with the woman writer herself, recording her history. It is notable that many works of literature by feminist writers—as well as other oppressed and marginalized writers who write in pursuit of liberation—end with writing. While writing might not set one free, it does provide a record of struggle and a history of resistance. In the absence of revolutionary political and social change, this is often the greatest political contribution an author has to offer.

Feminist Fiction and the Politics of the Personal

The early texts of the feminist movement had a powerful role in shaping the form and content of later narratives. As consciousness-raising texts (intentionally or not), all of these narratives share certain fundamental concerns: they assert a feminist political vision that collapses the ideas of separate private and public spheres; make a powerful, if not always explicit, argument for women's liberation; and, in adhering to the slogan that "the personal is political," depict feminism as never completely separate from other contemporary political movements. Even in the works of Plath and Lessing, the personal trajectory of the protagonist is unimaginable without an understanding of the larger political period: the execution of the Rosenbergs and the betrayals of Stalin and the Communist Party are the political reflections of a global bell jar that always threatens to engulf the self.

Likewise, in the feminist fiction produced in the early seventies, the political awakening of the female protagonist is based on a growing awareness of her own oppression but also reflects the wider radicalization of the period. The Vietnam War, the civil rights and Black Power movements, and the New Left frequently play central roles in these texts as the "housewife" develops a new political consciousness that extends beyond her own oppression and

nurtures an emerging feminist consciousness. These novels perform the role of consciousness-raising groups by creating personal narratives that ultimately reveal the political underpinnings of oppression in the private realm.

If the "political" landscape is always a crucial background against which these feminist awakenings take place, the interior world is also crucial to these narratives. The realm of psychology is central to most of these works as the protagonist seeks to free her consciousness from the decaying world of the 1950s nuclear-family ideal. In exploring the realm of the psyche, many of these writers explore a politics of madness, a rejection of the individualization of the psychological, in favor of understanding the world as being itself at odds with the most basic needs, desires, and impulses of humanity. Influenced by the anti-psychiatry movements of the time and the writings of Laing, Marcuse, and others, for many feminists and radicals of the New Left, madness was the only sane reaction to a world that had gone stark raving mad, or so it seemed. The anti-psychiatry movement also challenged traditional notions of the profession and revolutionized its most oppressive and exploitative practices. The politics of madness had a particular poignancy for women writers, who had all too often been the victims of psychiatry and the misogyny of many of its greatest proponents and practitioners. The feminist movement itself played a role in revolutionizing the realm of psychology, exposing sexism and arguing for new practices and theories in the medical world more broadly that would challenge the underlying biases women patients faced. Increasingly, the very notion of "madness" was challenged as these movements in psychology sought to relocate the source of mental illness not in the subconscious but in a world gone mad—a world that incites fragmentation and breakdown in the individual.

Borrowing the Laingian notion that madness is frequently a sane response to the madness of the world, the feminist narratives that developed in this period frequently explore the psyches of their female protagonists, who seek to construct a liberated identity in a world that denies them this possibility. All of these novels explore to varying degrees the breakdowns, fragmentation, trauma, and alienation that are the byproducts of a world seemingly intent on the annihilation of humanity and subjectivity, particularly for women—as well as the failures of traditional psychiatry or medicine to provide any solutions. Too often, psychology offered not liberation but shock therapy, Freudian theories that belittled women and their experiences, and exploitative and repressive psychologists for whom the struggle for women's liberation was itself a psychological disease. In many of these works, the character of an oppressive male psychologist figures prominently, exposing the sexism within the psychiatric establishment.

These narratives are replete with descents into madness as metaphors for the profound madness of the world and the traumatic and oppressive effects of oppression and alienation on the female psyche. Even in the very "personal" realm of psychiatry, the political is thus always omnipresent. Many of these narratives trace the protagonist's development through some kind of breakdown to a recovery that allows the protagonist to emerge at the end of the narrative with some measure of personal liberation. Nonetheless, the madness of the world is always on the verge of erupting anew and threatening the protagonist's newly constructed identity. Like Plath's bell jar, it is always just out of sight, threatening to descend once again on the female protagonist. Without a collective solution to women's oppression, the bell jar is an ever-present threat, rooted in the political and suffocating the personal on every level.

Lastly, central to all of these narratives is the role of the woman writer herself. The vast majority of the feminist narratives explored in this dissertation feature women writers and artists as protagonists, themselves struggling with the limits of form as they engage in metafictional rebellions to push the boundaries of literary convention. A key feature of the feminist fictions

explored in this dissertation is the centrality of the woman writer as fictional protagonists and the resulting concern with form as well as content in creating a new feminist consciousness. All of the novels explored here in depth feature a woman writer as protagonist—most of them writers by profession or training, with the exception of Ella Price and Bridget Jones, who as diarists are the only amateurs of the group. This distinguishing feature lends itself to metafictional forms, as the conventions and limitations of fiction are thematized in the works. This struggle against literary convention is central to these texts, as writers search for narrative structures that liberate rather than contain the woman writer. The potential and limitations of narrative to capture an authentic voice and to tell a "true" story are explored in a world in which "truth" is often "stranger than fiction" and in which fiction is often a more apt vehicle for conveying the truth of feminism's individual and collective stories.

In Chapters 1 and 2, I look at the literary precursors of the women's liberation movement: Sylvia Plath and Doris Lessing, whose works provide the prototype for later texts. The publications of *The Golden Notebook* (1962) and *The Bell Jar* (1963) helped to give birth to a new feminist movement in fiction. The American feminist movement seized upon these novels, first published in England, as embodying their movement's slogan that "the personal is political." Written as first-person narratives that blend autobiographical elements into the fictional, they were read and discussed in consciousness-raising groups by women who were radicalizing and trying to understand the relationship between their own personal experiences and the oppression of women more broadly. While neither Lessing nor Plath considered themselves feminists, nor were they active participants within the movements that helped make their works famous, they nonetheless played a crucial role in shaping the emerging feminist consciousness and inspired the narrative forms and themes of later works. Lessing and Plath both share with their later counterparts in the feminist movement a concern with narrative form and the ability of fiction to give voice to the struggle of a female subject to make sense of her world. They are emblematic of the personal politics of the period and enact the dual poles of the personal and political. In *The Bell Jar,* Plath traces a path from subjectivity to politics as Esther Greenwood's personal tale becomes in many ways a political allegory for the plight of the woman writer of the 1950s. In contrast, for Lessing, politics is the entry point for a new subjectivity, as the narrative begins with a politically awakened "free woman," Anna Wulf, who increasingly rejects the politics of her past as staid and oppressive, experiences crisis and fragmentation, and forges a new subjectivity which allows her to reemerge (semi-)whole.

These early texts inspired an avalanche of writing in the early 1970s by feminist writers eager to capture the movement in print. In Chapter 3, I explore the explosion of feminist "mad housewife" fiction of the 1970s, which exemplifies the height of feminist fiction as a consciousness-raising tool. Writers like Marge Piercy, Erica Jong, and Dorothy Bryant continued in the footsteps of Plath and Lessing, writing first-person fictional narratives that charted women's progress from the "feminine mystique" into a new feminist consciousness. Like Friedan, feminist writers of the early seventies avidly exposed the "problem with no name" and tore apart the glossy, idealized, and entirely fictional image of the smiling 1950s housewife. For second-wave feminists, the politics of the family, housework, and childcare were issues of utmost political importance.

The early novels associated with the eruption of feminist fiction and political activism consciously identify with the women's liberation movement. Indeed, works like Bryant's *Ella Price's Journal* and Marilyn French's bestselling *The Women's Room,* among others, "even use the practice of 'consciousness-raising' as framing devices" (Coward "'This Novel Changes

Lives'" 53). In both content and form, these novels performed as consciousness-raising texts. Through these works, the authors use what Lauren Berlant refers to as the form of the "female complaint" to "create a vital space of communal political consciousness—a female centered public sphere"(238). In this context, Berlant argues, "feminism's crucial fusing of the personal and political comes from turning women's gyno-genealogical scars into diacritical marks in different kinds of oppositional narratives and social practices"(238).." The "housewife" novels that developed in this period are particularly emblematic of this impulse in feminist fiction. They expose the limits of consciousness-raising as a technique for liberation, since they cannot provide a solution beyond the internal revolution or the politically awakened self.

Chapter 3 ends by charting the trajectory from the more hopeful housewife tales of the early 1970s, of which *Ella Price's Journal* is a notable example, to later narratives in which the housewife escapes from the chains of domesticity only to find herself in a new prison. The decline of the movement as a whole was mirrored in fiction by increasing demoralization. Later feminist fiction such as *The Women's Room* grapples with the failure of consciousness-raising to fundamentally transform the world, depicting a new generation of politically awakened women who find themselves stymied at every turn. For the woman writer, writing itself is often the only means left through which to give expression to the hopes and aspirations of the women's liberation movement. The movement increasingly turns inward, questioning its own assumptions and political philosophies in view of the backlash that was gathering strength by the end of the decade. These same narratives contain the seeds of their post-feminist heirs: a later generation would adapt the feminist consciousness-raising narrative form in order to tell the stories of a new generation of post-feminist heroines like Bridget Jones, who struggle to find their way in a world in which women are expected to exude both feminist consciousness and a new incarnation of the feminine mystique.

Woman writers of color increasingly challenged the racial and class biases of the mainstream feminist movement. Chapter 4 explores these challenges to the women's movement, through a close reading of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979). For writers like Butler, who revisits both the 1970s and the antebellum South through a fictional personal narrative in *Kindred*, fiction creates a space for an interrogation not only of the women's movement, but also the civil rights and Black Power movements in the wake of their demise. For writers wading through the debris of social movements as the eighties backlash gained force, fiction still provided a space in which to examine the past and write the personal and political epitaphs of a generation whose consciousness had been raised.

For African American women writers suffering under the burden of a double oppression as women of color, the politics of the civil rights and Black Power movements were equally, if not more, influential in forging a new consciousness. While many white feminist writers saw women's imprisonment within the family as something to be escaped to create a space for artistic expression, for their African American counterparts, family was something to be both escaped and reclaimed in the wake of slavery, which denied its victims the right to have a family at all.

In this chapter, I analyze *Kindred* as an emblem of a new genre of personal/historical narratives, drawing on the work of Ashraf Rushdy, who has widely analyzed the development of the "neo-slave" or "palimpsest" narrative as a literary expression of this political period. Like many of the narratives of white feminist writers, Butler's protagonist is a writer who must escape the oppressive weight of the family to find any possibility of sanity or liberation. Unlike the other protagonists, she must return to the antebellum South to do so. There, she first saves her ancestor, the young master and future slaveowner, allowing him to live long enough to rape her

great-grandmother to begin the painful family history of which Dana is a product. The extreme violence and inhumanity of America's "peculiar institution" makes Dana's relationship with her "kin" and "kindred" far more complicated those of than her counterparts in housewife fiction. Straddling genres, Butler draws on fantasy, neo-slave narratives, and the first-person fictions of the feminist movement to create a "grim fantasy" in which the protagonist journeys across time and space to explore the politics of her generation. While this novel is less imbued with questions of psychology and psychiatry, Butler shares with other writers of the period a sense of the politics of madness as the trauma of history continues to encroach on the present, preventing the full development of human potential. For Dana, history is a threat to her sanity as well as her physical health. Only by exploring that history and freeing herself from its grip can she survive, albeit scarred and wounded from her journey. The physical and allegorical journey at the heart of *Kindred* provides a stunning testament to the special oppression of African American women under the weight of this history and the challenge facing African American writers in telling these tales that elude textual representation. Toni Morrison captures this conundrum when she writes at the end of *Beloved* (a work that is similar in genre and political impetus) that "this is not a story to pass on" (Morrison *Beloved* 275).These are stories which are in many ways impossible to pass on (transmit) to future generations—and even more impossible to "pass on" (skip).

The Epilogue looks at the transformation of the first-person fiction narratives of the feminist movement in the age of post-feminism. It explores the trajectory from feminism to post-feminism and the shift from a collective to a purely personal understanding of liberation as lifestyle politics, "power" feminism, and individualism gain ground. I argue that the triumph of post-feminism has its roots in the failure of the women's liberation movement to achieve real liberation and the contradictions inherent in its personal politics. The tensions that characterize post-feminism are already present within feminist fiction. Bridget Jones, in Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996), is perhaps the post-feminist heroine *par excellence*, stuck in a world of contradictions that expects her to be independent and dependent, a career woman and a housewife. She must embody the trappings of middle-class feminism without challenging the material basis for women's oppression, leading to a life of loneliness, insecurity, and self-help books. Nonetheless, Bridget Jones is a child of the protagonists of feminist fiction past. In particular, I analyze *Fear of Flying* by Erica Jong as an emblematic (and extremely popular) early feminist text that helped to pave the way from feminism to post-feminism. Whereas, in early feminist fiction, the idea that the personal is political functions as a means of radicalization and a call to political activism, it leads in Jong's work to a retreat into individualism. If the fiction of second-wave feminism in the United States has its roots in the repressed rage of the 1950s, the post-feminist heroines of the 1990s have their feet firmly planted in the fertile soil of 1970s feminism.

The triumph of the women's liberation movement, in particular in its artistic expression, was to fundamentally challenge the separation of personal and political concerns. In doing so, it helped to democratize the realm of literature, creating a new space for writers who had been marginalized and/or excluded from the "canon." Without fail, writers and activists of the feminist movement made the personal very public, challenging the world to recognize the insidious nature of women's oppression, demanding a public voice, and refusing to be swept back under the rugs of domesticity from whence they had escaped. Nonetheless, the personal politics that so empowered a generation of women contained the seeds of the movement's demise; too often it led not to liberation and collective struggle but to individualism and internalism. The successes of the women's movement were many; nonetheless, for a new

generation of women raised on *Bridget Jones* and *Sex and the City*, a new movement is desperately needed, a movement that can take on the challenge of increased social inequality that has put ever more burdens on working women. Feminist heroines like Sylvia Plath, Doris Lessing, Octavia Butler, and Marge Piercy continue to inspire. But to move forward we need to learn the lessons of their radical experiments in art and politics and forge a new consciousness that can not only make the private public and the personal political, but change politics as we know it.

Writing from *The Bell Jar*: The Curious Case of Sylvia Plath

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.
—Sylvia Plath, "Lady Lazarus"

Few literary figures trouble the boundary between truth and fiction, life and art, to the extent that Sylvia Plath does. Since her death in 1963 and the posthumous publication of her most (in)famous work, her life, legacy, and work have become a battleground of interpretations and claims (legal and otherwise) as warring parties stake claims to the true narrative of her life and work. As Jacqueline Rose notes in her introduction to *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath,* "Sylvia Plath haunts our culture. She is—for many—a shadowy figure whose presence draws on and compels. . . . Execrated and idolized, Plath hovers between the furthest poles of positive and negative appraisal. . . . Above all she stirs things up" (Rose 1). Marsha Bryant calls Plath "literary culture's ultimate commodity" ("Plath, Domesticity and the Art of Advertising" 17). Plath has been diagnosed, celebrated, condemned, and idolized and her life read over and over again through her poetry, fiction, journals, and letters.

The extremely personal nature of Plath's confessional poetry, particularly the poems in *Ariel* and her innovations in the realm of autobiographically inspired first-person fiction in *The Bell Jar,* raises larger questions about the relationship between the personal and the political—a question at the center of the women's liberation movement. Her audience has been divided and fragmented by those who seek to read her as symbolic of a larger political narrative. On one side of the Plath narrative, we find a victim of women's oppression and the archetype of the female poet, whose creative imagination seethed and exploded under the foot of the patriarchal Ted Hughes who, in this narrative, dons the mantle of male privilege as husband, poet, and ultimately executor of her estate. On the other side lie those who seek to hold Plath up as a warning of the dangers of madness, pathologizing her life and poetry and diagnosing her illness through her work. These readers see Plath as the "madwoman in the attic," whose death is proof of a personal tragedy for which only her mind is culpable. In both narratives, the personal is inevitably political as Plath's life and work become a lens through which feminism is debated, narrativized, pathologized, and/or celebrated. Her death and the political significance with which feminism endowed it makes the fictional personal narrative of *The Bell Jar* inherently political. It becomes part of a larger attempt to re-theorize women's lives.

The Trouble with Plath

Plath's story thus becomes her readers' story. In this contested terrain, her life and, most notably, her death become inextricably linked to her representations of herself. Interpretations and readings of her work cannot help but seek to interpret her death and find causes for her suicide between the lines on the page. As Ted Hughes notes in explaining his publication of her journals, "the circumstances of her death, it seems, multiplied every one of her statements by a wild, unknown quantity" (Hughes, "Plath and her Journals" 152–52). In this context, "dying" becomes an intrinsic part of the body of her "art," subject to interpretations that are themselves bound within larger cultural and political debates. Plath's death made her personal narrative (or at least its end) extremely public and for the incipient feminist movement (and its critics)

extremely political. As Cynthia Sugars notes, Plath's life "becomes inseparable from the Plath canon, for it is the totality with which the critics grapple, a totality which retroactively, through the suicide, is accorded narrative force and teleology." This approach poses dangers of a narrowly teleological reading, with her death always the ultimate marker in her narrative. Yet reading Plath's life and death into her work is also to some extent unavoidable precisely because most of it was published, edited, released, and fought over *after* her death. As a result, many of her artistic intentions are fundamentally unknowable and give rise to legal claims and battles over the control of her estate and interpretations of her work. Thus, Plath is always mediated through her heirs, including the Hughes family, who control her estate and her body of work. In this family drama, Plath's work cannot be separated from her life; her absence opens up a space in which others seek to speak for her and through her. Central to any discussion of Plath is the contest over who has the right to lay claim to her—to interpret her work, to speak for her, to control her legacy, and even to name her. This is made all the more complicated by the fact that her death left her work and estate in control of the two figures who most frequently reoccur as oppressive and dominating figures in her work: her husband, Ted Hughes, and her mother, Aurelia Plath. Since their respective deaths and the death of Plath's son Nicholas in 2009, control of the estate has fallen to Frieda Hughes, the daughter of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, who has remained a tight grip on her mother's life and work.

The controversies over Plath's legacy extend beyond the realm of the literary: even her body has become a battleground for feminism. As Rose and other critics document, her tombstone became contested terrain vis-à-vis her place in the feminist movement when it disappeared from her grave in April 1989, after repeated vandalism, during which the last name "Hughes" was erased. Ted Hughes' failure to replace the stone immediately led to further attacks; some saw this as symptomatic of the way he treated Plath when she was alive (Rose 65).

The controversy over Plath's work and narrative is crucially located within the specific cultural moment of the 1960s and 1970s. The incipient feminist movement seized on Plath as an icon of the movement, whose life and work, they argued, exposed and rebelled against a patriarchal society which they blamed for her death. Plath's emphasis on subjectivity opened the door to a political debate about women, oppression, and the role of the woman artist. Fierce debates raged over her place in this cultural and literary history, making her work a battleground on which feminism itself could be debated.

Within the feminist narrative of Plath's life, her husband Ted Hughes, came to stand in as the ultimate symbol of male dominance and violence toward women, his control of her estate after her death the ultimate insult to and degradation of Plath's life and work. The most notable literary example of this interpretation of Plath's life and death is contained in "Arraignment," a poem by Robin Morgan, a major figure in the more radical wing of the American feminist movement, which charges Hughes with Plath's murder, "a 'crime' in which she accuses the 'entire British and American literary establishment' of colluding" (cited in Churchwell 115). The poem continues by calling on Hughes' "girlish fans" to castrate, dismember, and murder him. Recognizing her own danger of becoming involved in the legal battles surrounding the Plath estate, she sarcastically ends the poem with "In the meantime, Hughes/ sue me" (cited in Churchwell 115). Morgan's attack on Hughes is symptomatic of radical feminism's reliance on patriarchy theory, which saw all men as oppressors and frequently advocated for a militancy heavily imbued with the politics of separatism. For writers like Morgan, Hughes was the oppressive patriarch par excellence, an enemy well worth as much enmity as radical feminism could muster.

On one side of this debate, Plath is a victim of the oppression of women under patriarchy as well as the embodiment of female rage and rebellion against this oppression; on the other side of the spectrum, Plath is dangerous precisely because she represents a "failed femininity" and thus presents distorted views of gender roles and the world that stem from her own psychoses (Rose 19). David Holbrook, the author of *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence* (1976), is the strongest advocate of this type of reading of her work. He argues, "One can see how Sylvia Plath appeals to women's liberators. . . . Sylvia Plath could scarcely find anything within her that was feminine at all . . . she is sadly pseudo-male, like many of her cultists" (cited in Rose 19). Other interpretations of her work from this period dismiss her poetry, ascribing her fame solely to the sensational details surrounding her death. The infamous literary critic Harold Bloom, for example, called Plath "an absurdly bad and hysterical verse writer" (Spirer "Candidates for Survival: A Talk with Harold Bloom"). In his introduction to *Modern Critical Views on Sylvia Plath*, Bloom compares Plath to another lesser-known female poet "whose tragic early death gave her a certain glamour for a time" (Bloom 1). Describing some of her poems as a "tantrum," he ascribes her fame primarily to the growing "School of Resentment" (Bloom 3), a school in which he also places such contemporaries as Adrienne Rich whose work he treats with equal condescension and disdain. One critic, Paul West, writes, "Had Sylvia Plath been ugly, and not died in so deliberate a manner, I wonder if she would have the standing she has" (cited in Churchwell 108). While all of these critics attempt to counter feminism's claim to Plath and the conflation of her life and work, they themselves rehearse the same displacement of Plath's life onto her work, either demonizing or trivializing it through readings that privilege personal narrative over art.

Within this debate, interpretations of Plath's work become a means of debating the validity of feminism itself. Al Alvarez, poet, critic and friend of Plath and Hughes, writes, in an attempt to speak for Plath, that "for the feminists, Plath was a terrible example of the raw deal women must expect in a world dominated by men. . . . I doubt that Plath would have seen herself that way. She was too talented and ambitious to want preferential treatment" (cited in Churchwell 120). That she could be both talented and ambitious *and* express anger at the role of women in a world dominated by men seemed an impossible consideration.

Plath polarizes her audience in such a way as to prevent any middle ground in interpreting her work. Erica Jong, who also claimed friendship with Ted Hughes, recalls when she "took the brunt of the Plath industry's assault" and was "picketed by an angry posse because [she] refused to mouth the feminist orthodoxy of the time, that Hughes had murdered Plath" (Jong, "An Art" 3). In this narrative, Hughes himself becomes a victim, falsely accused, convicted, and condemned by an angry feminist tribunal. As Plath is unable to speak for herself, the question of who can lay claim to her authentic voice becomes central to debates about her work. Her life itself, as much as her work, is cited as evidence for claims on all sides of the feminist divide. The personal is always political in these debates, as warring parties stake their claims on her body of work and, at times, on her body itself.

The question of editorial control and authority is central to debates around Plath's work. As executor of her estate, Hughes published *Ariel* posthumously and made editorial changes and deletions that fundamentally altered her conception of the work. Likewise, the tight control he maintained over access to her estate and permission to quote her work led to justifiable claims that he sought to limit interpretations of her life and work and to portray himself as the sole voice able to speak for Plath and interpret her poetry. Hughes burned the last journal Plath kept in the years leading up to her death, deleted certain poems from *Ariel,* and demanded extensive control

over biographies. He also replied frequently to critics, whom he berated for misrepresenting or misinterpreting Plath and her work. Such actions certainly open him up to charges of attempts to shape Plath's legacy. Ironically, Hughes, a British poet laureate whose literary career overshadowed Plath's during her life, has since been vastly overshadowed by Plath's work. He became, in the writer Janet Malcolm's words, "Plath's greatest critic, elucidator, and (you could almost say) impresario" (cited in Churchwell 113).

Plath's posthumous fame has at the same time cast Hughes as the emblematic patriarch in her narrative—a role he has had difficulty escaping and which has eclipsed his own art. Erica Jong describes an encounter with him in which his "vampirish warlock appeal" as a "born seducer" drew her in, saying that "only my terror of Sylvia's ghost kept me from being seduced" (Jong, "An Art" 2). Indeed, Hughes cannot elude "the ghost of Sylvia." Even his own collection of poems, *Birthday Letters* (1998) published thirty-five years after her death, is of primary interest for its attempt to respond to Hughes's critics. Andrew Motion, in his *London Times* review, argues:

> A particular moment in feminism—a surge of political correctness and a readiness to read poems as life-transcripts have combined to build a high wall round Plath. She has never been allowed to enjoy respect for her work without evoking pity for her situation. And what has Hughes done in the midst of this inferno? Published nearly all—but no, not quite all—Plath's writing. Justified himself in a steady trickle of letters to the press, introductions, and so on. Watched his early life turn into one of the most celebrated love stories of the century. And kept a bristling badger-silence which seemed dignified to some, reprehensible to others, and fascinating to everyone. (cited in Churchwell 119)

If, for the feminist movement, Plath has become a martyr of patriarchal oppression, then for other critics Hughes became a silent victim of the feminist movement, a portrayal equally invested in the larger political and cultural debate within which the Plath narrative has been read and interpreted.

Within this family drama, the role of Plath's mother, Aurelia Plath, has also created problems vis-à-vis the question of editorial control of Plath's work. Indeed, it was in deference to Aurelia Plath that the U.S. publication of *The Bell Jar* was delayed until after Plath's death and her own publication of *Letters Home* was viewed as an attempt to set the record straight in regards to the ominous role she frequently occupies within Plath's work. Each new narrative of Plath replays the conflicts and dynamics between Plath herself, her mother, and her husband and the larger readership who watch from the sidelines. As Rose notes,

> Like all family sagas, the story of Sylvia Plath seems to have the power to draw everybody who approaches into its orbit, to make you feel that somehow you belong (this is not quite voyeurism whose pleasure rests on exclusion, on a position that remains firmly outside). The Plath story at once involves you and asks for judgment. It asks you to apportion blame, to parcel out innocence and guilt." (Rose 105).

Plath's notable absence imbues her poetry and fiction with even greater force. It is precisely her inability to speak and respond to critics on either side of this divide that engenders the passion in this debate as each reader seeks to stake their claim to the truth about Plath. It is notable that many critical interpretations and biographies or introductions to her work begin with a

description of the author's first encounter with Plath, whether in person or through her writing, as if to authenticate the author's claim to truth or understanding of Plath's life and/or work. Sandra Gilbert maintains that Plath's lived myth "created Plath addicts" because her story was "our own" (cited in Sugars).

The Bell Jar's US publication in 1971 served to coalesce Plath's status as an icon of the feminist movement. Until the later proliferation of biographies of Plath and the release of her journals, letters and other documents about her life, it was the only available document of her life in print (Bundtzen 109). As a result, despite being fiction, it was read by many as the "explanation" of her death, the only narrative which provided the clues and social context that could give coherence to her actions. An immediate bestseller, it outsold her poetry, becoming for many the ultimate feminist coming-of-age story of the time. While the narrative itself is highly fictionalized and based on events ten years prior to her death, it also served to make her life inseparable from her writing. Its lasting appeal—having sold more than 3 million copies since 1972—is a tribute to both the specific way in which it gave expression to the social, political, and cultural developments of the period and also to the enduring legacy of these movements in shaping popular culture and providing a prototype for narratives by and about women. *The Bell Jar* encapsulated the inextricable link between the personal and the political.

The Bell Jar and the "Autobiographical Problem"

The publication history of *The Bell Jar* complicates any attempt to read it as purely fictional or autobiographical. Originally published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas in England shortly before Plath's death, the novel only gained a mass readership when it was posthumously published under Plath's name. Plath's motive for publishing under a pseudonym was apparently that she "regarded it as an 'autobiographical apprenticework,' a confession which, so she told A. Alvarez, she had to write in order to free herself from the past" (Perloff 507). In this context, the pseudonym served both to protect the real people on whom many characters were based, but also reflected Plath's somewhat ambiguous relationship to the novel and her fear of critics' responses to the work, which she herself deemed a "potboiler" (Bundtzen 109). Bourjaily reads the pseudonym as a "mask," arguing that Victoria Lucas "was a necessary fiction through which Sylvia Plath could hold back a really reckless commitment of talent, thought and feeling at the depths of where they are too nearly inexpressible to make for easy reading" (144).

Plath's ambivalence about the novel is further underscored by her stated motives for writing it: "a puzzling combination of financial opportunism and a desire to work through and master her personal history. . . . Plath's mixture of motives in writing the novel suggests an unresolved confusion about what the novel was supposed to do for her" (Bundtzen 109–10). While the novel can be read as a thinly veiled autobiography of Plath's twentieth year, it also functions as a fictional female coming-of-age novel in the tradition of Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye,* to which the novel is frequently compared. This combination makes it almost impossible for readers to separate fact from fiction.

Plath's suicide magnified the interpretive problems related to her novel as well as vastly increasing its appeal and readership. Her posthumous celebrity status led to the novel's republication first in England and later, sans the pseudonym, in the United States, thus further encouraging autobiographical readings (Alexander, "Introduction" xi). Aurelia Plath objected to its US publication in a letter to Harper & Row:

> "What I've done," I remember her saying, "is to throw together some events from my own life, fictionalizing to add color –it's a pot boiler really, but I think it will show how isolated a person feels when he is suffering a breakdown. . . . I've tried to picture my world and the people in it as seen through the distorting lens of a bell jar." . . . Practically every character in *The Bell Jar* represents someone—often in caricature—whom Sylvia loved; each person had given freely of time, thought and affection, and, in one case, financial help during those agonizing six months of breakdown in 1953 . . . as this book stands by itself, it represents the basest ingratitude. That was not the basis of Sylvia' s personality; it was the reason she became so frightened when, at the time of publication, the book was widely read and showed signs of becoming a success. Sylvia wrote her brother that "this must never be published in the United States" (cited in Ames 262-3).

Ultimately, the novel was published after Harper & Row agreed to allow Aurelia Plath to publish Sylvia's *Letters Home* to "correct" the record and provide a different depiction of Plath's relationship with the characters described in a more negative light in the novel. Its publication history underscores *The Bell Jar*'s tension between the fictional and autobiographical, the personal and the political.

By 1971, "Plath was nearly a household name . . . there were Plath groupies, and the women's movement was in full bloom, with recent books from Germaine Greer and Robin Morgan. Confessional literature was in vogue. . . . *The Bell Jar* sailed right onto the bestseller list" (McCullough, "Foreword" xii). It was greeted with enthusiasm by the emerging feminist movement and was also widely read as an autobiographical background to *Ariel*. At the same time, the critical praise for Plath simultaneously became more contested as "the general celebration gave place to an equally concerted denigration" (Huf 125). "Sylvia Plath was said to have disclosed in *The Bell Jar* a disposition that was 'bitchy,' spiteful,' and 'mean'" (Huf 126). As *The Bell Jar* helped to solidify Plath's status as feminist icon, this role was fiercely contested. Plath was accused of selfishness and egotism in some reviews, particularly by men such as Sam Maloff, who called her a ""bitchy, manipulative . . . 'user' of people" and described her madness as "self-indulgence like a temper tantrum" (cited in Huf 127). In all of these reviews, Plath and her narrator, Esther Greenwood, become one, making it difficult to separate the fictional voice in the novel from Plath's own. The polarized response to the novel in the United States, in this context, reflects interpretations of the Plath narrative as a whole—as either martyr of the feminist movement or man-hating madwoman who unfairly maligns others, particularly men. In many ways, responses to *The Bell Jar* reflect a political context in which the feminist movement itself was both increasingly polarized and polarizing in asserting its demands.

For critics, the publication of *The Bell Jar* at this critical juncture and the debates around her life, death, and art pose interpretative problems that are almost impossible to escape. All Plath critics must negotiate an approach to the novel's "autobiographical problem" while resisting the temptation to read it purely from an autobiographical perspective in which Plath's suicide is always the final chapter. For Bundtzen, for example, "the novel is closer in form and style to allegory than autobiography. . . . As an allegory, *The Bell Jar* is about . . . three aspects of femininity: the woman's place in society; her special creative powers; and finally, her psychological experience of femininity" (Bundtzen 113). Bundtzen argues that through the narrative, "Plath seems to have gained a new, and what we might now call a feminist, awareness of how her life has been shaped under male domination" (114). But, she continues, "the most important source of anxiety is Esther's supposed Electra complex," an analysis which is partly

based on the narrative of the novel itself but is heavily influenced by analysis of Plath's biography, including her poetry and an omitted scene from the novel (Bundtzen 134–140). This analysis is symptomatic of the interpretative problems posed by the novel—and by feminist fiction more broadly. As the personal becomes political in fictional narratives of the movement, the tendency to read such fiction as personal stories or as autobiography becomes increasingly prevalent. Too often, this tendency obviates the role of the woman author as artist, focusing on feminist texts as personal narratives in which the 'I' of the author and the 'I' of the narrator become one and the same.

Bourjaily (135) likewise grapples with the "autobiographical problem" by attempting to read the novel as the first work by "Victoria Lucas," a "young American writer . . . then living in England, otherwise unknown" (134). Bourjaily justifies her reading by arguing that "*The Bell Jar* is obviously relevant to the life and death of Sylvia Plath but the life and death need not be held relevant to *The Bell Jar*" (134) and provides an extensive and useful commentary on the important differentiation between author and narrator, arguing that Esther must be read as a created fictional character and not simply as a stand-in for Plath herself. She argues that there are notable differences in physical appearance which make it impossible to read Esther as the author. Bourjaily puts forth an interpretation of the narrative voice of the novel in which the "author has put ironic distance between self and character when author and reader share an understanding which eludes the character" (147). Throughout the novel, she argues that Esther's lack of awareness in certain social situations and her misinterpretation of other characters creates a gap between the narrator of the novel and the author, who subtly points to the limits of Esther's own self-awareness and ability to read others. This is particularly evident for Bourjaily in Esther's relationship with Doreen, whom she perceives as "wittier" than herself (even though this is not sustained by the text), as well as, most notably, in Esther's misinterpretation of Constantin's lack of sexual interest in her. For Bourjaily, "subtly, Sylvia Plath makes [Constantin] gay—by association" (149), although this interpretation eludes Esther herself.

For Bourjaily, Esther Greenwood becomes a means for Plath to deal with what she calls "the unwritable" (150). In grappling with the tangled web of the personal, psychic, and social history that informs the narrative, Bourjaily argues that one solution "is to fictionalize the unwritable thoroughly enough, by wishing it off on an invented character, so that it's no longer autobiographical" (151). The other way to deal with "the unwritable," according to Bourjaily, is through "a system of symbols, language, allusions and images"; thus, the essay concludes that "while Victoria Lucas was working with Esther Greenwood and Elly Higginbottom, Sylvia Plath was writing *Ariel*" (Bourjaily 151). Ultimately, in this analysis, *Ariel* and *The Bell Jar* become two sides of the same coin—both represent Plath's attempt to make sense of her own life, social position, and psyche, although one is fictional and one is symbolic. In this reading, the autobiographical element still plays a crucial role in understanding the narrative, but it is precisely the elusive nature of that autobiography that requires fictional expression. Esther Greenwood's fictional voice distances Plath from the text, but at the same time, the distancing technique itself provides insight into Plath's motives for writing the novel. In other words, Esther Greenwood is not Sylvia Plath, but she becomes a technique through which Plath can write and narrate her own "unwritable" history.

While Bourjaily's analysis is commendable in its attempt to separate fictional narrator from author, the tensions between these two voices are complicated by contradictions within the novel itself. While Plath goes to great lengths to distance herself from her narrator, there are moments when the slippage between Plath and Esther is problematic. While Esther Greenwood's

narrative focuses on the year 1953, there are brief moments in which the reader is made aware that this narrative is not meant to be read as written in that historical moment but rather from the perspective of an older narrator looking back on her past from ten years later. In one puzzling passage toward the beginning of the narrative, when Esther is introducing the historical context of the novel and the setting of the events of the summer of 1953 that will be related in the course of the narrative, she discusses the various objects she kept from her summer in New York: "For a long time afterward I hid them away, but later, when I was all right again, I brought them out, and I still have them around the house. I use the lipsticks now and then, and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses case for the baby to play with" (Plath, *BJ* 3). The narrator is thus introduced in the narrative as Esther Greenwood ten years later—she is now a mother and, we are told, "all right again." This narrative positioning creates a problem for any interpretation of the narrative voice in the novel. As Buntdtzen (112) argues, "These brief glimpses of Esther ten years later tell us that she is a wife and mother—two possibilities that look remote if not impossible from what we see of the youthful Esther, who says children disgust her and claims that she won't marry. As a result, these disclosures of Esther's future sound inconsistent with what we learn about her."

The ending of the novel resists providing closure by leaving Esther in the asylum awaiting a verdict on her "sanity" and questioning the sanity of a society in which women are forced to conform to roles that seem unappealing to her and whose constraints are arguably the chief cause of her madness. Nonetheless, this earlier passage points to a different kind of resolution of the narrative's conflicts—she is a mother who is "all right." The ten-year gap in the novel's narrative thus presents two versions of the narrator which are on the surface inconsistent and unimaginable. It reveals tension between a desire to resolve the conflicts raised throughout the narrative while simultaneously resisting this type of narrative closure, since these conflicts reflect societal conflicts that cannot be resolved in an individual or personal narrative. The lack of a coherent thread connecting these two narratives is, in part, what Plath is intent on illustrating. This passage likewise triggers an autobiographical reference—it is hard to imagine a need for this perspective from ten years later in the narrative, unless we recall that Plath herself is writing this story ten years after the events which inspired the novel, as a mother of two now separated from Hughes. If this passage points to an autobiographical impulse within the novel, it is also laced with tragic irony; it becomes almost impossible to forget that her comment about being "all right again" was published less than a month before her suicide. This passage points to the larger tensions between the autobiographical and the fictional that are contained within the novel itself, not simply projected onto it by critics reading it as part of the larger Plath canon and narrative of her life and death.

The tensions between the fictional and autobiographical and the question of truth within *The Bell Jar* have confounded not only literary critics but also the law itself, as the legal case surrounding the film version of *The Bell Jar* (1979) showed. After the movie was released, Jane Anderson, on whom the character of Joan Gilling was apparently based, brought a lawsuit, charging the filmmakers with "defamation, invasion of privacy, and intentional infliction of emotional damage" for portraying her as a lesbian (Rose 107). Anderson said that while she "instantly recognized herself" as Joan Gilling in the novel, "the homosexual implications of her portrayal had escaped her until Edward Butscher's 1976 biography of Plath" (cited in Rose 106). While the case itself was about the movie, Rose argues that

> a crucial issue was whether *The Bell Jar* was a literal (in the guise of fiction) or a wholly fictional representation of the facts in Plath's life. Hughes stated under

> oath that the novel was fiction . . . although he also said that his aim in laying down conditions for the film had been the protection of Aurelia Plath. . . . The novel is therefore fiction, but it is real enough for individuals to recognize themselves in it to need subsequent protection. (107)

The case hinged on whether or not the work should be treated as fiction—in which case the depiction of Anderson's character could not be considered libel—or as autobiography, in which case Anderson's case could be sustained. Anderson's case was complicated by the fact that the character Joan Gilling commits suicide in the novel—thus, Anderson's presence at the trial itself was proof of the work's fictionality.It was only the portrayal of her sexuality that led Anderson to sue.

In many ways, this case validated Aurelia Plath's fears about the novel's original publication in terms of the real people it fictionalized, frequently as caricatures, to suit the needs of the narrative. Hughes argued that the Gilling character was "a composite, made up of a number of real individuals condensed into a single form" (Rose 108). The fictional narrative contained enough truth to identify the plaintiff—who, despite this, was suing precisely because her character was portrayed in a libelous manner, and thus, was fictional. Ultimately, the trial centered on how to classify the book's genre of the narrative and thereby identify the burden of truth required. As Rose asks, "How to determine the truth-quotient of a form of writing which hovers between autobiographical reference and fiction, which displays the logic of both empirical and unconscious truth?" (108) The parties settled out of court; Anderson acknowledged, "that she had been 'unintentionally defamed'" (107). The trial itself underscores the elusive quality of Plath's novel: it resists easy categorization as autobiography or fiction. The fictionalized narrative is intimately entwined in the life narratives of Plath and those around her, but the "truth" behind the representations contained in the text constantly eludes the reader, the critic, and even the law.

Since this case, many biographers, filmmakers, and (more recently) novelists have found themselves enmeshed in the Plath family legal battle. At stake in each battle is the question of who can claim Plath's story and represent its "truth." The movie *Sylvia,* about Plath's life and marriage, was barred from quoting her work by the Plath estate and led to a pointed expression of outrage from Plath's daughter, Frieda Hughes, who

> wrote a powerful poem about the making of the movie, "My Mother," which serves as a jolting reminder of . . . whom we're really talking [about] when we talk of the milk Plath left out for her children on the day she committed suicide, the wet tea-towels she jammed in the joints of their doors. "Now they want to make a film/For anyone lacking the ability/To imagine the body, head in oven,/Orphaning children," she wrote. "They think/I should give them my mother's words/To fill the mouth of their monster/Their Sylvia Suicide Doll." . . . Plath's story is Frieda's story; but fame means we think it belongs to the rest of us (Viner).

Plath's story is both familiar and unimaginable. We identify with it and are horrified. In making her personal story public, she gave us a narrative whose gaps and silences demand to be filled. Her life and work demand urgently that we ask "Why?" As a new generation of women began to ask the same question on a mass level, the publication of *The Bell Jar* coincided with a political moment in which that urgency tapped a nerve. The answers, however, would for generations to come say more about readers themselves than about the ever-elusive Plath.

The Bell Jar as Feminist Novel

The Bell Jar in many ways mirrored and presaged the development of the feminist movement that erupted in the late sixties and seventies in the United States. Set in the 1950s, the narrative anticipated a rejection of the period's ideology, just as *The Feminine Mystique* would do, by bringing national attention to the "problem with no name." Indeed, Plath's journals and letters about the origins of the novel reflect an emerging consciousness about the social constraints placed on women, in particular the woman writer. The novel hit a chord for the emerging feminist movement and, as a result, "*The Bell Jar* [became] for the young of the early seventies what *Catcher in the Rye* was to their counterparts of the fifties: the archetypal novel that mirrors, in however distorted form, their own personal experience, their sense of what Irving Howe calls 'the general human condition'" (Perloff 508).

Ames notes, "As [Plath] became increasingly conscious of herself as a woman, the conflict between the life-style of a poet/intellectual and that of a wife and mother became a central preoccupation and she wrote 'it's quite amazing how I've gone around for most of my life as in the rarefied atmosphere under a bell jar'" (250). Later, Plath described the book she wanted to write, mentioning

> the pressures of the fashion magazine world which seems increasingly superficial and artificial, the return home to the dead summer world of a suburb of Boston. Here the cracks in [Esther Greenwood's] nature which had been held together as it were by the surrounding pressures of New York widen and gape alarmingly. More and more her warped view of the world around her—her own vacuous domestic life and that of her neighbors—seems the one right way of looking at things. (cited in Ames 254)

Thus, in Plath's conception of the novel, the specific social conditions of women in 1950s American society—in particular, the objectification and commodification of women by the media—are central to understanding the protagonist's later mental breakdown.
At the same time, Plath's rebellion against conventional forms and her attempt to construct a voice capable of expressing these dynamic tensions both contributed to her appeal and helped to shape subsequent narratives emerging from this period.

While the novel can be read primarily as a psychological narrative that traces Esther's breakdown, suicide, and rebirth, this narrative is incomprehensible without an understanding of the specific social conditions women faced in this period. Indeed, its indictment of the stultifying and destructive effects of women's oppression on individual women is scathing. In this sense, it is indeed the literary companion to Friedan's pivotal work: it rips the mask off the 1950s cult of womanhood. Even critics who tend to privilege a psychoanalytic reading of the novel, such as Buntdzen, acknowledge that "Plath begins with social oppression" (116). The question of women's role in society is central to the novel, whether it is read as an allegory of femininity (as in Bourjaily) or as a novel about "thwarted ambition" in which, as Huf argues, the "creative heroine is caught in the tug and pull between her aspirations as an artist and her education as a woman" (130). The first half of the novel charts Esther's rejection of this "education as a woman," which runs parallel with the growing depression and psychological fragmentation that lead to her suicide attempt. The social and the psychological are inextricably intertwined throughout.

The novel begins with Esther's incipient awareness that, despite having fashioned her life into the model success story of the 1950s woman, something is profoundly amiss. Esther is a successful student who has won a scholarship to an elite women's college as well as a fashion

magazine writing contest, which gives her the opportunity to spend a summer working at a women's magazine in New York. And yet, Esther realizes,

> I knew that something was wrong with me that summer. . . .
>
> I was supposed to be having the time of my life.
>
> I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls. . . .
>
> Look at what can happen in this country, they'd say. A girl lives in some out-of-the-way town for nineteen years, so poor she can't afford a magazine, and then she gets a scholarship to college and wins a prize here and a prize there and ends up steering New York like her own private car.
>
> Only I wasn't steering anything, not even myself. (Plath *Bell Jar* 2)

Esther suffers from Friedan's "problem with no name": a growing awareness that the female version of the American dream is rapidly becoming a nightmare from which she is desperate to escape. It is not coincidental that this realization comes while she is working at a women's magazine (modeled on Plath's experience at *Mademoiselle*) that consciously projects in its pages the stultifying image of the happy housewife and profits from the commodification of women in American culture. In this world, fashion is as crucial to women's success as education. Indeed, Doreen is introduced as going to a college that "was so fashion conscious, she said, that all the girls had pocketbook covers made out of the same material as their dresses" (5) Doreen's polar opposite, Betsy, is turned into a cover girl after a haircut. The first half of the novel charts Esther's gradual rejection of the oppressive femininity that mass media represents and promotes. This world is perhaps most ironically depicted in the "Amazon" Hotel (a pun on the Barbizon hotel, where Plath lived during her summer in New York)—a woman-only hotel where women's strength and position in society is determined by their willingness to allow themselves to be commodified by the fashion industry, in preparation for their ultimate career aspiration: marriage.

This section is replete with images of consumer culture and commodification. As Marsha Bryant notes, Plath frequently plays on images of advertising and commodity culture in her poetry as well as in this novel. Her most notable poem in this regard is "The Applicant," written at approximately the same time as *The Bell Jar,* in which finding a wife is depicted as buying an appliance. Plath's use advertising imagery reflects the larger influence of advertising and consumer culture in the 1950s, used to promote both the image of the suburban housewife and its metonymic narrative of the American dream. While Plath clearly parodies this, Bryant argues that her relationship to advertising is nonetheless ambiguous: "Most critics argue that Plath rebels against cultural norms, but her interactions with advertising extend beyond the stance of parody and satire. In *The Bell Jar*, for example, the protagonist mocks a disc jockey's 'white toothpasted smile' but she also imagines escaping her awkwardness through the reified 'blue light' of a vodka advertisement" (Bryant, "Plath, Domesticity and the Art of Advertising" 18). Esther's ambivalent relationship to advertising and the mass media, exemplified in the novel by the beauty industry, reflects a growing realization of the contradiction between what she is "supposed" to be and want and her increasing dissatisfaction with the options available to her. She uses the language of advertising precisely because she has not yet found another medium through which to express her emerging consciousness.

Indeed, in the opening pages of the novel, Esther's dissatisfaction is expressed through her obsession with the execution of the Rosenbergs and her growing discomfort with her

expensive clothes (2). The jarring juxtaposition of the Rosenbergs and her wardrobe as two symptoms that something is "wrong" serves to emphasize the relationship between the oppressive culture of McCarthyism and the social oppression of women, as well as the continuity between these narratives. The juxtaposition of the seemingly trivial concerns of the fashion world with violence of the McCarthyite witch hunts reminds us of the political oppression, violence, and repression that underlay the postwar myth of the American dream, and shows how women's mass media creating a false sense of equivalency between "news" and articles on fashion and cooking that ultimately desensitize the audience to such violence. Esther's growing rebellion against the world, symbolized by the Amazon Hotel, is thus presented in the context of a larger rejection of the American political landscape.

Clothes, for Esther, become symbolic of a larger system of women's oppression; they represent the narrow constraints of femininity and the illusory roles women must play to be viewed as successful commodities within the New York fashion world. If clothes were once a form of expression and a symbol of social mobility, they increasingly become a symbol of inequality and oppression as Esther's early ambivalence turns to disdain and discomfort. The wardrobe she bought in anticipation of her summer in New York increasingly ceases to "fit" her and becomes uncomfortable. As she rejects the fashion world of New York, the clothes take on an identity of their own that Esther can no longer assume. Preparing to leave New York, she stares at them as if they had " a separate, mulish identity of their own that refused to be washed, folded and stowed." To Doreen she says, "It's these clothes. . . . I can't face these clothes when I come back." (104). Later that night, after being attacked and almost raped by the "woman-hater" Marco, she returns to her hotel and throws the entire wardrobe out the window: "Piece by piece, I fed my wardrobe to the night wind, and flutteringly, like a loved one's ashes, the gray scraps were ferried off, to settle here, there, exactly where I would never know, in the dark heart of New York" (111). The next day, as she leaves the "heart of darkness" of New York, she is no longer the Esther of the magazine world—she leaves wearing a borrowed "Pollyanna Cowgirl" outfit and "diagonal lines of dried blood" on her cheeks from her battle with Marco. She is no longer the envied icon of success, but rather a "sick Indian" who attracts stares on the train. This transformation reflects the reality behind the "feminine mystique" of the world of the Amazon Hotel: beneath the glitter and beauty of the false world of advertising lies the violent subjugation of women. As both cowgirl and sick Indian, wearing both Betsy's clothes and Marco's blood, Esther epitomizes the double-edged sword of "success" in the world of the beauty industry. Thus she rejects her wardrobe and the world it symbolizes, but keeps the blood—a perpetual reminder of the cost of trying to fit into this world of double standards, in which women cannot "steer" themselves without facing imminent danger to their identities.

Images of violence and physical sickness pervade Esther's description of New York; the illusions of the world of fashion and beauty always contain hidden dangers. As a number of critics have pointed out, Plath uses many doubles as foils for Esther's character, as she seeks a model of femininity she can adopt as her own. Betsy and Doreen are the two most significant doubles in the first half of the novel: they represent the "good" and "bad" woman of the 1950s. Doreen first appeals to Esther as she rejects the Amazon's false purity and politeness, making her feel "wise and cynical as all hell" (8). After Esther is forced to watch Doreen's drunken, violent sexual encounter with Lenny and to take care of Doreen as she collapses into a pool of her own vomit Esther is disillusioned by her friend's false superiority. She says, "I made a decision about Doreen that night. I decided I would watch her and listen to what she said but deep down I would have nothing at all to do with her. Deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy and her innocent

friends. It was Betsy I resembled at heart" (22). Esther rejects Doreen's false bravado for Betsy's purity—but her decision does not last long. The next day, at the *Ladies' Day* banquet, she questions her decision: "I wondered why I couldn't go the whole way doing what I should any more. This made me sad and tired. Then I wondered why I couldn't go the whole way doing what I shouldn't the way Doreen did, and this made me even sadder and more tired" (30). Neither Betsy nor Doreen provides an adequate role model for Esther. After the luncheon, Esther goes to a movie with Betsy and is further confronted with society's double standard vis-à-vis women as she realizes that "the nice girl was going to end up with the nice football hero and the sexy girl was going to end up with nobody, because the man named Gil had only wanted a mistress and not a wife all along and was now packing off to Europe on a single ticket" (42).

It is precisely at this moment that Esther begins to "feel peculiar" and rushes with Betsy back to the hotel, where she and the rest of the women spend the next day or so vomiting profusely, thanks to a massive case of food poisoning from the banquet. Esther's plan to be more like Betsy ends the same way as her night with Doreen— surrounded by vomit and sickness. Beneath the glossy images and lights of the illusory fashion world, Esther once again finds danger, poison, and physical illness. The "seductive" world of advertising can hide the poison, but not its effects on women. Once again Esther must reject the illusory world it offers as it violently submerges her into a world of illness.

It is hardly surprising, in this context, that Esther does not want to be photographed under the same "brilliant lights," to be commodified and objectified in the magazine in whose image she no longer sees herself. She hides in the powder room to avoid being photographed, saying, "I didn't want my picture taken because I was going to cry. I didn't know why I was going to cry, but I knew that if anybody spoke to me or looked at me too closely the tears would fly out of my eyes and the sobs would fly out of my throat and I'd cry for a week" (100–101). At this point, the world of *Ladies' Day* no longer holds any illusions for Esther, even if she is not aware of her reasons for reacting so forcefully. She does not want to be reduced to a photograph of a woman who wants to be a poet, next to Betsy who wants to be a farmer's wife and Doreen who claims to want to do social work in India just so she can touch a sari. Asked what she wants to be, Esther is unable to answer. Having emphatically rejected the models of femininity she has encountered in New York City, she is unable to imagine a future in which she is not trapped by double standards and social constraints.

Esther's tears in front of the camera, which wash the makeup off of her face, represent an attempt to shed her skin, to rid herself of a certain model of femininity. She feels betrayed by the magazine, which lured her in with promises of developing her as a writer and has instead attempted to capture her image within its pages and commodify her. As she tries to hide her tears, she pulls out one of her free advertising gifts, a compact makeup kit, and stares at herself in the mirror. This is one of numerous mirror images throughout the novel that help to trace Esther's development as she seeks an identity that reflects her own aspirations and desires. Instead, "the face that peered back at me seemed to be peering from the grating prison cell after a prolonged beating. It looked bruised and puffy and all the wrong colors. . . . I started to paint it with small heart" (102). Esther rejects the "feminine mystique" and recognizes the oppression and violence behind it. While she still paints her face without enthusiasm, this event immediately precedes her final night in New York, when she frees herself from the "prison cell" of *Ladies' Day* and throws her wardrobe from the roof. The bruised face she sees in the mirror after being

photographed presages the blood-streaked face she sees after her encounter with Marco. Esther leaves New York all too aware of its "dark heart."

Unfortunately, if New York has led Esther to reject certain models of femininity, it offers no positive model to help her establish a different identity. Perloff argues that the models of femininity Esther observes demonstrate her attempt to figure out what role to perform (512). However, after each encounter, "Esther quickly discovers that each of these women is, despite her particular gift or talent, essentially a flawed human being. . . . It seems, in short, all but impossible for a woman to attain what Yeats called Unity of Being" (514). If Doreen and Betsy represent the double standard in terms of female representation and sexuality, the older women characters remind Esther of the real social constraints women faced in 1950s America.

Esther's mother advises her to be more "practical" and develop skills that will help her to find employment in the male-dominated labor force. She encourages her to learn shorthand and secretarial skills (and, implicitly, to abandon her poetry). Esther, however, rejects "female labor" that requires her to serve men. She says, "The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters" (76). Likewise, Esther rejects the model of Mrs. Willard, a former teacher and wife of a university professor, whose daily life is dominated by domestic labor. Elaborating on the oppressive role that marriage plays in subjugating women, she says, "And I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat" (85). The most frightening image of femininity is reserved for Dodo Conway, who is not only a housewife but a mother of six children with another one on the way, trapped in what Esther views as a domestic nightmare. After watching Dodo through her window, Esther remarks: "Children made me sick. . . . I couldn't see the point of getting up. I had nothing to look forward to" (117). Once again, the available models of femininity seem to threaten Esther's health and plunge her into illness.

The "career women" in Esther's life, who appear to have escaped the trap of domesticity, nonetheless give her little to "look forward to." Philomena Guinea, the "wealthy novelist" who provides Esther with scholarship money, is the only successful woman writer Esther encounters, but her writing represents an appeal to the female consumer and thus reifies the "feminine mystique" Esther is so eager to escape. A career in pulp fiction, geared at reinforcing female subjugation and domesticity, is not Esther's goal. Guinea's work resonates with Berlant's analysis of "women's culture" in *The Female Complaint,* and the way in which "commodified genres of intimacy" promote a fantasy of common experience with other women in a discussion that is both very public and intimate. For Esther, sentimental mass fiction is another way women's voices are contained and commodified; it ultimately reinforces the objectification of women. This model of the woman writer is anathema to Esther's view of her own creativity and talent. She seeks to be a different kind of writer and a scholar and to make use of her education and hard work.

Jay Cee, the editor of *Ladies' Day*, manages to balance both a career and a marriage. Despite her initial admiration, Esther is ultimately disillusioned by her, in large part because Jay Cee's success is also based on perpetuating false portrayals of women through a magazine that maintains the status quo vis-à-vis 1950s ideals of female domesticity. Esther's plans do not conform to Jay Cee's expectations or accept the limitations of the "women's magazine" world—she wants more. As she becomes increasingly disillusioned with the beauty industry, she rejects Jay Cee as a viable model.

Bundtzen questions Plath's feminism, arguing that Jay Cee represents a "liberated" woman whom Esther nonetheless rejects. This interpretation misses the point: Jay Cee's success and "liberation" depends upon an industry devoted to female subjugation. Esther's "bell jar" is not simply internal—it is also a reflection of the external world that subjugates woman and limits their creative freedom, offering intelligent, creative women success only if they are willing to be part of an industry that sells their art for the purpose of perpetuating an ideology that subjugates them. Jay Cee does not provide a way out of this distorted universe.

In a key passage, Esther describes her vision of a fig tree, which represents her awareness of the limited options available to her and her unwillingness to conform to any of these models:

> I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story.
>
> From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor. . . . and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out.
>
> I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I should choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (77)

Esther's paralysis is a powerful illustration of her lack of real choice. As Perloff (515) notes,

> Esther's symbolic tree, appropriately bearing phallic figs, is the objectification of her central malaise, a malaise that is hardly confined to schizophrenics. . . . I would guess that every woman who reads this passage has felt at one time or another, that 'choosing one meant losing all the rest' that because female roles are no longer clearly defined, women are confronted with such a bewildering variety of seeming possibilities that choice itself becomes all but impossible.

It is not simply the "bewildering possibilities" that create Esther's malaise, but the limitations implied—each choice requires the loss of other possibilities. Esther poignantly notes the contradictions facing women: new opportunities become available, but these require giving up other opportunities and limiting one's desires. This passage is a culmination of the novel's "doubles," as Esther realizes that none of the choices available to her will satisfy her desires. This passage perhaps best expresses Esther's emerging feminist consciousness as she contemplates the material, social, and cultural constraints that limit women's choices. Yet, as Perloff notes, "Sylvia Plath's feminism is never militant"; immediately after the vision, Esther "beautifully undercuts her own high seriousness" (Perloff 515) by noting, "It occurred to me that my vision of the fig tree . . . might well have arisen from the profound void of an empty stomach" (Plath, *BJ* 77). While this statement does indeed undercut Esther's awareness of her own profound vision, earlier scenes of stomach ailments serve as metaphors of a deeper societal sickness, in which women's hunger or desire cannot be satisfied without illness. Esther's hunger is, in this context, symbolic of a larger hunger that cannot be fulfilled within the social constraints of 1950s femininity.

The vision of the fig tree is perhaps the novel's clearest explanation of Esther's search for female role models, though it is full of images of doubles. These images reflect Esther's search for a means to express her own authentic self in a world where her image and/or reflection is crucial to her ability to navigate and survive in a complex web of social relations and double standards. The use of this doubling technique is clearly central to Plath's depiction of identity and gender, both within the novel and in her larger body of writing. Plath alludes to her own senior thesis on "doubles" in Dostoevsky (Bundtzen 151) through Esther's thesis on twins in Joyce. Interestingly, Plath abandons Dostoyevsky for Joyce as Esther attempts to construct her own "portrait of the artist." Likewise, Plath infantilizes the double in Esther's thesis on "twins," recalling Esther's own obsession and revulsion toward children, childbirth, and those monstrous fetuses in bell jars that haunt the narrative.

The use of doubles is likewise reinforced by the repeated images of mirrors. This recurring motif helps to trace Esther's development. Bourjaily notes that "an early title for the novel was *The Girl in the Mirror,*" which suggests that Esther's narrative is intimately intertwined with the narratives of "the girls Esther sees when she looks at herself" (Bourjaily 141). When she wakes up in the hospital after her suicide attempt, the mirror crashes to the ground. Esther no longer recognizes her image at all. The destruction of the mirror represents Esther's complete rejection of the mass-marketed ideal of the 1950s woman in all its forms, although at this point she has yet to construct a new identity that can allow her to escape the oppressive frame and boundaries of the narrative. It is also significant that this marks the introduction of Joan, Esther's last and perhaps most significant double.

Joan is one of the most enigmatic characters in *The Bell Jar*. She functions as a mirror for Esther and as a disturbing "copycat": she meets Esther in the asylum after a suicide attempt in part inspired by newspaper accounts of Esther's own attempt. If earlier doubles represent Esther's attempt to find a model of femininity she can emulate, the situations is reversed here: Joan seeks to emulate Esther's rejection of the distorted world she sees through the bell jar. Joan is also, significantly, associated with Buddy Willard, whom she dated before Esther did. Joan is the only character in the novel who seeks escape from the social constraints placed on women by rejecting heterosexuality altogether in favor of a lesbian relationship during her time at the asylum.

Esther simultaneously envies and is revolted by Joan, seeing her initially as fake and imagining that Joan has faked her suicide attempt simply to follow Esther into the asylum. Later, as Joan makes quicker progress, she becomes a model of the psychologically healthy, "marking," in Esther's words, "the gulf between me and the nearly well ones" (205). Esther continues, "Joan was the beaming double of my old best self, specially designed to follow and torment me" (205). Joan becomes symbolic of an identity that Esther is eager to shed.

At the same time, Joan also recalls another "double" from Plath's own life in a way that perhaps explains some of the revulsion she elicits in Esther. The autobiographical problem arises again here due to the parallels between Joan and Plath's real-life "double" Assia Wevill, for whom Hughes left Plath while she was writing *The Bell Jar*. Joan is the "double of my old best self" (205); she elicits such revulsion from Esther that she at one point tells Joan, "I don't like you. You make me want to puke, if you want to know" (220). Joan thus represents a model of femininity that both attracts and repels Esther. While Joan's sexuality is one of the reasons she repels Esther, this is less a result of her revulsion toward lesbian sexuality than it is a rejection of lesbianism as a model for female sexual liberation or as a means to escape from the subjugation of women in society. As in "Lesbos," a poem often read as inspired at least in part by Assia

Wevill, the possibility of female relationships outside of the realm of female subjugation in dominant heterosexual discourse is impossible because "meanwhile there's a stink of fat and baby crap" (Plath *Collected Works* 228) and therefore "even in your Zen heaven we shan't meet" (230). Relationships between women are themselves mediated by the oppressive boundaries of female subjugation in society—just as Esther's relationship with Joan is mediated in some sense by Buddy Willard (and Plath's and Wevill's relationship mediated by Hughes). Indeed, Joan and her imitative suicide attempt hauntingly presage Wevill's own suicide several years after Plath's in almost identical circumstances.

Likewise, it is hard to read Buddy Willard's question to Esther after Joan's suicide—"Do you think there is something in me that *drives* women crazy?"(239)—without imagining Ted Hughes asking the same question. Yet these parallels between the fictional and the personal cannot be simply read as a moment of psychic insight in Plath's fiction—rather, they point to her awareness of the ways in which social oppression and the double standard pervade all relationships. Esther's earlier failed search for a role model and confidante at the Amazon Hotel is a testament to the ways in which oppression distorts women's relationships with one another. Likewise, her realization at the end of the novel that the women at Belsize are no different than the women in college dorms everywhere serves to generalize the "bell jar's" ability to distort all relationships and prevent any genuine sense of community or collectivity. In this novel written well before the eruption of the women's rights movement, all female relationships are mediated by oppressive structures, from the world of mass media and the college campus to the medical establishment.

Plath narratively kills Joan off to make way for Esther's own rebirth. Yet Joan haunts the latter part of the narrative. Esther thinks, "Sometimes I wondered if I had made Joan up. Other times I wondered if she would continue to pop in at every crisis of my life to remind me of what I had been, and what I had been through, and carry on her own separate but similar crisis under my nose" (219). As a ghostly double who haunts Esther's life, there is a certain wish fulfillment in Joan's death, despite Esther's fear that she might be in some way responsible. Joan represents a past self that can no longer survive if Esther is ever to escape the bell jar. While Esther earlier envied Joan's mental health, it is Joan who ultimately commits suicide; Esther, after the death of her last double,can be "reborn" and leave the hospital, although her future is far from certain. Joan must die for Esther to be reborn.

It is in the novel's exploration of female sexuality that *The Bell Jar* perhaps most fully anticipates crucial issues of the feminist movement, thereby earning its place in the canon of feminist literature. As Bourjaily notes, "the sexual outcome is important because movement toward it is the positive movement in the novel. . . . It is in this regard that *The Bell Jar* is a feminist novel, repudiating the double-dealing by means of which society is stacked against talented, independent women" (Bourjaily 138). If Esther's doubles and mirrors pave the way for her rejection of dominant societal standards of femininity, her encounters with men mark crucial signposts on her journey toward reclaiming both her own sexuality and the creative and procreative powers she associates with it.

Esther's encounters with men in New York City reveal a veritable minefield in which female sexuality is constantly threatened. As she seeks sexual fulfillment and an escape from sexual double standards, she finds instead violence and the constant threat of rape. The only exception to this pattern is her encounter with Constantin, who refuses to recognize her as a sexual being. These brief encounters demonstrate the perilous maze she must negotiate in her attempts to take control of her sexuality.

Esther's relationship with Buddy Willard, recounted primarily through flashbacks, provides the central narrative through which Esther explores and problematizes her own understanding of sexuality and the ways in which female sexuality is subjugated and regulated by dominant ideology. "Buddy Willard was a hypocrite" (Plath *Bell Jar* 52), Esther tells us early on. This idea is repeated throughout the Buddy narrative as Esther becomes aware of the double standards of 1950s courtship. This process of realization reaches a climax in Chapter 6, when Esther visits Buddy in medical school and becomes aware of his previously concealed sexual relationship with a waitress. This revelation forever brands Buddy as a hypocrite in her eyes. It elicits not betrayal or jealousy, but rather profound outrage. What this scene makes abundantly clear is that Esther seeks equality in her relationship with Buddy. Instead she is confronted by the double standard governing sexual behavior for men and women: while Esther is expected to remain chaste, pure, and loyal, Buddy is allowed to explore his sexuality. This enrages Esther, who seeks a way out of the double bind. She is prevented from doing so by the fear of an unwanted pregnancy, a thought symbolically associated with imprisonment and the death of her creative self. Indeed, procreation negates creation for Esther; she remembers "Buddy Willard saying in a sinister, knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems anymore. So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterward you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state" (85).

Notably, in the same scene Esther is made aware of the complete alienation and subjugation of female sexuality in the male-dominated medical world. The chapter fittingly begins with Buddy showing her stillborn fetuses in jars—a powerful metaphor for stunted female sexuality and creativity constantly bound within the confines of procreation and male pleasure. After witnessing the fetuses, Esther accompanies Buddy to watch a woman in labor and is warned not to watch. Esther watches nonetheless, both fascinated and horrified by the alienation of women from their own labor and procreative powers: "It looked like some awful torture chamber, with these metal stirrups sticking up in mid-air at one end and all sorts of instruments and wires and tubes I couldn't make out properly at the other" (65). The scene of torture is compounded by the condescending doctors who treat the woman in labor as an object with no role in the process, ignoring her pain, whisking the baby away as soon as it is born, and barely bothering to inform her of the child's sex. Esther responds to the woman's obvious overmedication by thinking,

> I thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent. Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it or she wouldn't groan like that, and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been, when all the time, in some secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again. (67)

As Robert Scholes argues, in this scene (as well as in others), "Plath has used superbly the most important technical device of realism—what the Russian critic Viktor Shklovsky called 'defamiliarization.' True realism defamiliarizes our world so that it emerges from the dust of habitual acceptance and becomes visible once again" (132). Defamiliarization works in this scene to collapse the images of maternity and childbirth propagated within the 1950s discourse of female domesticity. Plath emphasizes the violence and pain to which female bodies are subjected within the medical establishment, with maternity wards as a Poe-like torture chambers

where women are forced to submit to a coerced ideal of maternity, totally alienated from their own reproductive labor. Indeed, the condescension and disdain with which women were treated by medical discourse and institutions became an important issue of the later feminist movement, which demanded greater control for women over decisions relating to reproduction, including the childbirth process. Over the course of the 1970s, women fought for and won many reforms including the right to determine the nature of childbirth, to refuse anesthesia, and to allow a father to attend his child's birth.

Similar scenes to this one in *The Bell Jar* are repeated in these later narratives as women writers gave voice in to the growing demand for greater female control over their own bodies. In *The Women's Room*, Marilyn French, for example, describes a similar scene as her protagonist Mira goes into labor for the first time. As she begins labor, she describes the arrogance and condescension of doctors who ignore women's own experience and knowledge of their bodies – made most evident by a women in the delivery room who tries to request an epidural based on her own knowledge of her body, having had five children previously, but who is repeatedly denied one by the doctors who claim to know better. Not surprisingly, they are ultimately proved wrong, but not before condemning the woman to a painful labor without any medical relief. In response to this, French writes,

> Mira tried not to feel. It was not the labor that was agonizing her: it hurt, but not too much. It was the scene—the coldness and sterility of it, the contempt of the nurses and the doctor, the humiliation of being in stirrups and having people peer at her exposed genitals whenever they chose. She tried to pull away into some inner place where all this did not exist. A phrase kept going through her mind: there is no way out. (French 46).

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison demonstrates how this alienation and lack of reproductive control is further compounded by racism. If white women are treated with condescension, black women are treated as animals. As Pauline Breedlove, the mother of the novel's protagonist, Pecola, begins labor, she hears doctors talking about the black women in the hospital saying, "…now these women you don't have any trouble with. They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses"(Morrison *Bluest Eye* 99). In response to this comment, Pauline yells louder, saying, "…I had to let them people know that having a baby was more than a bowel movement. I hurt just like them white women" (Morrison *Bluest Eye* 99). While racism further exacerbates the alienation of women within maternity wards, this scene echoes the sentiment of horror at women's alienation from their own bodies and the lack of control over their own reproductive processes earlier given expression to in *The Bell Jar*.

For Esther, unlike Mira in *The Women's Room*, there is still a way out. Immediately following the childbirth scene, Buddy Willard exposes himself to Esther in what amounts to her first sexual encounter. Unsurprisingly, Esther is unimpressed. She remarks, "The only thing I could think of was turkey neck and turkey gizzards and I felt very depressed" (Plath, *Bell Jar* 69). Still haunted by what she has just witnessed, Esther projects her strong sense of alienation from her own body and sexuality onto Buddy, whose sexuality is likewise defamilarized and alien to her. In describing his sexual organs as gizzards, the rhyming play on the name Willard further accentuates this separation and alienation from sexuality; Buddy's indifference and condescension to the women in the hospital have negated any sexual appeal he may have had for her. Romantic fantasies about sexuality and relationships fall flat in this notably unromantic

scene as Esther is confronted with the gap between the media's idealized visions of relationships and the alienation and depression this encounter inspires. This is further underscored by Esther's unwillingness to show her body to Buddy; she is suddenly reminded of "my Posture Picture taken at college, where you have to stand naked in front of a camera, knowing all the time that a picture of you stark naked, both full view and side view, is going into the college gym files to be marked A B C or D depending on how straight you are" (69). These humiliating posture pictures were widely rejected and protested by the later feminist movement. As a symbol of the medical establishment, Buddy's gaze becomes associated with the cold lens of science that objectifies, compartmentalizes, and labels the female body, denying women agency and subjectivity. Esther's refusal to take her clothes off represents her first attempt to reject the terms of dominant narratives of sexuality: she is unwilling to put her body on display.

The potential dangers of female sexuality lurk everywhere for Esther; her attempts at self-emancipation and control over her own sexuality run up against inevitable obstacles for the first half of the novel, meeting with violence, objectification, or worse: babies and the corresponding fear of a lifetime of domestic imprisonment. As Howard Moss notes, Esther

> wants to fulfill herself, not to *be* fulfilled. To her, babies are The Trap, and sex is the bait. . . . She is caught between the monstrous fetuses on display in Buddy's ward and the monstrous slavery of the seemingly permanent pregnancy of her neighbor Dodo Conway, who constantly wheels a baby carriage under Esther's window, like a demented figure in a Greek chorus. Babies lure Esther toward suicide by luring her toward a life she cannot—literally—bear (128).

Indeed, Esther's first step toward freedom after her suicide attempt occurs when Doctor Nolan, the female psychiatrist who is crucial to her recovery, provides not a psychological solution but a material one, referring her to a clinic to buy a diaphragm. The political significance of Esther's purchase of a means of birth control is crucial to her sense of control over her own sexuality, body, and thus her life. Once again, the novel anticipates a crucial thrust of the later feminist movement, which sought greater control for women over their own bodies, culminating in the fight for legalized abortion. Plath makes the political stakes clear when Esther tells Doctor Nolan, "What I hate is the thought of being under a man's thumb. . . . A man doesn't have to worry in the world while I've got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick to keep me in line" (Plath, *Bell Jar* 221). By the time the novel was written and published, birth control, most notably in the form of the pill, had become legal; when Esther gets fitted for a diaphragm, however, birth control is still illegal, of which Esther is well aware. That Esther is compelled to break the law and resort to covert means to gain control of her own sexuality and body undoubtedly resonated with later feminists, reading the novel as women publicized covert and illegal abortions at mass speakouts and consciousness raising sessions.

Esther's sense of freedom here also gives expression to the movement's demands. As she climbs up on the table to be fitted for a diaphragm, she thinks to herself:

> I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person, like Buddy Willard, just because of sex, freedom from the Florence Crittenden Homes where all the poor girls go who should have been fitted out like me, because they did, they would do anyway, regardless. . . .
>
> I was my own woman. (223)

Plath's inclusion of this scene and her insistence on reproductive freedom as crucial to Esther's recovery and independence echoes Margaret Sanger's famous comment, later echoed by the women's movement, that "a woman had the right to control her own body" (cited in Brownmiller 105). Plath's technique anticipates the dominant technique later developed by the feminist movement in its battle to make reproductive freedom a constitutional right rather than a crime. Similar scenes became such frequent motifs in later feminist fiction that "one reviewer referred to the 'obligatory abortion episode'" (Hogeland 62). Dorothy Bryant's novel *Ella Price's Journal*, discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, was written later but published in the US around the same time as *The Bell Jar*. Like many consciousness-raising novels of the feminist movement, it also points to control over reproduction as a crucial step in women's liberation, ending with Ella Price's symbolic (and ironic) rebirth by having an abortion over the objections of an earlier doctor. As Brownmiller notes of the movement,

> Unlike the isolated women of their parents' generation who sought individual solutions in furtive silence, they would bring a direct personal voice to the abortion debate. . . . The importance of personal testimony in a public setting, which overthrew the received wisdom of "the experts," cannot be overestimated. It was an original technique and a powerful ideological tool. (Brownmiller 109)

In a sense, Esther straddles the generation gap between the feminists, who sought collective action to bring about legal and institutional change, and their predecessors, condemned to seek secret, individual solutions. Nonetheless, Plath's public and frank rendering of this quest marks an early attempt at using this type of personal testimony to make a political point. Esther's tale becomes political as her personal quest for liberation runs up against legal and political institutions that hinder her progress. The novel thus implicitly advocates for broader political and legal change. In her open and frank exploration of the double standards faced by women and in associating reproductive control with female liberation, Plath acts in many ways as feminism's "big sister," both anticipating and inspiring the movement that would claim her as one of its own.

Diaphragm in hand, Esther seeks an opportunity to test out her newfound sexual liberation—not as a means of actual sexual fulfillment, but of ridding herself of the now-hateful chastity that keeps her trapped within the confines of the double standard exemplified by her relationship with Buddy. She says, "Ever since I'd learned about the corruption of Buddy Willard my virginity weighed like a stone around my neck. It had been of such enormous importance to me for so long that my habit was to defend it at all costs. I had been defending it for five years and I was sick of it" (Plath, *BJ* 228). Recalling the violence of Marco's earlier attempt to rape her, Esther's sexual experience with Irwin ends in bloodshed—this time her own, as she suffers a rare mass hemorrhage.

Esther's loss of her virginity is a rebirth bathed in blood, emphasizing the continued violence (even if unintentional) associated with female sexuality in a world in which women's bodies are objectified and constantly under assault. Yet Esther emerges from this near-death experience in control of herself and unwilling to bear the cost—psychic, moral, or material—on her own: instead, she sends Irwin the medical bill. This important step points to both her growing awareness of the material role of female subjugation in society and her refusal to accept terms that grant male sexual freedom while placing the burden of unwanted consequences on women who break the rules.

It is notable that, while the incident with Irwin is at least partially based on an actual experience in Plath's life, she substantially altered the event to give Esther greater agency. This perhaps reflects a growth in Plath's consciousness of women's oppression over the ten years that separated the event from its novelistic rewriting. Huf notes that in the "real" story, Plath was in fact sexually assaulted; it was her roommate who encouraged her to send her attacker the bill: "Instead of making Esther a passive victim of rape, she made her the active agent of seduction in order to show her effecting her recovery by refusing to accept the definition of herself as virgin or whore that the double standard imposed on her" (Huf 145–46). Perloff adds to this discussion by arguing that Esther in this scene represents the "new woman" (522). Indeed, the idea of submitting a "bill" representing the immense unpaid services performed by women is echoed in other works that arise from the women's movement. In Marilyn French's *The Women's Room*, Mira calculates a bill for her husband when they divorce for all her unpaid labor in maintaining the home as well as her sexual services, emphasizing her own emerging consciousness of the ways female sexuality is subjugated and defined within an economy that depends on the unpaid domestic labor of women. Esther herself recognizes the import of sending Irwin the bill as an important step toward her own liberation: as she hangs up the phone after making him promise to pay, she says, "I was perfectly free" (Plath, *BJ* 242).

Although Esther's future is uncertain at the end of the novel, her narrative movement toward a kind of liberation gives voice to an emerging feminist consciousness; Esther's control of her own sexuality is crucial to her rebirth and formation of a new identity. While the novel borrows from conventions of the coming-of-age novel, it is also in this sense an interesting variation on the captivity narrative, tracing Esther's path from her entrapment in the conventions of 1950s femininity to an uncertain freedom. Unlike traditional captivity narratives, which begin with the narrator in a state of happiness that is interrupted by abduction by an alien "other," *The Bell Jar* begins with Esther's captivity—in the glossy world of women's magazines, consumerism, and the objectification and commodification of women in 1950s America—and traces her journey to a form of (albeit incomplete) liberation. Esther's "liberation" is primarily psychological: she rejects the double standard and the social constraints placed on female sexuality and creativity in an attempt to be "perfectly free." Yet this liberation is extremely limited, based on a notion of individual freedom that is primarily internal. Eventually she must return to the world outside the asylum, where nothing has changed and where the subjugation and oppression of women continues unchallenged. Again subverting the traditional captivity narrative, in which the protagonist returns with a difference to the original happy state, Esther returns to a status quo that is oppressive and inhibiting. The liminal state she achieves in between represents the only true (though extremely limited) freedom she experiences. Thus, the novel refuses to provide full narrative closure—there can be none as long as the social and material conditions that provided the catalyst for Esther's breakdown remain. Nonetheless, in her attempts both to provide a social critique of the constraints and limitations placed on women in 1950s America and to suggest the possibility of some kind of liberation, Plath points the way forward for later feminists. While Plath may not have considered herself a feminist, *The Bell Jar,* through its depiction of a female artist's struggle for liberation, became an almost archetypal narrative for the feminist movement that claimed it.

The Social Conditions of Madness in *The Bell Jar*

Esther's search for liberation ultimately traces her descent into the "bell jar" as she undergoes a psychic breakdown, culminating in her suicide attempt and gradual "recovery."

However, madness is not presented in the novel as a simply personal problem—it is always social. In this regard, Plath anticipates developments in philosophy, psychiatry, and feminism in the 1960s that challenged traditional definitions of madness as well as the treatment of women within prevailing psychiatric institutions. Plath was heavily influenced by Freudian psychoanalytic theory in explaining her own depression, relationships, and suicide attempt. Despite this reliance on Freudian psychoanalysis, her focus in *The Bell Jar* on the social roots of Esther's breakdown is much more closely allied to feminist theory and contemporary theorists of the anti-psychiatry movement, most notably R. D. Laing.

Laing's *The Divided Self* and *The Politics of Experience* resonated in many ways with the larger radicalization of the 1960s; his starting point for all understanding of mental illness is that the world itself is mad. He writes in the 1964 preface to *The Divided Self*, "In the context of our present pervasive madness that we call normality, sanity, freedom, all our frames of references are ambiguous and equivocal" (Laing *The Divided Self* 11). Laing was influenced by the ideas of Herbert Marcuse and existentialism and outraged by the Cold War and Vietnam War; his theories in many ways became increasingly polemical:

> What we call "normal" is a product of repression, denial, splitting, projection, introjection and other forms of destructive action and experience. . . .
>
> The more one sees this, the more senseless it is to continue with generalized descriptions of supposedly specifically schizoid, schizophrenic, hysterical "mechanisms."
>
> There are forms of alienation that are relatively strange to statistically "normal" forms of alienation. The "normally" alienated person, by reason of the fact that he acts more or less like everyone else, is taken to be sane. Other forms of alienation that are out of step with the prevailing state of alienation are those that are labeled by the "normal" majority as bad or mad. . . .
>
> Normal men have killed perhaps 100,000,000 of their fellow normal men in the last fifty years. (Laing *Politics of Experience* 27–28)

Laing's radical arguments reflect in many ways "the pervasive sense among sixties radicals and counterculturalists that existing conditions were utterly intolerable and must be changed totally in order not just for life to improve, or for humanity to realize its authentic or liberated potential, but for life to continue at all in any meaningful way" (DeKoven 203). Laing, along with Marcuse, became one of the great theorists of this radical period not only because of his critiques of specific psychiatric theories and practices but because of his larger claims about society, his theorization of personal experiences as the basis for all scientific study of the person, and the implications of his argument that those who reject the "normal" alienation and madness of society are part of the solution—an idea that resonated with the growing countercultural movements in the United States in particular. Indeed, as Farland notes, "the [anti-psychiatry] movement's nonconformist, anti-establishment message struck a chord with North American audiences, bringing unexpected celebrity to figures like clinical psychiatrist R. D. Laing. In his first visit to the U.S. in 1972, a surprised Laing was greeted by bumper stickers proclaiming "I'm mad about R. D. Laing," and by invitations for interviews with *Reader's Digest*, *Playboy*, and the *Today* show" (cited in Farland).

As many critics have noted, whether or not Plath herself had read the works of Laing, *The Bell Jar* seems to complement his clinical theories (Moss 127). Nonetheless, Plath's reliance on

Freud (evidenced in her journals and poetry) has led many critics to rely on Freudian readings of her work to explain her depiction of mental illness. In *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath,* for example, Jacqueline Rose relies on psychoanalysis, particularly Freud but also Jung, to provide an interpretative framework for her analysis of Plath's work. William Logan argues that Plath's use of Freud was a reflection of the dominance of his theories in psychoanalytic institutions of the time, writing that "her explanations may already have been tainted by the most powerful interpretative myth available in the fifties—tainted, that is, by Freud" (Logan 72). In *The Bell Jar*, however, Plath points to a far different understanding of mental illness that is antithetical in many ways to Freudian psychoanalysis. It is a vision of mental illness rooted in specific social conditions. In *The Bell Jar*, it is not just Esther who is mad—it is society as a whole, as madness begins to function as a metaphor for 1950s America. Here, too, Plath insists—as would the movement that gained force after her death—that "the personal is political." Her focus on Esther's individual subjectivity opens the door to politics as she begins to question the "sanity" of the system as a whole.

The anti-psychiatry movement began in the fifties and reached its peak in the 1970s. It challenged definitions of sanity and insanity and the labeling of the "insane," as well as the coercive and authoritarian way patients were treated, including involuntary hospitalizations, electric shock treatments and, most horrifying, the wide use of lobotomies for patients who resisted other forms of "treatment." Marked by anti-authoritarianism and anti-conformism, it constituted a powerful social critique and raised public debate about psychiatry and the accepted societal standards vis-à-vis those deemed mentally ill. Maria Farland, in her insightful article "Sylvia Plath's Anti-Psychiatry," argues that Plath's novel was clearly inspired by and part of the larger canon of crucial texts which defined the anti-psychiatry movement such as Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* as well as Laing's work, Goffman's *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients*, and Szasz's *The Myth of Mental Illness* (Farland, "Sylvia Plath's Anti-Psychiatry"). While it is uncertain how many of these texts Plath had read, the timing of *The Bell Jar* coincides with the period in which the critiques this movement raised were gaining mainstream currency in England, where Plath was living at the time. Farland argues that the spring of 1962, when Plath began to write the novel,

> coincided precisely with the months in which attacks on psychiatry by Goffman, Szasz, and Laing took center stage in the British press. Looking to the popular mental illness novels of the 1950s for her model, Plath sought to represent, in her words, "how isolated a person feels when he is suffering a breakdown." . . . "There is an increasing market for mental hospital stuff. I am a fool if I don't relive it, recreate it" (Stevenson 154, 45). . . . Plath demonstrated a canny nose for trends. (Farland).

For Farland, *The Bell Jar*'s critique of coercive psychiatric practices—from the botched electric shock therapy Esther receives in the "cramped city hospital ward" (Plath *BJ* 185) to Valerie's lobotomy at Doctor Gordon's hospital—places it firmly in this tradition of anti-psychiatry texts. Nonetheless, Farland argues, Plath's critique goes beyond a simple exposé of the most egregious practices of public psychiatric facilities. While Doctor Gordon's hospital, to which Esther is sent only because her benefactor Philomena Guinea agrees to pay the bill, is a great improvement and ultimately paves the road to Esther's recovery, it too relies on such coercive practices. Indeed, Esther's decision to "improve" is at least in part because of the alternative she witnesses at this

hospital—perpetual confinement. Plath is, Farland argues, "less sanguine about the consensual doctor-patient relations that were the utopian ideal of clinical anti-psychiatry. In this respect, Plath's novel simultaneously endorses, and challenges, anti-psychiatry's reformist agenda" (Farland, "Sylvia Plath's Anti-Psychiatry").

Plath's descriptions of Esther's state of mind throughout the novel closely mirrors Laing's description of the "schizoid personality" in *The Divided Self* (Perloff 508). Likewise, throughout the novel, Plath points to the fact that Esther's breakdown is not solely the result of internal causes: for Esther, madness is social. As Perloff argues,

> Whatever the extent of Esther's congenital predisposition to madness, the mad world she inhabits surely intensifies her condition. R. D. Laing's insistence that "the experience and behavior that gets labeled schizophrenic is a special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unlivable situation," may sound extreme but it seems wholly relevant to *The Bell Jar*. (Perloff 518)

In this sense, Plath also anticipates later feminist critiques of psychiatric practices in which the psychological repercussions of women's oppression are perceived to be "individual" rather than collective problems caused by the subjugation of women and the limitations placed on female identity and agency. As Phyllis Chesler, a pioneer of the feminist critique of psychiatry, put it,

> female unhappiness is viewed and "treated" as a problem of individual pathology, no matter how many other female patients (or non-patients) are similarly unhappy—and this by men who have studiously bypassed the objective fact of female oppression. Women's inability to adjust to or to be contented by feminine roles has been considered as a deviation from "natural" female psychology rather than as a criticism of such roles. . . . Each woman as a patient thinks these symptoms are unique and are her own fault. She is neurotic, rather than oppressed. She wants from a psychotherapist what she wants—and often cannot get—from a husband: attention, understanding, merciful relief, *a personal solution*. (Chesler 746–52)

Chesler underscores the need for a collective solution and demonstrates the sexism within established psychiatric practices by analyzing the disproportionate numbers of female psychiatric patients and of women involuntarily committed. *The Bell Jar* likewise demonstrates how women are pathologized for not conforming to established sex roles. Indeed, many of the women in Belsize and the other wards Esther visits serve as crucial examples of women deemed "insane" if they reject conventional roles as wives and mothers (Farland). Frequently, as Chesler argues, women who did seek psychiatric treatment found that the "solution" presented to them was to learn to accept conventional sexual roles and to embrace marriage and motherhood, despite the fact that these societal expectations had created their psychological problems in the first place.

Esther's first encounter with Doctor Gordon is emblematic of this phenomenon. Esther finds herself enraged by the family photo on Doctor Gordon's desk, which becomes proof of his hypocrisy and his inability to understand her. "The picture suggests that Doctor Gordon sees a healthy woman as a procreative one", Huf (137) argues. In many ways, Doctor Gordon exemplifies the sexism of the psychiatric profession: after he jokingly comments about the attractive women he met at the WAC center at Esther's college, Esther perceives him as

punishing her with a series of torturous botched shock treatments. Feminist novels of the following decades, including *Ella Price's Journal* (discussed more fully in Chapter 3), frequently included similar depictions of psychiatrists who responds to the women's social problems by attempting to force them to conform to sex roles. These characters point out the complicity of the medical and psychiatric profession in promulgating female subjugation and enforcing the ideal of female domesticity.

Esther's development in *The Bell Jar* points to the "insanity" that governs the lives of all women, inside or outside the asylum, as they seek their own identities while also conforming to societal expectations. Perloff argues that

> If we take the division of Esther's self as the motive or starting point of the novel's plot, the central action of *The Bell Jar* may be described as the attempt to heal the fracture between inner self and false-self system so that a real and viable identity can come into existence. But because, as Laing reminds us, "everyone in some measure wears a mask," Esther's experience . . . is simply a stylized or heightened version of the young American girl's quest to forge her own identity, to be herself rather than what others expect her to be. (509)

Esther's attempts, described above, to find a role model and her repeated attempts to cast off the symbols of women's oppression—throwing away her clothes and neglecting her appearance—point to her desire to "symbolically kill her false self" (Perloff 510–12). At the same time, as Esther discovers, there is no personal solution to a collective problem.

Illness pervades the novel, from the food poisoning–induced vomiting in New York to Buddy's tuberculosis, portraying a society that is sick to the core (Perloff 518). By the end of the novel, Esther has come recognize her own internal madness as a reflection of the world's; this is metaphorically expressed in her understanding of madness as a bell jar. "To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is a bad dream" (Plath *Bell Jar* 237). Likewise, she recognizes that madness is not limited to the asylum but rather that the social conditions of oppression condemn all women to a life inside the bell jar. Esther remarks, "What was there about us, in Belsize, so different from the girls playing bridge and gossiping and studying in college to which I would return? Those girls, too, sat under bell jars of a sort" (Plath *Bell Jar* 238). Thus, as Huf argues, "While the bell jar is clearly a metaphor for the heroine's private madness, it is less obviously a metaphor for the madness of an era, the Feminine Fifties, when all women were glassed into 'belle' jars" (Huf 143). For Esther, madness reflects of the personal psychological cost of living as a woman in an oppressive society that denies any possibility for female agency or liberation.

Because, as noted above, there is no possibility of a personal or individual solution to the social problem of madness, Plath cannot provide full resolution. While Esther has "recovered" from her breakdown, the novel ends with her awaiting judgment from a panel of experts who have the power to deem her "sane" enough to leave the asylum and return to society. While we are led to believe that she will indeed be deemed recovered, Esther herself is very aware that the conditions that led to her breakdown in the first place have not disappeared: "I wasn't sure at all. How did I know that someday—at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere—the bell jar, with its stifling distortions wouldn't descend again" (Plath *Bell Jar* 24). Indeed, as did many of the feminist narratives that followed. *The Bell Jar* resists providing any narrative closure or certainty at the end of the novel, as the reader too is left uncertain about Esther's future. In the last line,

Esther "step[s] into the room" (244) surrounded by the eyes of the doctors who have the power to judge her sanity—but their judgment is left to the reader's imagination.

By ending the novel in this way, Plath places the reader in the doctors' position, forced to come up with his or her own verdict, leaving the reader with the same question marks that plague Esther. The ending likewise points to the failure of conventional narrative structures to provide any resolution to Esther's conflicts. Esther has rejected both of the traditional narrative "endings" for female protagonists: marriage and death. As Esther searches for a "ritual for being born twice" (244), the reader also is left searching for an appropriate closure, recognizing the impossibility of a clear resolution to the societal madness the narrative has exposed. Ultimately, the power of the novel lies in its insistence that no such personal resolution is possible; as readers, we are left with a collective sense of unease and with far more questions than answers. In this sense, Plath's use of the personal narrative form to tell Esther's story goes beyond the limits of the personal to place her story in the context of a collective and societal narrative, inviting the reader to engage in a larger social critique of problems that demands not personal but collective solutions.

The Personal and the Political in *The Bell Jar*

While the primary thrust of Plath's political critique in *The Bell Jar* is focused on the specific conditions of women's oppression, the novel clearly places this personal narrative in the larger historical and political context of the Cold War and McCarthyism, both of which dominated the US political scene in the 1950s. Esther's personal narrative anticipates in many ways what would become the ultimate slogan of second-wave feminism: "the personal is political." For Plath's readers in the 1960s, themselves radicalized by the Vietnam War, the student protest movements, and the incipient women's liberation movement, the impossibility of separating the political and personal would be clear, but Plath's narrative lends itself to such a reading precisely because it refuses to see the psychological crisis at the center of the novel as isolated from the underlying political and historical crises that give rise to it. While *The Bell Jar* clearly goes beyond the confines of the purely personal in its insistence on understanding Esther's psychological trajectory as a reflection of the social conditions faced by all women, it also makes clear that the specific oppression of women in this period is intricately intertwined with the larger political framework.

This relationship is most notably represented by Esther's horror at the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. The Rosenberg execution was undoubtedly one of the most polarizing political events of the decade. It crystallized the political debates surrounding McCarthyism, forcing a generation to confront larger political questions and take a side. That Plath begins the novel with a discussion of the execution situates both the novel historically and Esther politically, as her revulsion reflects a growing alienation from and rebellion against the status quo. "The world in which the events of this novel take place is a world bounded by the cold war on one side and the sexual war on the other" (Scholes 131). The anticommunist hysteria the execution exemplifies and the horror and violence it symbolically represents provide an important backdrop for the novel's depiction of madness, which juxtaposes Esther's breakdown and self-inflicted violence with the violence of the supposedly sane society she cannot understand. Political violence is reflected in the violence of the domestic realm. This anticipates Laing's theories, which radicals seized upon in the 1960s precisely because they made the psychological political. The novel thus taps into the specific concerns of the women's liberation movement as well as the broader political concerns of the time as millions of people, exposed

through the Vietnam War to its violent underpinnings, began to question the myth of American freedom and democracy.

The novel opens with Esther contemplating the execution of the Rosenbergs, saying,

> It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that's all there was to read about in the paper…. It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves.
>
> I thought it must be the worst thing in the world. . . .
>
> (I knew something was wrong with me that summer, because all I could think about was the Rosenbergs and how stupid I'd been to buy all those uncomfortable, expensive clothes, hanging limp as fish in my closet, and how all the little successes I'd totted up so happily at college fizzled to nothing outside the slick marble and plate-glass fronts along Madison Avenue). (Plath, *Bell Jar* 1–-2).

The Rosenbergs function in the novel to show Esther's own narrative as part of a collective or historical narrative—this incident demonstrates clearly that if the personal is political, the political is also extremely personal. Esther's revulsion reveals a much more profound revulsion with the entire political framework of the society in which she lives. It constitutes a powerful critique of the American dream and the freedom and liberty it is supposed to embody. The execution of the Rosenbergs frames the general horror that pervades the novel as Esther begins to see the world, through the bell jar, as a nightmare.

Yet Esther interprets her horror and revulsion at the execution as the first sign that "something was wrong with me that summer." To empathize with the Rosenbergs is a quality that makes one "insane" in the McCarthyite 1950s. It also foreshadows Esther's electric shock therapy, which despite its later redemptive value is first experienced as a terrible punishment. The opening passage further demonstrates Plath's ironic separation from her narrator as her protagonist claims to be "stupid about executions," a statement that invites the reader to wonder what the appropriate or intelligent response to such executions should be. Likewise, Esther's easy slippage from the Rosenbergs to her clothes and general dissatisfaction with her life points to the way the political landscape of America is intermeshed with and projected onto Esther's personal life, as well as hinting at the beginning of her dissatisfaction with female sexual roles. Esther thus views her obsession with the Rosenbergs as an early sign of her pathology and her inability to feel as she is "supposed to" (2).

Indeed, it is not Esther who is "stupid" about executions. The prevailing inhumanity and hysteria surrounding the execution becomes a powerful symbol for the alienating, stultifying climate of fear and repression that dominates Plath's depiction of the period. Later, in the only other mention of the Rosenbergs in the novel, Esther recounts her horror at the reaction the execution elicits in her peers in a passage worth quoting at length.

> "I'm so glad they're going to die."
>
> Hilda arched her cat-limbs in a yawn, buried her head in the arms on the conference table and went back to sleep. A wisp of bilious green straw perched on her brow like a tropical bird.

Bile green. They were promoting it this fall, only Hilda, as usual, was half a year ahead of time. Bile green with black, bile green with white, bile green with nile green, its kissing cousin.

Fashion blurbs, silver and full of nothing, sent up their fishy bubbles in my brain. They surfaced with a hollow pop.

I'm so glad they're going to die. (99).

In this passage, McCarthyism's violent repression and disregard for human life are yet again juxtaposed with the banality of the fashion world, the "bile green" trends recalling the sickness and vomit that permeate the text. Hilda's sadistic proclamation is the flipside of the fashion magazines that promote oppressive images of subjugated female sexuality and domesticity. For Plath, the sexual war and the Cold War are indeed two sides of the same coin. The passage continues with Esther explaining the origins of the conversation:

So, I said, "Isn't it awful about the Rosenbergs?"

The Rosenbergs were to be electrocuted late that night.

"Yes!" Hilda said, and at last I felt I had touched a human string in the cat's cradle of her heart. It was only as the two of us waited for the others in the tomblike morning gloom of the conference room that Hilda amplified that Yes of hers.

"It's awful such people should be alive."

She yawned then, and her pale orange mouth opened on a large darkness. Fascinated, I stared at the blind cave behind her face until the tow lips met and moved and the dybbuk spoke out of its hiding place, "I'm so glad they're going to die." (100)

The monstrosity and horror of both worlds combine in this scene. As Esther seeks a "human string" she finds instead a "large darkness" and a "blind cave" from which emerges the dybbuk's voice.—a scathing indictment of the insanity of society at large that places Esther's own breakdown in a crucial political context. This scene is taken almost verbatim from a journal entry Plath wrote on June 19th, 1953, the evening of the execution. Unlike Esther, however, Plath comments more extensively on the incident, revealing much greater horror and anger at the lack of response to this destruction of human life:

The phones are ringing as usual and people planning to leave for the country over the weekend, and everybody is lackadaisical and rather glad and nobody very much thinks how big a human life is . . .

They were going to kill people with those atomic secrets. It is good for them to die. So that we can have the priority of killing people with those atomic secrets which are so very jealously and specially and inhumanly ours.

There is no yelling, no horror, no great rebellion. That is the appalling thing. The execution will take place tonight; it is too bad that it could not be televised . . . so much more realistic and beneficial than the run-of-mill crime program. Two real people being executed. No matter. The largest emotional reaction over the United States will be a rather large, democratic infinitely bored and casual and complacent yawn. (Plath *Journals* 82).

Plath's sardonic and biting critique of American "democracy" and of the disregard for human life that belies the myth of the American dream makes it clear that this political and historical marker is of crucial significance in understanding the madness of society. However, she does not have Esther comment further on this incident, perhaps because her growing awareness of the collective "bell jar" that is America has not developed at this point. Only at the end of the novel does she become more conscious of the collective madness of the world she inhabits. Nonetheless, her sense of the horrors that lie behind the smiling faces in the magazine she works for are emphasized in the passage immediately following this one, as Esther is told to smile for her photograph and instead breaks down crying. Esther's tears, despite her own uncertainty about their cause, point to a collective sorrow that stands in stark relief to the insanity of a society in which the likes of Hilda dominate.

Plath's Struggle with Form

For Plath, writing is more than just an art: it is a means of "justifying my life, my keen emotion, my feeling, by turning it into print" (Plath *Journals* 16). The relationship between her life and writing is a recurrent motif in her journals as she struggles to find a form that allows her both expression and the success she craved. In this regard, Plath's struggle with form is diametrically opposed to that of Doris Lessing, whose work will be discussed in the following chapter. The success of Lessing's earlier work, a conventional novel about her early experiences in Africa, led her to question, at least in part, the ability of the novel form to express any real truth. The limits of the form that earned Lessing her success spurred her to experiment with form in *The Golden Notebook*, which celebrates fragmentation and rejects the notion of narrative providing any order or form to the chaos of experience. Plath, on the other hand, explains, "I justified the mess I made of life by saying I'd give it order, form, beauty, writing about it; I justified my writing by saying it would be published, give me life" (Plath *Journals* 109). Indeed, as Van Dyne argues, "Plath's habits of self-representation suggest she regarded her life as if it were a text that she could invent and rewrite" (1). At the same time, Plath's studies in literature and her avid reading of literary and popular women's magazines made her very aware of the publishing market. As numerous critics have noted, Plath's ambition frequently led her to conform her writing to forms that she thought would make her work more salable. She wrote, as Hammer notes, "under the pressure of a particular contradiction: on the one hand, she believed in writing as self-expression; on the other hand, as a condition of achievement in writing, she was taught to adhere to models and formulas" (76).

In this regard, Plath's struggle with form is a reflection of the contradictions at the heart of what Lauren Berlant calls "the female complaint." For Berlant, "the female complaint is . . . an aesthetic "witnessing of injury" and a means of expressing women's experiences of oppression. At the same time, the form in which it is expressed is already contained within a patriarchal economy that belittles and trivializes women's experience. As Berlant argues,

> The female complaint serves in particular to mediate and manage the social contradictions that arise from women's sexual and affective allegiance to a phallocentric ideology that has, in practice, denied women power, privilege, and presence in the public and private spheres. To the extent that women employ the complaint as a mode of self-expression, it is an admission and a recognition both of privilege and powerlessness: it is a powerful record of patriarchal oppression,

> circumscribed by a knowledge of woman's inevitable delegitimation within the patriarchal public sphere. The a priori marking of female discourse as less serious is paradoxically the only condition under which the complaint mode can operate as an effective political tool: the female complaint allows the woman who wants to maintain her alignment with men to speak oppositionally but without fear for her position within the heterosexual economy—because the mode of her discourse concedes the intractability of the (phallocentric) conditions of the complaint's production (243).

Plath seems very aware of this contradiction. Her desire to both create innovative aesthetic works of self-expression and to sell her works leads to a fraught relationship with her own work, with many unfinished projects and painful periods in which she could not write at all. Only in the last years of her life, which ultimately led to the publication of *Ariel* and *The Bell Jar*, could Plath break free from some of the constraints of form that had impeded her writing.

While *The Bell Jar* is Plath's only published novel, her journals record many earlier attempts (including one completed draft she destroyed); early on in her literary career, writing a novel was a crucial goal for Plath. Plath sought models and forms in everything she read. One early mention of her attempt to write a novel expresses some of the ways she struggled with the form:

> I could write a terrific novel. The tone is the problem. I'd like it to be serious, tragic, yet gay & rich & creative. I need a master, several masters. Lawrence, except *Women in Love*, is too bare, too journalistic in style. Henry James, too elaborate, too calm and well-mannered. Joyce Cary I like. I have that fresh, brazen, colloquial voice. Or J. D. Salinger. But that needs an "I" speaker, which is so limiting. (Plath *Journals* 156)

Throughout her journals she debates whether or not to use the first or third person for her novel. While she identified with Salinger's style, in the early stages of novel writing she leans toward a third-person narrator, which would provide her with more narrative distance from her protagonist. Yet she keeps coming back to the first-person form and the "I" that she finds both appealing and limiting. As she says, comparing the first person of short stories in magazines with a novel written in first person, "it is easier to manipulate strictly limited characters, almost caricatures, some of them, than the diary 'I' of the novel, who must also become, in her way limited, but only so that she can grow to the vision I have now of life" (163). Her notion of a first-person narrator who is "limited," as Esther is at the beginning of *The Bell Jar,* but "grow[s] to the vision I have now of life" reveals the genesis of Plath's novelistic structure years before she began to write *The Bell Jar*. It also reveals her struggle to write a novel that expresses her own life but in which her character is separate, "limited," from the full range of experience and feeling that Plath could perhaps better express in her poetry. Only later, around the time she begins *The Bell Jar*, did she settle definitively on a first-person speaker, noting, "My one salvation is to enter into other characters in stories: the only three stories I am prepared to see published are all told in the first person. The thing is, to develop other first persons" (332). Ultimately, *The Bell Jar*'s protagonist and narrator emerges from this struggle in the form of Esther Greenwood, who provides a fictional persona through which she can tell her own story and share her own vision of life.

In this regard, Plath's choice of a fictional persona through which to express both the personal and political is mirrored in Lessing's work, although for Lessing the use of a singular "I" is far more fraught. Anna Wulf, the fictional protagonist of *The Golden Notebook,* creates many "Is" within the narrative in an attempt to give expression to the personal and political crisis of the self. In the more overtly fictional Martha Quest series, however, Lessing more clearly finds a fictional protagonist through which she is most comfortable expressing the "truth." This ultimately would become one of the dominant novelistic forms to emerge from the sixties, particularly among feminist writers, for whom the form provides, as it did for Plath, a means to draw on one's life experiences and express the inner feelings and worldview of the protagonist while also allowing the protagonist to grow into the author's vision by the end of the narrative.

While J. D. Salinger perhaps provides Plath with a model for the voice of *The Bell Jar*, it was Virginia Woolf who inspired the style and structure of Plath's novel:

> Virginia Woolf helps. Her novels make mine possible: I find myself describing: episodes: you don't have to follow your Judith Greenwood to breakfast, lunch, dinner, or tell about her train rides, unless the flash forwards her, reveals her. Make her enigmatic. . . . Make her a statement of the generation. Which is you . . . the American experience on the saturated spot of history (Plath *Journals* 168).

This passage in many ways demonstrates Plath's search for a form that can both express the personal narrative of her protagonist and tell a collective story, "a statement for a generation." It points to Plath's ongoing struggle with molding the novelistic form to reveal the personal and to capture the inner landscape of her character while also clearly situating her in the broader political landscape. Plath's search for "truth" in her writing likewise becomes a crucial theme in her quest to write her novel. She repeatedly searches for a style that can be both fictional and true, honest and authentic (a quest that anticipates literary developments of the sixties and the attempt to translate the "reassertion of the personal" in politics into a similar movement in which truth and authenticity become crucial). Plath struggles with finding the "truth" in her writing: "How to be honest. I see the beginnings, flashes, yet how to organize them knowledgeably, to finish them. I will write mad stories. But honest. I know the horror of primal feelings, obsessions" (328). It is only as Plath learns to give voice to these "primal feelings" and her own personal experiences through her fiction, without fear of rejection in the world of publishing, that she can tell her story.

Plath's struggle with form and the use of fiction to express a deeper personal and collective truth anticipates theoretical questions later women writers faced in search of a form in which to write about the personal. The dilemma of the writer trapped between a desire to write for self-expression and her training in and mastery of forms that inhibit and limit that expression haunts Plath's work. In *The Bell Jar*, Plath borrows from a variety of literary models, both "high culture" and mass media, while using her own experience to provide the intensity and authenticity in the novel.

Conclusion

The Bell Jar, inspired by both Woolf and Salinger, draws on the confessional tradition, along with "potboilers" and mass media, to create a genre that anticipated and inspired the later feminist movement. The first-person fictional narrative would become the form of choice to express woman writers' "awakening" and political development as they emerged from the feminine mystique to discover a new feminist consciousness—particularly in the "mad housewife" tales of the early 1970s, which will be discussed more fully in the third chapter. This

form is the literary expression of the idea that the personal is political. Esther (like Plath) develops not solely a feminist consciousness but a broader rejection of the dehumanization and repression that defined America in the 1950s, of which the Rosenberg execution is one of the most palpable expressions.

Likewise, Plath's portrayal of madness as a social condition rooted in women's oppression resonates with later writers of the feminist and anti-psychiatry movements. In blurring the lines between the personal, the fictional and the political, Plath anticipates later writers and challenges her readers to avoid an easy categorization of her work. While Plath herself is never explicitly feminist, Esther Greenwood provides a voice for a new political movement still in the process of discovering itself. Readings that overly politicize or pathologize Plath's fiction miss the dynamic tension between the personal and political that would inspire and radicalize the women's liberation movement. The 'madness' at the center of Plath's narrative is never entirely personal, nor is it entirely social. If Esther emerges from the bell jar at the end of the novel, her future is far from clear, as individual solutions for Plath are always limited, if not impossible. Plath's personal narrative is a stark reminder of the limits of the literary "happy ending"—but in leaving Esther at the threshold of recovery at the end of *The Bell Jar*, Plath leaves open the possibility of an alternative ending—one which, despite the possibilities it inspired, still eluded later generations of women writers. The intense subjectivity of Plath's work provides a deeply personal expression of the myriad political awakenings which would galvanize radicalizing women readers and writers. By personalizing the political and politicizing the personal, Plath's fiction paved the way for later writers who, inspired by her work, would borrow from and build on her innovations to tell the tale of the political awakening of a generation.

From 1956 to 1968: "Free Women" of the Old & and New Lefts in Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*

"Everything is cracking up."
—*Doris Lessing*, The Golden Notebook

Lessing and Her Readers

If Plath's legacy is defined in many ways by her absence, the legacy of Doris Lessing is marked by her often-overwhelming presence in the debates surrounding her work. Lessing's most (in)famous work, the groundbreaking *Golden Notebook* (1962), earned an iconic place in the developing field of feminist literature and criticism, as did Plath's work[1]. Plath's death left her executors and readers to debate the intentionality of her work and its relationship to the emerging feminist movement, whereas Lessing, as an author, has repeatedly replied to both her critics and admirers, admonishing them for misreading her work and missing its central message and distancing herself from the feminist movement.

The Golden Notebook gives expression to a political moment in which "everything was cracking up." However, the temporal and political gap between Lessing and her readers reflects an immense chasm between the old and new lefts. Representing a moment of crisis for the old left and for Lessing herself, the year 1956 looms large in *The Golden Notebook*. The novel explores the political, personal, and literary repercussions of the political crisis engendered by Khrushchev's "secret speech" and the later Soviet invasion of Hungary that led to divisions, splits, and disillusionment in Communist Parties throughout the world. Notably, the Communist Party in England, of which Lessing was a member, saw a massive exodus of members as the events of 1956 nailed shut the coffin that Stalinism had built. For Lessing, this political crisis crystallized larger questions about the roles of women and writers within the Party—central themes throughout *The Golden Notebook*. As a result, the political crisis that catalyzed the novel was also an immensely personal one and, crucially, a literary one—i.e., a crisis of form, a crisis of the relationship between truth and fiction and of the ability of literature to accurately convey the personal and collective histories that shape every story.

In contrast, however, many readers who seized on the book as an expression of their own political struggles saw in it a reflection of the political crises of the New Left. Though Lessing was writing about 1956, it was 1968 that shaped her audience's response, as a new generation of radicals who had rejected the old left from the outset sought to make sense of the political movements and struggles that had thrust them onto the world's center stage. For a generation radicalized by the Vietnam War, inspired by the civil rights movement, and, too often, disillusioned by the failures of the New Left (particularly with regard to women's liberation), the novel had deep resonance. They too struggled to make sense of the personal, political, and literary struggles engendered by the New Left. This tension between author and reader, between 1956 and 1968, creates a space in which *The Golden Notebook* takes on a life of its own.

The growth of the women's liberation movement in the United States made *The Golden Notebook* a bestseller. While one of her early admirers and interviewers notes that "in 1966 . . .

[1] In "American Feminist Literary Criticism: A Bibliographic introduction," Cheri Register cites the prevalence of both works and their association with a developing women's liberation movement, a new feminist literary criticism and a "feminist grapevine" which provided the "impetus" to read (1).

Doris Lessing's following among the literary intelligentsia in the U.S. was miniscule" (Howe 419), by 1971 Lessing felt the need to upbraid readers in a preface of the new edition for reading it solely as "a tract about the sex war" (Lessing, "Introduction: 1971" xv). In the context of the emerging feminist movement, her portrayal of a woman writer seeking a unified identity in a fragmented world tapped into a broader political impulse. It was for this reason that early admirers and critics such as Florence Howe sought Lessing out, saying that "reading her books had mattered to my life" (Howe 419). Lessing's response, however was to berate and admonish her readers, particularly her "American readers" (Howe 419) for failing to understand her work, while attempting to assert authorial control over its message. In many ways, the novel's reception had less to do with its content than with its timing. As Lessing says,

> Some books are not read in the right way because they have skipped a stage in opinion, assume a crystallization of information in society which has not yet taken place. This book was written as if the attitudes that have been created by the women's liberation movements had already existed. It came out first ten years ago, in 1962. If it were coming out now for the first time it might be read, and not merely reacted to: things have changed very fast ("Introduction: 1971" xiv).

Nonetheless, Lessing's repeated attempts to distance her novel from the feminist movement reflects an ongoing conflicted relationship with the movement that has continued to inform debates around the novel and its message. The fervor of Lessing's response resulted partly from the sexism with which certain critics berated her as a "man-hater" and "ballsbreaker" (Lessing "A Guarded Welcome") in much the same way Plath was demonized for publicly expressing elements of female rage at social oppression. However, Lessing also admonishes her fans, who she feels belittle her work:

> But nobody so much as noticed [the] central theme, because the book was instantly belittled, by friendly reviewers as well as by hostile ones, as being about the sex war, or was claimed by women as a useful weapon in the sex war. . . . I learned that I had written a tract about the sex war, and fast discovered that nothing I said then could change that diagnosis ("Introduction: 1971" xii-xv).

Indeed, Howe (419) notes that Lessing "called *The Golden Notebook* a 'failure' because people had read it *merely* as a feminist statement. Feminism, she was saying in 1966, was nothing new, and certainly not to her." While Lessing continued to proclaim her support for women's liberation, her fervor in distancing her novel from feminism and her frequent criticisms of feminism's goal as "small and quaint" (Lessing "Introduction: 1971" xiii) endow the novel with a contested status in the feminist literary canon.

Part of the problem seems to be that Lessing frequently "belittles" the feminist movement itself and fails to understand *The Golden Notebook*'s appeal to radicalized women. By narrowly understanding its appeal within the feminist movement as a "tract about the sex war," Lessing narrowly defines feminism's goals as being about "sex" and ignores the roots of feminism, particularly the broader political movements and radicalization sweeping the United States. Lessing accuses her readers of missing the central theme of the novel—that in a world where "everything's cracking up" (Lessing *GN* 3) a breakdown is sometimes necessary for healing. She sees them as ignoring the more political sections of the red and black notebooks, and most

importantly, failing to understand the revolutionary form of the novel. Yet it is precisely for all these reasons that the novel appealed to a generation of women who emerged from the New Left to confront the sexism they experienced in fighting for political change. These women sought new forms of expression and revolutions in form both in their lives and in the literary texts that represented their experience. While Lessing's political development and radicalization within the Communist Party and her subsequent disillusionment precedes the American feminist movement by several decades, her depiction of the struggles of a "liberated" woman within such a radical political movement—as well as her own search for an identity and a literary form to capture her narrative—made the text an icon for the feminist movement. If *The Bell Jar* pointed to the madness of the world and the stultifying effects of women's oppression on the woman artist searching for an identity, *The Golden Notebook* adds to this canon by self-consciously addressing women's struggles not only in their personal and artistic lives but within broader political movements. In doing so, it critiques and revolutionizes the literary conventions that make such narratives impossible to tell.

In *The Golden Notebook,* Lessing "wanted to tell a story which neither political positions nor sociological analyses were capable of exhausting" (Montremy 193). The need to do so became all the more crucial, she argues, because it arose from Khrushchev's speech, which sent the Communist Party into a tailspin toward its ultimate decline. Members, including Lessing, abandoned the Party, disillusioned by the dominance of Stalinism and the web of lies used to justify its continued dominance of the international Communist Party line. In many ways, *The Golden Notebook* represents a break in Lessing's own political trajectory and in her conception of politics altogether.

The literary counterpart to this political break was a change in her understanding of the role of the author and a rebellion against literary convention. While the novel is fictional, it draws on many of Lessing's own experiences—yet, as Lessing is deeply concerned with the very possibility of telling the "truth" of these experiences, it is in her fictional works that Lessing frequently explores her own political, literary and personal development as an author. As Peel notes,

> The self is more clearly a concern only in more aggressively fictional works, such as *The Golden Notebook*. This self-reflexive, intricate book ruthlessly interrogates the very possibility of telling the truth. The main character frequently meditates on the difficulty of writing accurately about oneself. . . . On the other hand, the very failure to claim accuracy seems to provide the freedom for exploring the personal more deeply. . . . the novel downplays any claim to verifiability and becomes free to approach the author's self more closely (Peel 3–4).

Lessing clearly sets out not only to revolutionize form and structure but also to capture a political period and to convey her own shift in political perspectives. This shift arose in large part out of her political disillusionment with the Communist Party and a corresponding disillusionment with the role of the political writer. At first Lessing, "firmly believed being a writer means—'changing the world'. I saw it as my duty to be politically active, to take the field against injustice, and wherever I went, standing or sitting, to discuss political subjects" (Schwarzkopf 105). Later, deeming her work a failure, she comes to the conclusion that

> the writer is nothing but an isolated voice in the wilderness. Many hear it; most pass by. It has taken a long time for me to recognize that in their books writers should distance themselves from the political questions of the day. They only waste energy senselessly and bar their vision from the universal themes of humanity which know neither time nor space. . . . All ideologies are deceptive and serve only a few, not people in general. (Schwarzkopf 105)

In many ways, Lessing's own political trajectory anticipates that of many of the political activists in the New Left and the women's liberation movement. While Lessing was radicalized by an earlier political period that ended in defeat and disillusionment, and thus is somewhat cynical and dismissive of the aims of the New Left and the political radicalization that inspired her readers, her engagement with the possibility of political change, her struggle to find a place as a woman and a writer within these movements, and her expression of the personal experiences of these political movements imbued *The Golden Notebook* with the power to inspire a generation coming to terms with the possibilities and limits of its own political movements and goals. Her sometimes frustrating dismissal of the New Left and the women's liberation movement is primarily a product of her own disillusionment with political activism and the role of the artist within political struggles.

Like *The Bell Jar*, *The Golden Notebook* anticipates many of the concerns of the incipient feminist movement and the New Left more broadly by attempting to commit to narrative form the struggles and fragmentation of women seeking to enact political change and to challenge the conventions that governed their personal, political, and literary lives. While Lessing distances herself both from the feminist movement and the wider political project that gave birth to it, the work itself has taken on a life of its own and in the context of the 1960s and 1970s, it "mattered" precisely because it gave voice to those conflicts.

Lessing's Feminism

In an infamous 1969 interview, Lessing declared, "I'm impatient with people who emphasize the sexual revolution. I say we should all go to bed, shut up about sexual liberation, and go on with the important matters" (cited in Morgan, "Alienation of the Woman Writer" 4). This comment along with the preface discussed above, cemented her fracture with the growing feminist movement. What made Lessing's comments so frustrating to many of her readers is that they seem to directly contradict the narrative impulse of her own work. In *The Golden Notebook*, far from "shutting up" about sexual liberation, Lessing puts it at center stage—making female sexuality and the struggle to achieve any kind of sexual liberation extremely public. Indeed, her own comments about the origins of the novel point to the central role of questions about female sexual liberation: "I was simply trying to understand what was happening to us, to all of us, who refused to live according to 'conventional morality.' And who all encountered, nevertheless, many difficulties, submissive to the point of absurdity in our need to proclaim our freedom" (Montremy 198). As a narrative about "free women"—who, as Ella Price points out in Dorothy Bryant's later novel, are never really that free (Bryant *EPJ* 88)— issues of sexuality and relationships figure prominently and far from diminishing the narrative to a tract about the "sex war," add to its complexity.

In *The Golden Notebook* the question of sexual liberation is never too far removed from broader questions of political liberation and "conventions," whether they be social, sexual, or literary. Yet Lessing seems truly surprised that the novel would elicit such a strong response

from millions of women around the world who identified with Anna Wulf's struggle to forge her own identity as a political, sexual, and literary subject in a world which fragments and represses such identities, particularly for women. Lessing, on the one hand, shares with second-wave feminism a project deeply rooted in a moment of political crisis in which the world appeared to be "cracking up." On the other hand, the gap between such crises and the movements that give rise to their concerns distances Lessing from the later generation of radicals. If 1956 was Lessing's moment of crisis, it was more than a decade in the making. *The Golden Notebook* in many ways reflects a turning point: a rejection not only of Communism, which Lessing rejects vociferously from this point onward, but also of politics more generally. Lessing rejects political struggle and turns first toward a more personal and/or psychological struggle in the sense R. D. Laing put forth. She ultimately abandons that for Sufism and a somewhat mystical, often fatalistic, apocalyptic vision of the world (Hazelton). It is for this reason that Lessing rejects so vociferously the mantle of feminist icon: the novel that earned her this status is itself a rejection of the political ideas and struggles of her past to which the emerging sixties radicals are, to her mind, direct heirs. Thus, while she does locate *The Golden Notebook* not only in the moment of political crisis for the international Communist movement of 1956 but also in the emerging feminist consciousness, citing de Beauvoir as the best expression of this consciousness (Lessing, "Guarded Welcome"), she is careful to locate her own feminism in an earlier tradition:

> When I wrote *The Golden Notebook* it never occurred to me I was writing "a feminist bible." The 60s feminists were not the first in the arena. "The Woman Question" dated from the 15th century. In communist circles in the 40s and 50s feminist issues were much discussed. . . . So I became "a feminist icon." But what had I said in *The Golden Notebook*? That any kind of singlemindedness, narrowness, obsession, was bound to lead to mental disorder, if not madness. (This may be observed most easily in religion and politics.)
>
> If the dialogue that so affected (and still affects) women was straight from life, then a very interesting question has to arise. Why does what is written have so much more impact than what is said? Apparently my reporting of how women criticized men was a revelation. But why? Surely not to any woman? Yet what she must have heard all her life struck her as dynamite when written down. (Lessing, "Guarded Welcome")

It was precisely because it was *written down* that it tapped into and expressed the growing radicalization women who had never been part of discussions of the "woman question" in Communist circles in the 1940s and 1950s, but were beginning to initiate these conversations in the new radical movements of the 1960s. If *The Golden Notebook* represented the culmination of Lessing's political journey and her retreat from "politics" as she understands it, her audience—the new generation of radicals, most notably women—were just beginning their political journey, one which would culminate, for many of them, in similar conclusions several decades later. At the moment of its publication, *The Golden Notebook* found an audience not in those already disillusioned with politics but a generation radicalized by the civil rights movement of the 1950s.Yet the temporal and political gap between the political events and crises which shaped author and audience are huge. Like Lessing, who came to radical politics in earlier struggles against racism in the colonial setting of Rhodesia, the New Left got its start in the struggles against racism in the Jim Crow South. In the process, like Lessing, many women of the New Left

drew radical conclusions about the world while also confronting the sexism that existed even in the most radical milieus and struggles of their time. Unlike their predecessors, however, they began their political trajectory just as Stalinism had discredited the old left. They thus rejected these politics, turning instead toward Maoism, Third-World liberation struggles, and, ultimately, identity politics as their guides to revolutionary politics (see Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*). World War II and its aftermath defined Lessing's generation. In the post-war world of Lessing's Britain, leftist and progressive ideas gained considerable currency as a result of the war and wartime thinking which led to increased critiques of prewar society. With the ouster of Churchill in favor of Clement Atlee, a new "postwar consensus" emerged. The American New Left, in contrast, represented a generation forged by Vietnam. Whereas the Stalinist left of Lessing's generation had ultimately joined the war effort; the war in Vietnam ripped the veil off of US imperialism for the New Left of the 1960s leading many to conclude that "the United States may be the greatest threat to peace in the world today" (Paul Potter, SDS President, cited in Halstead 41-42). Unlike Lessing's disillusionment with Stalinism, the New Left's disillusionment with their own government propelled them into action against a system that produced such violence as they felt compelled to "name it, describe it, analyze it and change it" (Potter, cited in Halstead 42).

The Golden Notebook's publication coincided with the early birth pangs of the feminist movement, which first found expression in the New Left via Casey Hayden and Mary King's "A Kind of Memo" addressed to "women in the peace and freedom movements" (21) in 1965. Unlike the Communist Party, which had always at least paid lip service to women's liberation through a Marxist understanding of the "woman question," Sarah Evans (116) notes that "the new left embodied the heritage of the feminine mystique far more strongly than the older left had. Its obliviousness to the issue of women's oppression was a sign, in fact, of how thoroughly the 'new' left represented a break from the 'old.'" Women's struggle for sexual liberation and political equality over the next decade, and the New Left's failure to address the sexism within its ranks, would be one of the many causes for the New Left's fragmentation, most notably the collapse of SDS in 1968.

Thus the feminist movement that emerged in the late 1960s was marked by "differences in style and ideology" from the left Lessing knew. As Fredric Jameson argues, the dominant political currents of the 1960s emerged from third world liberation struggles, in a period marked by the decline of the old left and a move away from class politics. In the United States, Jameson cites the merger of the AFL-CIO as a triumph of Mcarthyite repression, as it allowed the expulsion of communists and transformed institutions of older working class politics into a "'social contract' between American business and the American labor unions… in which the privileges of the white male labor force take precedence over the demands of black and women workers and other minorities" ("Periodizing the 60s" 181). The late 1960s and 70s witnessed a groundswell of labor actions inspired by the anti-war, civil rights and women's movements. Of particular importance was the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit which provides an important example of black labor radicalism. Despite some successes, this labor resurgence ran up against the entrenched labor bureaucracy and limits imposed by the growing economic crisis.[2] At the same time, with the

[2] See *Detroit I do Mind Dying* by Dan Georgekas for more on the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement; *U.S. Labor and the Vietnam War* by Philip S. Foner; and, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* by Jefferson Cowie.

decline of third world liberation struggles, Jameson argues, the movements returned to an orientation on "internal politics"("Periodizing the 60s" 183). He notes that "the black movement in the U.S. enters into a crisis at much the same time, as its dominant ideology—cultural nationalism. . .-- is exhausted. The women's movement also owed something to this kind of third world inspiration, but it too, in the period 1972-1974 will know an increasing articulation into relatively distinct ideological positions ('bourgeois' feminism, lesbian separatism, socialist feminism)" (Jameson "Periodizing the 60s" 183). Evans points out that "the left as a whole was moving into a period of fragmentation, suspicions, and mutual recrimination. The new movement of women reflected both the weaknesses and the strengths of the background from which it came" (211). As the decade progressed, then, it is possible that Lessing's readers in the growing feminist movement identified with the political crisis and fragmentation at the center of *The Golden Notebook,* even if they viewed it from a very different political background and history. Nonetheless, the solution for this later generation of women radicals was not a disavowal of politics but the formation of a new and explicitly feminist movement—a political project that Lessing fundamentally rejects. Lessing's contradictory relationship with feminism and with the New Left reflects this gap in political trajectories. Even as her novel became a "bible" for the feminist movement, her own disillusionment with the Communist Party post-1956 ultimately led her to reject the struggles and political projects of later generations.

Lessing's experience with Stalinism and the British Communist Party leads her to a somewhat cynical approach to all political mass movements who in her view are inherently misguided and doomed to failure. In a 1992 *New York Times* op-ed, she took on the question of "political correctness":

> The phrase 'political correctness' was born as Communism was collapsing. I do not think this was chance. I am not suggesting that the torch of Communism has been handed on to the political correctors. I am suggesting that habits of mind have been absorbed, often without knowing it. . . .
> Does political correctness have a good side? Yes it does, for it make us re-examine attitudes, and that is always useful. The trouble is that, with all popular movements, the lunatic fringe so quickly ceases to be a fringe; the tail begins to wag the dog. For every woman or man who is quietly and sensibly using the idea to examine our assumptions, there are 20 rabble-rousers whose real motive is desire for power over others, no less rabble-rousers because they see themselves as anti-racists or feminists or whatever. . . .
> I am sure that millions of people, the rug of Communism pulled out from under them, are searching frantically, and perhaps not even knowing it, for another dogma. (Lessing, "Questions").

The "PC Wars" that Lessing attacks in this piece, published three decades after *The Golden Notebook,* is the last vestige of the radical movements of the sixties and seventies.. That Lessing jumps into these debates arguing that the "political correctors"—feminists, anti-racists, and indeed all "popular movements—are ultimately power-hungry rabble-rousers in search of a new dogma to replace Communism demonstrates how far she has traveled. Likewise, it demonstrates her association of all political struggles with the Communist dogma she rejected in 1956.

Nonetheless, while *The Golden Notebook* served in many ways to lead Lessing to these conclusions, it reflects a much more contradictory moment in her political development. Anna

Wulf, Lessing's alter ego in the novel, struggles with these political questions—her relationship to Communism, the relationship between the personal and political, and the political role of the writer—with far less finality than the later Lessing would demonstrate in these debates. It is here that the crux of the paradox of *The Golden Notebook*'s role in the 1960s is revealed. The novel, which seeks to capture the political crisis of 1956 which marks Lessing's own departure from politics in the formal sense, is read by a generation in search of political direction—and particularly by women within that generation searching for ways to raise specific questions they have about the relationship between personal and political struggles. Thus, as one reviewer notes in 1972, exploring Lessing's contradictory relationship to the feminist movement:

> The book's strength lies . . . in the wide range of Mrs. Lessing's interests, and, more specifically, in her attempt to write honestly about women. To be honest about women in the sixties is, for Mrs. Lessing, tantamount to a severe moral commitment, indeed almost a religion function, in some ways a corollary of her political fervor of the fifties.
>
> While the English novel has not lacked female novelists, few indeed—including Virginia Woolf—have tried to indicate what it is like to be a woman: that is, the sense of being an object or a thing even in societies whose values are relatively gentle. (Karl 1)

Indeed, the reviewer's characterization of the book as being "honest about women" reduces its scope to the "sex wars" in precisely the manner that Lessing so adamantly rejects. Nonetheless, it makes clear precisely why the novel was revolutionary, despite Lessing's claims to the contrary in this regard. Likewise, the reviewer accurately depicts Lessing's angry denunciation of the women's movement as a "curious turn upon herself"; it is in fact a rejection of her own political past, informed by her rejection of political struggle as a solution to the problem of women's oppression. Thus Lessing rejects those who would use her novel as part of the feminist consciousness-raising movement, calling it "double-edged" and "a continuation of that old bully, the party line" (Lessing, "Questions"). It is easy to see , then, why Lessing sees *The Golden Notebook* as the "albatross around [her] neck" (Lessing, "Salon Interview"). Nonetheless, despite her later protestations, she admits that "the reason for its continued vitality is, I feel, not literary. When I wrote it, I felt I was living through an explosion of contradictory possibilities. The energy of that somehow got into *The Golden Notebook*, gave it impetus" (Lessing, "Guarded Welcome"). Indeed, this "explosion of contradictory possibilities" was precisely what Lessing shared with the younger generation amidst her audience.

In many ways, *The Golden Notebook* begins where many of later feminist fictional narratives end: with "free women." However, as Lessing makes clear early on, these women, despite their relative freedom—from marriage and economic dependence on men, from stultifying social conventions, and so on— are not so free after all. In the opening of the novel, Anna Wulf and her friend Molly, the two "free women" who give the novel-within-the-novel its title, discuss the paradoxical nature of their "freedom" as they see it. They comment on the fact that, despite their many differences, the outside world deems them "interchangeable" because of their position as unmarried, unconventional women:

> "Free women," said Anna, wryly. She added, with an anger new to Molly, so that she earned another quick scrutinizing glance from her friend: "They still define us in terms of relationships with men, even the best of them."
>
> "Well, *we* do, don't we?" said Molly, rather tart. "Well, it's awfully hard not to," she amended, hastily because of the look of surprise Anna now gave her. […]
>
> Molly said at last, sighing: "Free. Do you know when I was away, I was thinking about us, and I've decided that we're a completely new type of woman. We must be, surely?"
>
> "There's nothing new under the sun," said Anna, in an attempt at a German accent. (Lessing *GN 4-5).*

From the very beginning of the novel, Lessing's contradictory relationship to feminism is laid bare. Her characters have a certain amount of independence and have freed themselves from the domestic trap of marriage and conventional morality, as later feminists would strive to do. Nonetheless, Anna and Molly's conversation makes clear that they are still judged and defined based on their relationships or lack thereof with men—not only by the perennial "they" of conventional morality, but also by themselves. As they seek personal and sexual fulfillment through relationships with men, they continue to be confronted with the limits of their own freedom and independence and the impossibility of escaping a world in which sexism and heterosexism pervade relationships at all levels.

It is also clear that for Lessing, Anna Wulf is not a "new woman," nor does Lessing believe in the possibility for the forging of such a new woman, thus crushing from the outset of the novel the possibility of realizing feminism's goal. From the beginning of the novel, then, Anna realizes what the heroines of other feminist novels of the period— *The Bell Jar's* Esther, *The Women's Room*'s Mira, Bryant's Ella Price, and so on—realize only at the culmination of their searches for personal liberation from a collective problem: that without a fundamental transformation of the material conditions which produce women's oppression, there are limits to the possibility of such a quest. The bildungsroman, a literary manifestation of bourgeois individualism and the triumph of the self, is a formal limitation that can give voice to a transformation in consciousness—but not to the kind of radical social transformation that eludes the confines of realist fiction.

For Lessing it is clear that freedom itself has a cost. In the yellow notebook, Julia (the fictional Molly) tells Ella (the fictional Anna), "I think we're all in a sort of sexual mad house," to which Ella replies, "My dear Julia, we've chosen to be free women and this is the price we pay, that's all." (Lessing, *GN* 438). While the contradiction inherent in seeking a personal solution to the collective problem of women's liberation is clear in this passage, it is also notable that, as Ellen Morgan argues in her insightful evaluation of Lessing's relationship to feminism in the novel, "neither woman considers actually fighting back; there is no visible solidarity among women which would sanction and support such rebellion. Moreover, their analysis of the situations is fundamentally apolitical" (473). In fact, while the novel is replete with Anna's attempts to develop her own political conclusions and analysis in the aftermath of the 1956 crisis in the Communist Party, these are kept carefully contained in the red and black notebooks. The majority of her most insightful observations about sexual politics and women's oppression remain primarily personal, not political. As Morgan argues, "Most of Ella's keenest observations are followed by turnings away, efforts to escape the essentially political consequences of their

logic. She is very much afraid that her perceptions, because feminist, are illegitimate and inconsistent with the broader humanism to which she is committed" (Morgan, "Alienation of the Woman Writer" 474). For Morgan, Lessing's rejection of feminism is due to her commitment to a broader politics, a remnant in some ways of the Communist Party in the 1950s, where questions of a more individual nature —whether her struggles as a writer or as a woman—were frequently subsumed to the party line. Nonetheless, it is crucial that Lessing moves increasingly to an understanding of women's oppression as a personal question at the same time as she splits from the Party and abandons her own belief in the possibility of revolutionary political change. It is her rejection of, not her belief in, a broader political philosophy which leads her to dismiss and reject the political project of feminism. Indeed, the novel traces her development away from more overt ideas of collective political struggle to the search for a personal and literary solution to the "madhouse" she inhabits. Anna's own attempt to grapple with the problem of "free women" is a reflection of Lessing's own attempts to come to terms with the possibilities for women's liberation. She ultimately concludes that liberation can only be realized in an extremely limited fashion through a personal psychological journey; such a journey is how the fragmented identities of Anna Wulf can be made whole. Lessing's contradictory relationship to the later feminist movement is thus already revealed in the novel itself and has its roots in her rejection of the collective political struggle that for her was unfortunately identified with the Communist Party.

Anna's experience within the Communist Party, particularly her youth in Africa, as recorded in the black notebook and in her earlier novel *Frontiers of War* (a not-so-subtle reference to Lessing's first novel, likewise set in Africa), disillusions her about the possibility of achieving any real level of sexual liberation. Despite the many discussions of the "woman question" and the Party's theoretical commitment to equality between men and women, she is repeatedly confronted with the inequality and sexism that continue to pervade relationships between individuals, no matter what political theories they espouse. Her novel revolves around the various relationships among the group of socialists and radicals who introduce her to Communism in Africa.

The story of George, in particular, is important with regard to Anna's inability to imagine relationships in which power inequalities are absent. Despite his professed socialist politics, Anna notes, "George needed a woman to submit to him, he needs a woman to be under his spell physically. And men can no longer dominate women in this way without feeling guilty about it" (Lessing, *GN* 119). Thus, George continues to engage in sexist behavior that objectifies women, but his only expression of his political rejection of this behavior is through his guilt. As he tells Anna, "I'm a sod and a bastard. Well, that would be bearable, but I'm also a practicing socialist. And I'm a swine. How can a swine be a socialist, that's what I want to know?" (Lessing, *GN* 119). Despite his political struggle against both racial and sexual inequalities, in his personal life he has an affair with a married, Black African woman and fathers a child with her to whom he can provide no financial support without severe repercussions in both of their personal lives. He perceives himself (as Anna perceives him) repeating stereotypical patterns and reinforcing the existing power inequalities that dominate relationships in Africa. This early realization on Anna's part of the gap between political theory and discourse and political experience reinforces her later rejection of any political theory that claims to be able to bring about true liberation for individuals. The fact that George is well aware of the paradox of his position does not make his actions any more justified. He clearly understands the contradictions of his politics. The gap between rhetoric and action, the personal and political, contained in George's explanation of his

own role as both an opponent and a perpetuator of inequality has an early influence on Anna, providing an example of her early disillusionment with the politics of the Communist Party and its inability to put politics into practice in the realm of personal relationships.

In England, Anna likewise encounters Party officials who, despite their belief in sexual liberation and equality between the sexes, are blind or worse to their wives' difficulties and stultification as they try to find fulfillment in the domestic sphere. Anna and Molly themselves are unable to reconcile their politics with their feelings and experiences in relationships. While both have left marriages to live as "free women," they repeatedly enter into unequal relationships and seem unable to realize their commitment to women's liberation in practice. This contradiction becomes most apparent in Anna's relationship with the American Saul Green at the end of the novel. Anna enters a cycle of mutual madness, violence, and domination in which she loses her sense of identity completely, only to have this final fragmentation become the key to her reemergence as a whole person. Saul Green in many ways represents the worst of the Communist men . Despite using demeaning language and objectifying of women, he claims, "It's the first time in my life I've ever been accused of being anti-feminist. It'd interest you to know that I'm only the American male I know who doesn't accuse American women of all the sins in the calendar. Do you imagine I don't know that men blame all women for their inadequacies?" (Lessing, *GN 535*). Ironically, it is this self-proclaimed "feeder on women" (629) who gives Anna the first line of her novel *Free Women*—the conventional novel-within-the-novel. He is the catalyst for the already fragmented Anna's complete breakdown, but in the process he is also the catalyst for her recovery and her return to writing. He both is a testament to the misogyny that can lie beneath the veneer of professed radical politics and a Laingian savior to Anna.

For R.D. Laing, what is perceived as 'madness' is a sane response to an untenable situation produced by an insane world. Much of Laing's critique of psychiatry focused on the hierarchical nature of the relationship between doctor and patient as well as the stigmatization of those deemed mentally ill without any attempt to understand the social roots of their condition. In particular, in his work on schizophrenia, Laing argues that what is needed from a therapeutic relationship is understanding and a relationship of equals "instead of the degradation ceremonial of psychiatric examination"(*PE* 128). Thus, the doctor must approach a psychotic episode in an attempt to understand it, as a voyage through which the self can be recovered. In this "initiation ceremonial… the person will be guided…into inner space and time, by people who have been there and back again. Psychiatrically, this would appear as ex-patients helping future patients go mad" (Laing, *PE* 128). Despite Saul's misogyny, he plays a similar therapeutic role as he helps to break Anna down completely, but also provides her with the unified *Golden Notebook* and allows her to emerge whole again to write *Free Women*, thus concluding the novel with some aura of a conventional form.

Indeed, in this section Lessing's own ambiguous and contradictory understanding of female liberation is at its most complex and perhaps its most cynical. The Anna who emerges from this episode has not only rejected her earlier politics but has also rejected, in many ways, the identity of "free woman." Despite their attempts to resist conventional morality and domesticity, at the end of the novel, both "free women" have come full circle. Molly is about to be married again; Anna has decided to take a job as a counselor at a "marriage welfare center" (635). Ultimately, both characters seek individual solutions and adapt themselves to a society in which they find that being "free women" is, in fact, impossible.

Throughout the novel, the collective oppression of women in 1950s British society forms a backdrop for Anna's personal struggle for liberation. She notes, as she canvasses women for

the Communist Party, "This country's full of women going mad all by themselves" (159). As the fictional Ella, working at a women's magazine, she finds herself conflicted about her inability to provide advice to the millions of women who are dissatisfied with their domestic lives, recognizing that there is no help for them "unless the whole system's changed" (169). Later, she recognizes that her own resentment and anger in her relationship with Michael are not a personal problem, but part of a collective problem facing women, observing that

> the housewife's disease has taken hold of me. The tension in me, so that peace has already gone away from me, is because the current has been switched on. . . . Long ago, in the course of the sessions with Mother Sugar, I learned that the resentment, the anger, is impersonal. It is the disease of women in our time. I can see it in women's faces, their voices, every day or in the letters that come to the office. The woman's emotion: resentment against injustice, an impersonal poison. The unlucky ones, who do not know it is impersonal, turn it against their men. The lucky ones, like me—fight it. It is a tiring fight. (318–19)

It is notable that Anna comes to her realization of this "disease of women in our time" not through her political education or struggle, but through Freudian psychoanalysis. The problem of social oppression of women is rooted primarily in psychology, not politics. Later generations of feminists would insist, as Phyllis Chesler among others would argue, that this was a political failure, and not a personal or psychological one, therefore, there could be no personal solution to a collective problem. For Lessing, the psychological malaise of the housewife, while a reflection of a broader injustice, is firmly ensconced within the realm of the individual psyche. It must be resolved within the self. As such, it cannot be solved through collective struggle, for Anna, who "fights it" on an individual, psychological level.

In fact, Anna's awareness of the social oppression of women leads her not to rebel and protest but to accept and learn to adapt to this state of affairs, absolving individual men from responsibility for their treatment of women. As Morgan notes,

> She tells herself the anger has nothing to do with Michael. It is "impersonal," the disease of "women of our time" which is evident in their faces and voices, a protest against injustice, but nevertheless a protest which should be fought down and not on any account turned against men (p. 333). The idea is that one must adjust rather than act in one's own self-interest to change the system. (Morgan, "Alienation of the Woman Writer" 478)

The novel appealed to the emerging feminist movement in its frank depiction of the paradoxical and conflicted struggle of "free women" in a society that systematically denies that freedom, but it also makes clear what Lessing would later state more frankly and vociferously—that a political movement for women's liberation is not a solution. Instead, for Lessing, the struggle is an internal and psychological one that can only be resolved psychologically. Lessing's feminism thus reflects her broader political trajectory from Marx to Laing, as she increasingly rejects the possibility of change in the material world for a focus on the internal landscape of the mind.

Lessing's discussions of female sexuality in the novel also reflect this move to an internal psychological landscape. These passages are disturbing in terms of their implications for Lessing's feminism. Anna seems to blame women for the lack of real possibilities for sexual

liberation. Real liberation for women is impossible because, as she says, "our real loyalties are always to men, and not to women" (Lessing, *GN* 46). She suggests that for all the "whin[ing] and complain[ing]" (46), women cannot live without men and are, despite their resentment at sexual inequality, dependent on them. She even goes so far as to suggest that "many women like to be bullied" (94). Anna's sexual relationships, despite her attempt to reject conventional morality, frequently reinscribe dominant ideology vis-à-vis female sexuality. She repeatedly enters unequal sexual relationships in which she submits to male desire. Nowhere is the gap between Anna's feminism and that of the later generation she inspires so apparent as in her discussion of female sexuality and, in particular, the female orgasm. For Anna, "there is only one real female orgasm and that is when a man, from the whole of his need and desire, takes a woman and wants all her response. Everything else is a substitute and a fake, and the most inexperienced woman feels this instinctively" (205). This passage, read in light of later feminists' attempts to redefine female sexuality (such as the infamous Hite Report and Koedt's "Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm") might have appeared to Lessing's second-wave feminist audience as an old-fashioned relic of earlier sexual mores and heterosexist scientific discourse. However, it reveals a much greater ambiguity that lies at the heart of Lessing's feminism: an insistence on women's sexual and psychological need for some kind of submission to male desire for fulfillment. While this need is fraught with contradictions, it is for Lessing, at least one of the explanations for why women cannot be "free." While *The Golden Notebook* was revolutionary in bringing these frank discussions of female sexuality and women's alienation from their own bodies and sexuality into the realm of literary discourse, it is, in many regards, unable to break out of dominant discourses regarding female sexuality. Like many later feminists, Lessing seems to suggest that there is no possibility for truly equal or "free" sexual relationships between men and women, nor is she able to imagine any form of liberated sexuality beyond the bounds of heterosexism. Whereas Plath and many of the later feminist writers would locate the cause of this in the social conditions of women's oppression, which necessitate a collective rather than individual struggle, Lessing sees the problem as rooted in the female psyche and at times within the female body itself. It is perhaps for this reason that Lessing so adamantly argues that the women's movement should "shut up about sexual liberation, and go on with the important matters" (cited in Morgan 4).

The struggles of the "free women" in *The Golden Notebook* —to overcome alienation and fragmentation, to make sense of inequality and objectification in their personal relationships, and to find political theories and struggles that would make sense of their lives and world— tapped into an emerging feminist consciousness. Yet the novel itself is a rejection of this type of political struggle. *The Golden Notebook* represents the end of Lessing's political trajectory: her rejection of her previous belief in the possibility of revolutionary change, in the forms of both Communism and a collective struggle for women's liberation. Capturing her moment of political crisis, however, allowed the novel to take on a life of its own. Lessing's readers drew entirely different conclusions. Its exposure of the contradictions between the political and the personal, the individual and collective, lay at the heart of its appeal to the new generation of women radicals, who would reject much of the previous generation's political worldview in favor of a politics of identity and the idea that the "personal is political."

From 1956 to 1968: The Personal & Political in the Old and New Left

Although Lessing repudiated the New Left, her own political development mirrored the trajectory of many of the radicals who read were inspired by *The Golden Notebook*. Lessing's rejection of the color barrier and racism and colonial domination she witnessed firsthand in

Rhodesia radicalized her and brought her into the world of left-wing politics. Her portrayal of the complexity of racial, sexual, and left-wing politics in the 1950s resonated with the emerging feminist movement, particularly in the United States, where it emerged from the civil rights movement in the South (see Evans, *Personal Politics*). The US New Left was rooted in profoundly different politics. Nonetheless, the crises within it posed serious questions for radicals.

For Lessing, the black notebook, which depicts Anna's early political development in Africa as both a radical and a writer, is crucial to her later political development. The black notebook is perhaps where the contradictory nature of Anna's status as a writer, a woman and a radical is most evident. While structuring the narrative around the different notebooks purposely resists the bildungsroman's overly determined notions of time and causal links between past, present, and future, the black notebook is crucial because it contains the roots of Anna's later personal and political crisis in her early experiences in colonial Rhodesia.

Indeed, the position of the colonial white woman writer in Africa is fraught with contradictions. In *Margins of Empire*, Louise Yellin explores these contradictions, arguing that they are reflected in the women characters such writers created. They are, as Draine notes in a review of Yellin's work, "by force of sexual politics always at the margins of imperial power," but "white women in a colonial context write from the inexorably privileged position of their whiteness" (Draine 554). This recognition of both marginal status and privilege is a contradictory one for Lessing, who explores this complex system of power relationships in much of her writing on Africa. In *The Golden Notebook* it is at the root of the Mashopi episode, which provides the material for Anna's successful novel *The Frontiers of War*. In the black notebook she re-explores the experience, demonstrating both the hypocrisy and the naïveté of the group of radicals, who seek to challenge racism in Rhodesia and yet replicate many of its power dynamics in their personal relationships. Likewise, she satirizes the unending discussions of the "white vanguard" and the "black vanguard" in the trade union and the working-class movement against racial oppression they had at a time when there was not yet a Black trade union movement. These characters seem to have no contact with African radicals at all. Their failures in many ways presage the later failures of the Communist Party, but also point to their inability to understand how profoundly colonial domination and racial oppression shape all social, political, and personal life. While Anna (and Lessing) point to their failures, these experiences are nonetheless crucial because they trace her initiation into politics and simultaneously contain the seeds of her subsequent disillusionment.

For white feminists in the United States in the early sixties, many of whom had just gone through their own Mashopi episode in the American South, the black notebooks undoubtedly had profound resonance. As Sara Evans argues in *Personal Politics*, "Twice in the history of the United States the struggle for racial equality has been the midwife of the feminist movement" (Evans 24). While the first-wave feminist movement of the nineteenth century emerged from the abolitionist movement, second-wave feminism had its roots in the early experiences of women organizing with SNCC, among other organizations, in the South and participating in Freedom Rides and Freedom Schools in the civil rights movement. Unlike Lessing's depiction of the small groups of radicals in Rhodesia, however, the white women who participated in the movement were not isolated leaders but, rather, were forced to confront the complexity of their own political role in a struggle led by African Americans. As Evans argues,

> From the beginning, a cluster of young white women committed their lives to the revolt of black youth and shared most of that revolt's complexities: the exhilarating sense of "making history," which brought in its wake hard work, anxiety, fear, and comradeship. The civil rights movement of the sixties allowed white participants no license to cling to a patronizing self-image or to decide the movement's agenda. Young blacks, spearheaded by SNCC, demanded "freedom now," and the young whites who joined them were in no position, as earlier generations of white reformers had been, to suggest which freedoms should come first or how. . . . For women, their new experiences and perceptions brought them face to face with the tangled relationship between race and sex, and with the fact that they, as white women, were walking symbols of racial domination. (Evans 42–43)

Like Lessing, the white women involved in the civil rights movement were forced to confront the complex ways in which sexual and racial oppression intersect. Through their personal and political experiences, they were also radicalized, both by their recognition of the brutality of racism and by their growing awareness of their own sexual oppression.

It is not surprising, then, that *The Golden Notebook,* with its complex analysis of the roles of white women and radicals in fighting racism in the colonial setting, would be read as an expression of this emerging feminist consciousness. Nonetheless, the circumstances of Lessing's entrance into politics— before the civil rights movement and the national liberation struggles in Africa that emerged at the height of the crisis in the Communist Party— led her to fundamentally different conclusions. For Lessing, the African liberation struggles raging at the time of the novel's publication figure centrally—not as proof of a new political struggle emerging, but as a continuation of the failure of Communism and as proof of that all political struggle inevitably ends in chaos, fragmentation, and defeat.

The black notebook traces Anna's early political development in Africa, but is interrupted starting in 1955 by newspaper clippings tracing the growth of national liberation struggle in Africa. Begun as an attempt to record the "source" and "money" from her successful novel about her experiences in Africa, it becomes Anna's attempt to grapple with that past for her subsequent development as a political activist and as a writer. Anna's Africa story ends with the beginning of African liberation. With the onset of African liberation movements, her narrative is supplanted by a historical record in which each item "referred to violence, death, rioting, hatred in some part of Africa" (Lessing, *GN* 500). Notably missing from this record are the successful national liberation struggles. Disillusioned by the Communist Party and unable to see in these movements any continuity with her early struggles against racism and colonial domination, Anna sees only violence and defeat. Her only subsequent entry, the final entry in the black notebook before it is closed and put away, records a dream about a film version of her novel. She writes,

> Last night I dreamed that a television film was to be made about the group of people at the Mashopi Hotel. . . . Then I saw the cameras come wheeling in to make the film. They reminded me of guns. . . . Then I understood that the director's choice of shots or of timing was changing the "story." What would emerge from the completed film would be something quite different from what I remembered. I was powerless to stop the director and the cameramen . . . .When it was all over, and the cast began drifting off, to drink in the Mashopi Hotel bar,

> and the cameramen (who I now saw were all black, all the technicians were black) were wheeling off their cameras and dismantling them (for they were also machine guns). I said to the director: "Why did you change my story?" . . . He said, "But Anna, you saw those people there, didn't you? You saw what I saw? They spoke those words, didn't they? I only filmed what was there." I didn't know what to say, for I realized that he was right, that what I "remembered" was probably untrue. (Lessing, *GN* 501-2).

In this dream, Anna's story no longer exists; it has been supplanted by a new narrative written and enacted by the national liberation struggles that were sweeping the African continent as Lessing was writing the novel. The white radicals who were the actors in the Mashopi Hotel story are no longer the central characters, as the all-Black camera crew turn the cameras into weapons. In Anna's mind, the new narrative is marked by violence as her story, her words, loses meaning amid an active revolution led by African people themselves. Rather than see any potential for liberation in this new narrative, Anna names this transformation "sterility," underscoring her vision of these struggles as devoid of any progressive movement for change. While the "sterility" she discusses is also her own sterility and a recognition of the fiction of white radicals and writers at the center of revolution, her disillusionment and sense of loss are telling. While Anna focuses on the violence of the new political narrative of Africa, she ironically reveals a certain nostalgia for the past and the old order, one marked by profound racism and colonial subjugation. While these struggles would inspire the radicals of the New Left in the United States and England, for Anna and Lessing, they are distortions of an earlier narrative and equally condemned to end in defeat, chaos, and violence.

The black notebook is also crucial to the development of Anna's character as a writer struggling with truth and fiction and giving form to her political consciousness. The black notebook quickly loses its original purpose as a financial record of her first novel, in part because of the disgust and anxiety Anna feels about its profitability and the repeated attempts to commercialize it. Ironically, it is the publication of this novel which gives Anna the success and income necessary to live her life in London as a "free woman." Her political failure gives rise to financial and literary success. Anna is deeply troubled by what she perceives as the book's failure to capture the "truth" of the experience and by the failure of her audience to understand the political meaning of her story. Just as Lessing later admonished the reviewers of *The Golden Notebook*, Anna mocks and satirizes the trite reviews that project readers' political biases onto the narrative. Likewise, she parodies the commodification and Eurocentric appropriations of Africa in Western discourse. Nonetheless, Anna herself, through her novel, profits from the commodification of Africa—a realization which profoundly troubles her sense of political identity as a writer. This leads her to refuse to write another novel, a major factor in the personal crisis *The Golden Notebook* chronicles.

Her role as writer leads Anna into a conflict with the politics of the Communist Party that leads up to her final break from it. As a "successful bourgeois writer" (Lessing, *GN* 331), she struggles with the political role of the writer, both in the Communist Party and in her own literary work. She rejects the Stalin-influenced Party's narrow definitions of political writing, which favor rigid socialist realism and decree that all writers be bound by this code. For Anna, political content is not the determining factor of literary worth; she struggles to find a form to express her own political and moral conscience. The question of form and content is crucial to Anna's struggle as a writer and is a subject well debated on the literary left. Trotsky, in fact,

wrote *Literature and Revolution* in response to the same Stalinist distortions of the role of art that Anna rejects. Anna herself never refers to dissent among left-wing radicals, nor does she make mention of Trotskyist (or other Marxist) critiques of Stalinism. Whether due to lack of interest or lack of awareness, it seems that, for Anna, Marxism does not exist beyond the Stalinism of the British Communist Party. Nonetheless, Trotsky's contribution to a Marxist literary theory is worth noting, as it makes clear that Anna's frustration at such Stalinist limitations were more broadly shared and debated within the left. In discussing the political role of art, Trotsky writes:

> [It] does not at all mean a desire to dominate art by means of decrees and orders. It is not true that we regard only that art as new and revolutionary that speaks of workers, and it is nonsense to say that we demand that the poets should describe inevitably a factory chimney, or the uprising against capital! . . . One cannot always go by the principles of Marxism in deciding whether to reject or to accept a work of art. A work of art should, in the first place, be judged by its own law, that is by the law of art. (Trotsky 144–50)

In the Party, however, Anna does not find many who share her view; instead, she chooses not to write at all. Not surprisingly, then, it is her break from the Communist Party and the psychological crisis that accompanies this period that ultimately allows her to take up the pen again, with the help of Saul Green.

Yet the role of writer continues to be fraught with contradictions for Anna. As she tells Saul, "I can't write . . . because at that moment I sit down to write, someone comes into the room and looks over my shoulders, and stops me. . . . It could be a Chinese peasant. Or one of Castro's Guerilla fighters. Or an Algerian fighting in the F.L.N. Or Mr. Mathlong. They stand here in the room and they say, why aren't you doing something about us, instead of wasting your time scribbling?" (Lessing, *GN* 609). For Anna, political struggle and writing are counterposed. One must take precedence over the other—thus, she is only free to write again, despite her continued ambivalence, once she has left the arena of formal politics.

While at the end of the novel Anna continues to struggle to find a form, Lessing herself moves further and further away from this professed goal in her later literary career. At the moment of *The Golden Notebook*, Lessing's own struggles with the relationship between politics and writing give the novel some of its power, vitality, and relevance. However, if the conflict is resolved within the novel by the publication of *The Golden Notebook* itself—which in form and content gives expression to this struggle—this resolution does not last, as Lessing repudiates the political role her novel played in the feminist movement, later insisting that novelists should not take up political questions at all. This progression is in many ways mirrored by the progression of the form of *The Golden Notebook* itself. While the earlier notebooks attempt to separate the "political" from the "personal" or "literary," this division is frequently impossible. The black notebook, begun as a record of her novel, becomes a crucial political journey into Anna's early years in Africa; the red notebook that chronicles her relationship to the Communist Party also touches on her frequent conflicts about the role of women and writers within the Party; the yellow notebook, a fictionalized version of her life, contains both political and personal musings; and the blue notebook, meant to be a true diary chronicling her personal experience and her experience in psychoanalysis, is filled up with newspaper clippings about world events of war and violence. As the novel progresses, however, this changes. The red and black notebooks both become devoted to newspaper clippings as Anna becomes disillusioned with the Communist

Party and decides to leave it. No longer able to see her own personal experience in the political developments of the world, she withdraws the personal from these notebooks, turning them into a record of war, violence, and chaos that is entirely external to her own experience before abandoning them completely. The yellow notebook is also completed and finished as her numerous fictional reworkings of her life no longer ring true. The blue notebook is the last to go, as Anna chooses the personal over her previously fragmented identities. It is only abandoned when replaced with the "golden notebook" of the title, given to her by Saul. While this last notebook is a symbolic return to a whole self from the fragmented notebooks of the divided Anna, it is in style and content similar to the blue notebook. The golden notebook represents the rebirth of a new, whole Anna, who has decidedly chosen the personal as the only means to express herself on a political, psychological, or literary level.

Anna's progression throughout the novel away from formal politics and the possibility of political struggle or change is incomprehensible without an understanding of the development of the Communist Party in Britain and Lessing's own relationship to it, particularly at the moment of crisis in 1956 that is the impetus for the novel. The British Communist Party, which, like much of the international Communist movement was formed in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution of 1917, was heavily influenced by the subsequent course of the revolution and its degeneration into Stalinism. Like its American counterpart, the heyday of the British Communist Party was in the 1930s, during which it led strikes and played a central role in the fight against fascism and anti-Semitism. During this period, Stalinism was already exercising a profound influence on the British Communist Party; it nonetheless attracted socialists, Jews, and radicals, who saw it as the primary organization leading struggles within the trade union movement as well as against the growing threat of fascism and the wave of anti-Semitism it unleashed (Eaden & Renton, xix-xx). Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Party members were subjected to sudden and often extreme shifts in party line—from "Third Period" to "Popular Front" to the "War on Two Fronts" policy in the early years of WWII—instigated by the demands of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, which demanded adherence to the party line to support its own domestic and foreign policy.

While some members were disillusioned by these sudden shifts and the growing bureaucratization of the leadership, the Party did not suffer dramatic losses of membership in these years. Nonetheless, it was increasingly plagued by its inner contradictions:

> On the one hand it was the organization to which thousands of industrial and socialist militants looked, people who were determined to rid Britain of the sharp social inequalities of the 1930s, people who, in an age before it was fashionable, challenged Britain's role as an Imperial power. On the other hand, it was an organization whose aspirations were turned towards uncritical support for the Soviet Union. (Eaden & Renton 84)

With Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, the Soviet Union once again changed the line and through the Comintern (the Communist International, the global directing body) insisted that all Communist Parties in the allied countries give unquestioning support and allegiance to their governments. While this period allowed the Communist Party to grow immensely as it joined the war effort against fascism, it also raised even greater contradictions within the Party. Members were forced to oppose militant rank-and-file union workers who opposed its productionist line (even acting as strikebreakers) and to support an "electoral truce" for the

duration of the war, which meant going as far as supporting Conservative candidates when circumstances called for it (Eaden & Rendon 87–90). Despite its growth during this period, World War II "marked the final end of any pretence that the CPGB remained a revolutionary party" (97). With the end of the war and the onset of the Cold War, it was wracked by a series of crises. Between 1945 and 1951, "the CP's membership fell dramatically" (Eaden & Rendon 108) and it began formulating "an open rejection of revolutionary socialism" in favor of support for "a left-wing parliamentary party" as the Party moved increasingly toward an electoralist strategy (*The British Road to Socialism*, cited in Eaden & Rendon, 116). But as Eaden and Rendon note, "The new politics also contained within itself important tensions, for if the CP was not a revolutionary party, then what actually was the purpose of its existence?" (116).

After the death of Stalin, Khrushchev delivered his famous "secret speech" in 1956, outlining the crimes and horrors of Stalin's regime and of the Soviet invasion of Hungary in the same year, which led to the death of thirty thousand Hungarians (Eaden & Rendon 120). The contradictions that had been building in the British Communist Party could no longer be contained. They erupted into a crisis that wracked the Party, leading to a massive exodus from which it would never recover. Many in the Party, including Lessing, had already been disillusioned by the ossified bureaucracy's insistence on pushing through the Soviet party line at the expense of internal democracy—and frequently in opposition to the will and interests of rank-and-file members. Nonetheless, these contradictions could be contained as long as there was some possibility that the Soviet Union still represented some form of progressive alternative, no matter how degenerated, that was worth fighting for. With Khrushchev's admission of Stalin's crimes and the obvious betrayal of every revolutionary goal of the Soviet Union with its invasion of Hungary, millions of Communist Party members were forced to confront the fact that they had been struggling for several decades of political struggle at the behest of a brutal, totalitarian regime that bore no resemblance to the Communist ideology to which they had ascribed. Between February 1956 and February 1958, "overall membership fell by a third" (Eaden & Renton 122) as workers and intellectuals departed from the Party en masse (despite popular myths that only intellectuals left). While the Party continued to exist in Britain until 1991 (and, in other countries, still exists), it never recovered from 1956. Indeed, 1956 marked a fundamental shift in international Communism, as the crisis that wracked the CPGB was repeated across the world. It marked the end of an era in which Communist Parties led progressive politics and political struggle internationally; these movements finally collapsed under the weight of Stalinism.

The year 1956 was indeed a turning point for the radical left and it is for this reason that Lessing chooses 1956 as the moment of crisis that spurs the action of *The Golden Notebook*. She noted that the Khrushchev speech

> was like a depth charge under the left, large parts of which insisted that "the capitalist press" had invented it. I was joking, but then could no longer joke, that every time the phone rang another comrade had had a religious conversion, taken to drink, committed suicide, or turned into his or her opposite. The collapse of communism created many a fine businessman. If you have spent your life analyzing the crimes of capitalism there could not be a better apprenticeship for becoming one.
>
> I knew this was an extraordinary time. I was watching extraordinary events. I wanted to record them. . . . I wanted to capture the flavour of 1956 and

> later, and I think I did. The novel could not be written now. (Lessing, "Guarded Welcome")

This year was also a turning point for Lessing, as she grappled with the political and personal implications of these events. While her earlier work contained plenty of criticism of the Communist Party and the rigidity of its party line, 1956 led her to reject Marxism altogether. *The Golden Notebook* provides the most explicit expression of this political, personal, and literary crisis, though 1956 figures as a turning point in other literary work written over the decades following her move to Great Britain, most notably in the *Children of Violence* series.

A bildungsroman of sorts, the *Children of Violence* series chronicles the quest of the aptly named Martha Quest, clearly an alter ego of Lessing, to find personal and political liberation. The first two novels in the series, *Martha Quest* and *A Proper Marriage*, were published respectively in 1952 and 1954 in Britain, but were not published in the United States until 1964, after Lessing acquired a certain degree of fame from *The Golden Notebook*. They chronicle the protagonist's early years in Africa and conclude with her rejecting conventional morality and domesticity, leaving her marriage and child to become a Communist Party activist in the fictional Zambesia. The next two volumes, published after the crisis of 1956, *A Ripple in the Storm* (1958) and *Landlocked* (1965), chronicle Martha's involvement in the Communist Party in Zambesia and its decline, culminating in her departure from Zambesia for England. By the final volume, *The Four-Gated City* (1969), Martha Quest, like her author and creator, leaves politics altogether, searching for solutions in psychology, hallucinogens, and mysticism. Ultimately, the world itself is annihilated in an apocalyptic moment, giving Martha a new role as a psychic "seer" of sorts. The series is useful as a counterpart to *The Golden Notebook* in charting the overall political trajectory of Lessing's writing over the 1950s and 1960s.

Like other writers in the Communist milieu in the 1940s, 1950s, and before, Lessing's rejection of Stalinism sparked major questions about the possibility of political struggle and liberation. Her literary expression of this rejection was certainly not the first of its kind—indeed, the African American writers Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison publically disavowed their earlier involvement with the Communist Party USA as Stalin's horrors became known and as the CPUSA, under orders from Stalinist Russia, abandoned all pretense at fighting racism in the United States, a struggle which had won them the support and political allegiance of their "fellow travelers" in the first place. Unlike Wright, who until his death continued to look for political alternatives, most notably writing extensively about the African liberation struggles of the fifties and sixties, Lessing follows a course more similar to Ellison's, rejecting politics altogether. As Karl argues in discussing Lessing in this period, "Like the rest of us, Mrs. Lessing has changed her former vision, in which political and social action—the image of Sisyphus pushing the boulder—was possible" (Karl 29). He continues noting that "with all her prolixity, she has almost nowhere to go." (33). In abandoning Marxism, Lessing abandons not only the possibility of all political struggle, but also any historical-materialist conception of the world. In this regard, Lessing's trajectory mirrors broader shifts and challenges to the definition of politics which Marianna DeKoven in *Utopia Limited* argues begin to emerge in the 1960s as postmodernism increasingly leads to a rejection, not only of Marxism, but of all "narratives or metanarratives of modernity… most notably those of objective science, determinate reason, technological progress, human progress…" (DeKoven 15). As Karl argues, her work increasingly not only rejects political struggle but also "the objective world" (33) itself as she turns toward mysticism and apocalyptic visions of the future in her science fiction.

The magnitude of the crisis of 1956 blinds Lessing to other political developments as she precludes the possibility of any political alternative. Not only did 1956 usher in the end for the Communist Party in Britain, it also saw the emergence of new "political space to the left of the Communist Party" (Eaden & Renton 122). The vehemence with which Lessing experienced and reacted to the crisis of 1956 and its profound impact on her political and literary development makes it important to read her "record" of the time with a grain of salt. As Jane Miller argues, despite her powerful depiction of the disillusionment that the crisis provoked for many of the most militant Communists and radicals,

> it is also possible to feel that her treatment of that period of her life is lopsided and overgeneralized, on the one hand, and unfair to the large numbers of people who worked and wrote from a variety of positions on the left, on the other. Her passionate disavowal of her Communist past, often vague as to dates and details—as if it were not shared with other people, whose presence would make such things at least checkable—had more to do with the Party's Puritanism, philistinism, and authoritarian notion of the writer's role than with current political needs and priorities. . . . If Communism originally attracted her because Communists read books, her rejection of the Party was also partly because she wrote books and wished—understandably—for some peace in which to do so. It also seems likely that the character of her revulsion has unsettled her political judgment ever since. It had produced a predictably personal and partisan picture of the 1950s and then of left politics generally, encouraging her to extrapolate from her present contempt of her own relatively youthful enthusiasms to impugning the motives and intelligence of her contemporaries. ("Lessing and the Millenium")

Indeed, her treatment of the new political movements of the period demonstrates how the political conclusions she drew from 1956 have colored and distorted her objectivity in regard to all future political movements. Lessing increasingly demonstrated disdain for the radical politics of many of her readers. On the one hand, *The Golden Notebook* appealed to the New Left, particularly its women, precisely because of its portrayal of women radicals and the political and personal difficulties they faced. On the other hand, its portrayal of radicals as doomed to failure, to repeating the mistakes of those who came before them, was undoubtedly disconcerting for Lessing's early readers, who were responding to political crises not by abandoning politics but by seeking new forms of political expressions and creating new political movements.

In *The Golden Notebook*, the emerging generation of radicals that would become the New Left is most clearly depicted through the character of Tommy, Molly's son, who becomes increasingly involved with a new protest movement organized primarily around support for national liberation struggles in Africa. Tommy's entrance into politics at precisely the moment when Anna and Molly are abandoning the Communist Party and disavowing much of their own political pasts poses a challenge for both women, who grapple with how to respond. Despite Anna and Molly's disillusionment, they seem equally disdainful of this new movement's lack of organized leadership and what they perceive as its "spontaneous" nature. As Anna tells Richard, Tommy's father, "Didn't you know that demonstrations at this particular moment are in fact spontaneous? The C.P.'s lost whatever grip it has on young people, and the Labour Party's too respectable to organize this sort of thing. So what happens is, groups of young people go and

express themselves about Africa or war and so on" (Lessing, *GN* 487). She later describes a particular demonstration in which Tommy and Marion participate in more detail, saying, "The demonstration was not at all like the orderly political demonstrations of the Communist Party in the old days; or like a Labour Party meeting. No, it was fluid, experimental—people were doing things without knowing why. The stream of young people had flowed down the street to the headquarters like water. No one directed or controlled them" (489). Lessing's depiction of the New Left exhibits nostalgia for the more orderly types of political struggles the CP led. Her depiction of the New Left is frequently marked by condescension and disdain for what she perceives as its lack of political analysis and organization and youthful and (to her mind) misguided belief in the possibility of revolutionary change. Having rejected the Communist Party and their own political pasts, neither Anna nor Molly can see any alternative in the new movements, which reject Stalinism while maintaining a belief in revolutionary struggle and transformation. For Anna and Molly, and for Lessing herself, these new movements are repeating the same pattern and are condemned to a similar fate of fragmentation, chaos, and violence. No other possibility exists outside of the narrative that shaped their political and personal trajectories. While this is already clear in *The Golden Notebook*'s depiction of the early New Left, the development of these movements over the course of the next decade earns them no more credibility in Lessing's eyes:

> As Lessing portrays them, there is no doubt that the sixties—colorful, stylish, superficially eclectic—look a good deal better than the fifties. But the sense of political hopelessness that reverberates through *The Four-Gated City* simply echoes the despair suffered by Anna ten years before. Despite the new fashion of protest, the world of the sixties is even more fiercely and efficiently headed toward self-destruction than the more repressive earlier decade. Only the youth on the antiwar Aldermaston March have any illusions as to whether their voices will be heard by those in power, and even the younger generation sense at bottom the futility of their protests (Vlastos 248).

While *The Golden Notebook* clearly taps into the sentiment that the "personal is political," the trajectory of the novel is one in which the personal *replaces* the political. Like Plath, Lessing insists on the social and political causes of personal oppression and fragmentation and yet, for Lessing, only in the realm of the psychological or even the mystical does the possibility of liberation exist.

The "Sexual Mad House": Madness and Women in *The Golden Notebook*

For Lessing, as for Plath, madness is inherently social. Indeed, in explaining the origins of *The Golden Notebook* and its portrayal of personal, political and social breakdown, she notes that "everything is cracking up . . . It has been falling apart since the bomb was dropped in Hiroshima. . . . Throughout my life I've had to support parties, causes, nations, and movements which stink" (Lessing, cited in Karl 16). For Lessing, the post–World War II political climate is a form of political and social madness that permeates every level of society and leads to personal breakdown and fragmentation in her protagonists. After her departure from the Communist Party, she increasingly sees adherence to any political ideology as a form of collective hypnosis or even psychosis. As a result, she turns inward toward psychology as a means of political and personal liberation, before abandoning even that possibility in favor of a version of mystic

Sufism which remains nonetheless influenced by the anti-psychiatry movement of the sixties. The "madness" or intense fragmentation into which Anna Wulf descends in *The Golden Notebook* is inherently political, just as her affiliation with the CP is psychological. If Anna joined the CP in a failed search for wholeness, its collapse and her own departure trigger her personal breakdown at a time when the world itself is tottering on the brink of madness, by Lessing's account. As Anna Wulf rejects Marx, she turns toward Mrs. Marks, the aptly named psychoanalyst of *The Golden Notebook*. While this portrayal of madness ascribes, as does Plath's, to a Laingian notion of madness as inherently social and political, Lessing also draws different conclusions.

Lessing's move into the domain of the psychological is a reflection of the profound destruction and fragmentation that the political psychosis of capitalism enacts in the realm of the personal or the psyche. This move also tends to displace all collective forms of political response or activism (which she views as failed) onto the individual and the psychological. If madness is in particular a condition of women, imposed on them by a society in which oppression determines every level of the personal and confines women to impossible conditions, it is also the madness of the nuclear age and a society bent on its own destruction. Yet while Plath and other writers conclude that there is no personal solution to a collective madness, Lessing posits a view of madness which can *only* be solved by a personal journey to the depths of madness, from which one *can* recover and return to a new form of sanity or consciousness. Thus, if madness for Lessing is political, then a return to sanity becomes a form of political change.

In her insightful analysis of Lessing's political understanding of psychoanalysis, Marion Vlastos (1976) argues that this shift from the realm of the political to the psychological for a solution to the madness of the world is broader than Lessing, while noting her own crucial role in this movement:

> There would seem to be only two basic ways to attack a social problem—from the outside or the inside, by reforming the structure of society or by revolutionizing the consciousness of man. . . . Radicals in the first half of this century shared Orwell's belief in the preeminence of structural change, but radicals in the latter half are showing signs of a swing in the opposite direction. If we look at the novels of Doris Lessing with this fundamental question in mind, we can see a gradual movement away from Orwell's position toward a new kind of belief in the possibility of affecting the inner man. (Vlastos 245)

Martha Quest, she notes, "is personally committed to political action" (245), but "with the collapse of hope in the political answer to human misery, the struggle for a viable existence becomes again the onus of the individual self and its capacities for creativity and moral development" (Vlastos 245). Lessing's turn toward the personal anticipates the turn toward identity politics and lifestyle politics which would triumph in the demise of the movements of the 1960s. Like Lessing's generation, the generation radicalized by the 1960s would increasingly be confronted with the limits of their politics as the revolution they envision failed to materialize. Faced with this failure, radicals were increasingly disillusioned with the possibility of mass social change and turned toward an understanding of change rooted in the individual self.

Throughout *The Golden Notebook*, it is clear that the fragmentation Anna experiences is not simply a "personal" problem, but the product of a collective social and political fragmentation, breakdown, and madness that assumes a global dimension. In this, Lessing clearly

ascribes to a Laingian view of psychology, despite the predominance of Freudian psychoanalysis in the novel. The blue notebook, which chronicles Anna's psychoanalytic journey with Mrs. Marks (Mother Sugar), is replete with Freudian interpretations of dreams, desires, and the subconscious. Nonetheless, while Anna attempts to limit the content of this notebook exclusively to the personal and the "truth" of her thoughts and personal experience, she is unable to separate this experience from the political:

> Anna is consciously and perpetually tormented by the conflicts between her different roles as a woman—mistress, mother, friend—and by the painful discrepancies between her aspirations and her accomplishments as artist and as political activist. And, like the failures of all Lessing's protagonists, Anna's failures are only partially personal. The divisions within herself as a woman are also socially determined—condoned and encouraged—by convention; and the esthetic and political conflicts she suffers emanate from her perception of a world based on violence "masquerading as love" (Laing's terminology) and bound toward destruction in the guise of self-protection. (Vlastos 246)

The novel's trajectory increasingly forces Anna to confront her fragmented selves and assimilate these into some kind of whole person. If her early notebooks reflect the divisions between her different selves, the writer, the woman, the Communist, and the psyche—each proves unable to live up to the task. As she succumbs to the pressure of political disillusionment, failed relationships, and writer's block, she is unable to continue to live in a world in which, like the Algerian soldier of Saul Green's novel, all of her emotions can be explained by "Grandfathers Freud and Marx" (Lessing, *GN* 613). As the notebooks each end with a firm double line and Anna can no longer compartmentalize her identity, she descends into madness. Neither Marx nor Freud proves adequate to the task of creating a whole out of the fragmented selves she has created—it is only in the Laingian notion of madness itself as a solution to the crisis and insanity of the world that she can reemerge whole. As Vlastos notes, "here—in the self's descent into madness—can be found whatever small hope is offered by *The Notebook*" (245). As Anna's unlikely alter ego, the misogynistic, sadistic American Saul Green, accompanies her and spurs her on, the boundaries between the personal and political collapse completely, as do the boundaries between self and other:

> I was invaded by terror, the terror of nightmares, I was experiencing the fear of war as one does in nightmares, not the intellectual balancing of probabilities, possibilities, but knowing, with my nerves and imagination, the fear of war. What I was reading in newspapers strewn all around me became real, not an abstract intellectual fear. There was a kind of shifting of the balances of my brain, of the way I had been thinking, the same kind of realignment as when, a few days before, words like democracy, liberty, freedom, had faded under pressure of a new sort of understanding of the real movement of the world towards dark, hardening power. I *knew,* but of course the word, written, cannot convey the quality of this knowing, that whatever already is has its logic and its force, that the great armouries of the world have their inner force, and that my terror, the real nerve-terror of the nightmare, was part of the force. I felt this, like a vision, in a new kind of knowing. And I knew that the cruelty and the spite and the I, I, I, I, of

> Saul and Anna were part of this logic of war; and I knew how strong these emotions were, in a way that would never leave me, would become part of how I saw the world. (Lessing, *GN* 562)

Anna's breakdown is marked on the one hand by an awareness of a new kind of "terror" or "darkness" that replaces her previous commitment to the possibility of real structural change and the struggles for freedom and democracy that marked her years as a Communist. At the same time, the terror of war on a mass scale and the global power of destruction is not a political phenomenon but rather a universal logic, of which the "I, I, I, I"—the fragmentation of the ego and the self—is an intrinsic part. The horror that she experiences is simultaneously personal and political and paves the way for her reemergence as a new Anna, a whole person whose worldview has been profoundly changed. As for Laing, the words "mad" and "sane" lose meaning (567) as Anna becomes aware of "the tremendous irony . . . that, while social behavior is based on the principle of compartmentalizing, splitting, certain people are forcibly seized and locked up in isolation from society for admitting this condition" (Vlastos 249).

In recognizing this irony and the madness of the world, Anna allows herself a subjectivity which her previous commitment to Marxism and to broad notions of collective justice and liberation had prevented. Raw ego and pure subjectivity become a crucial part of her new way of knowing. She says, "Yes, that was me, that was everyone, the I. I. I. I am. I am. I am going to. I won't be. I shall. I want. I" (Lessing, *GN* 599). While the "I, I, I, I" is an expression of madness, of the "sick Anna," it also begins Anna's process of reemergence as a whole person, symbolically chronicled in the golden notebook—the notebook that is meant to construct a whole unified narrative from its four fragmented predecessors. In this notebook, Anna is "faced with the burden of re-creating order out of the chaos that my life had become. Time had gone, and memory did not exist, and I was unable to distinguish between what I had invented and what I had known, and I knew that what I had invented was all false" (591). But Anna is able to create a new self and a new narrative, which culminates in the conventional novel *Free Women* the final product of her return to wholeness.

The healing force of madness and its ability to create wholeness out of a fragmented self is nonetheless limited. It requires, for both Anna and Lessing, abandoning the possibility of collective struggle or radical change in society in favor of a more individual approach. As Anna attempts to reorder her life, the "projectionist" in her mind, who screens scenes from her past and from her writing to be remembered and reordered, shows her a new way of looking at the world in which her previous experiences, values, and concerns fade away. In this "film," which is "beyond my experience, beyond Ella's, beyond the notebooks," we are told that Anna comes to a new understanding:

> Because there was fusion; and instead of seeing separate scenes, people, faces, movements, glances, they were all together. The film became immensely slow again, it became a series of moments where a peasant's hand bent to drop seed into earth, or a rock stood glistening while water wore it down, or a man stood on a dry hillside in the moonlight, stood eternally, his rifle ready on his arm. Or a woman lay awake in darkness, saying No, I won't kill myself, I won't, I won't. . . . That was about courage, but not the sort of courage I have ever understood. It's a small painful sort of courage which is at the root of every life, because injustice and cruelty is at the root of life. And the reason why I have only given my

> attention to the heroic or the beautiful or the intelligent is because I won't accept that injustice and the cruelty, and so won't accept the small endurance that is bigger than anything. (Lessing, *GN* 606)

In this passage, it is clear that Anna's reemergence from madness and into some form of wholeness involves a complete shift in worldview. It is no longer about being heroic. The new Anna no longer seeks to change the world fundamentally, nor to write narratives that capture larger social and political struggles. She understands the world to be inherently and unchangeably unjust and cruel. In this world, the greatest acts of political or personal change are these many acts of "small endurance" which are the social expression of the new politics. Images of people engaging in small acts of endurance replace her previous visions of the Mashopi figures and their ideals or the guerillas and freedom fighters who haunted her previous world. In implementing her new philosophy, Anna commits herself to two new projects, both of which clearly resonate with this realization. On the one hand, we learn at the end of *Free Women* that Anna has decided to devote herself to counseling others in Dr. North's marriage welfare center, an act of helping others which she recognizes as the key political contribution she can make. On the other hand, she also begins writing again, using Saul's first line, "The two women were alone in the London flat" (610), which does indeed become the first line of both *Free Women* and *The Golden Notebook*.

Anna's return to writing is a crucial development in her reemergence as a whole person, her writing—or more notably her inability to write—being a major contributor to her madness in the first place. As a writer who has constantly struggled with the political content, purpose, and "truth" of her writing, only abandoning the possibility of radical politics and wide-scale social change allows her to write again, without the pressure of justifying the content of her work. More than anything, writing the conventional novel that provides the formal structure and logic of *The Golden Notebook* is the logical outcome of Anna's newfound political and personal views. It both is a testament to the injustice and cruelty of the world and a celebration of the "small endurances" and courage of individuals seeking to make sense of and survive in a world that is constantly cracking up. Furthermore, it is through her return to a written narrative that Anna can most clearly return to a whole "I," with this more conventional form simultaneously providing a written means to communicate her experience. This new "I" is only possible, however, in fiction; a fictional "I" is necessary to express these small endurances. In this process, Lessing points to the political purpose of *The Golden Notebook* as a whole, which, even while abandoning her previous commitment to political and social liberation and structural change, nonetheless echoes a new sensibility in which the individual's journey into madness and back is itself a form of political change.

This shift is likewise reflected in the *Children of Violence* series, in which Martha Quest engages in a purposeful journey into a form of madness to tap into her true self, discovering in the process mystical and psychic abilities that cannot simply be categorized as either political or personal. In the final novel of the series, *The Four-Gated City* (1969), as the world is thrown into postapocalyptic disaster and chaos, only those who have been deemed "mad" are capable of "seeing" and providing some form of leadership. By this time Lessing has already moved away from a Laingian view of madness and political change to a politics more influenced by Sufism and the mystical. As a student of Sufism, Lessing argues that Sufis are "are the substance of that current which can develop man into a higher stage of evolution" (cited in Hazelton). Nonetheless, she still owes some of her treatment of madness, both as a social symptom and as

containing the possibility of change, to Laing. *The Golden Notebook*'s vision of madness as a collective and social phenomenon undoubtedly tapped into sixties radicals' growing sense that the world they had inherited was fundamentally mad. Likewise, her turn toward the personal also resonates with the "reassertion of the personal" that marked the politics of New Left groups such as SDS, as well as the politics of identity that would become the primary theoretical and political legacy of the feminist movement.

However, Lessing clearly does not advocate these interpretations of her work. After this crucial turning point in her political and literary trajectory, she sees all political movements and ideologies as suspect and as symptoms of the madness and psychopathology of modern society. As Yellin argues, Lessing's later work "rewrites political commitment as psychopathology and, ironically inverting the feminist slogan, 'the personal is political,' stresses the degeneration of the political into the merely personal" (Yellin 96–97). While *The Golden Notebook* thus clearly taps into many of the broader social, political and psychological theories and movements that dominated the sixties and allowed her audience to adopt the novel as a crucial narrative of their generation, the narrative itself already precludes and opposes the fundamental change that they sought to enact in the world. To some extent, she anticipates later theoretical developments, as many of these radicals were later forced to confront the failures of their political movements, and frequently responded by retreating from overt political action into notions of personal change and/or postmodernism.

Art and Politics: The Limits of Form

The form of *The Golden Notebook* is crucial to the political content and message of the work as a whole. It is the experimental form of the novel that Lessing suggests is one of the least appreciated and understood aspects of her work and is central to understanding the project as a whole. Like Plath, Lessing struggles with the form of the novel and seeks a formal solution to the dilemma of the woman author in carving out a space in fiction for both the personal and political. The solution she arrives at in *The Golden Notebook* is an attempt to theorize and demonstrate, in literary form, the struggle of the writer, particularly the woman writer with a commitment to political theory, for whom form can never be separated from content. Unlike Plath, who struggles with the narrative voice in her writing leading up to *The Bell Jar*, ultimately deciding on the first person, Lessing chooses both, essentially refusing to make a choice that limits her. Instead, her novel provides the reader with both a conventional novel with an omniscient third-person narrator and the first-person narratives and diaries that go into the making of that novel, to create a new form—one in which the metanarrative of the search for form becomes a crucial component. In many ways, the form of *The Golden Notebook* is also its message. As Lessing explains in her 1973 preface to the work:

> *The shape of this novel is as follows:*
>
> There is a skeleton, or a frame, called *Free Women*, which is a conventional short novel, about 60,000 words long, and which could stand by itself. But it is divided into five sections and separated by stages of the four Notebooks, Black, Red, Yellow and Blue. The Notebooks are kept by Anna Wulf, a central character of *Free Women*. She keeps four, and not one because, as she recognizes, she has to separate things off from each other, out of fear of chaos, of formlessness—of breakdown. Pressures, inner and outer, end the Notebooks; a heavy black line is drawn across the page of one after another. But now that they

> are finished, from their fragments can come something new, *The Golden Notebook*. (Lessing, "Preface" xi)

The structure of the novel closely mirrors Lessing's depiction of madness and psychic fragmentation within it. The "conventional novel" is unable to give form to Anna's fragmented consciousness as she grapples with her multiple selves; it is only as she enters further into formlessness and madness that she is able to reconstruct herself as a whole person, and a whole, unified narrative, in the golden notebook. The form of the novel, thus, embodies the dialectic at work in much of the book as a whole, as the conflicts between selves and narratives ultimately produce a new form and a new self which emerge throughout the course of the novel. The form of the novel, as Miller argues, thus serves multiple purposes, since "the allegedly "experimental" organization of the material into its color-coded versions and alternatives could be understood as a naturalistic expression of the separations enjoined on her by the Party," referring to the CP's disapproval of interests such as psychoanalysis, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christian mysticism. Miller continues, "It has also been read, of course, as more than that: as reflecting the difficulties of constructing a narrative out of her life as a woman and a writer of fiction, who was drawing on her past and present existence and also speculating about the alternative choices within the possibilities of the time and place she inhabited" ("Lessing and the Millenium").

Like many woman writers, Lessing rebels against the limits of the conventional novel, which frequently imposes narrative limitations on female protagonists such as the two traditional endings: marriage or death. Even the bildungsroman, which provides greater space for the development of the female protagonist's psyche and intellect, offers limited opportunities: too often, the protagonist's "education" is an induction into conventional gender roles. The narrative space of the conventional novel leaves little space for free women to find expression and closure. But for Lessing, it is also influenced by the political imperatives imposed on political, and particularly Communist, writers by social realism:

> I was really trying to express my sense of despair with the conventional novel in that. You see, actually that is an absolutely whole conventional novel and the rest of the book is the material that went into making it. . . . There it is 120,000 words; it's got a nice shape and the reviewers will say this and that. And the bloody complexity that went into it and it's always a lie. And the terrible despair. So you've written a good novel or a moderate novel, but what does it actually say about what you've actually experienced. The truth is, absolutely nothing. Because you can't. (cited in Howe 428)

This frustration with the conventional novel's inability to capture the 'truth' of the experiences or emotions that provide its inspiration is a constant theme throughout the novel. Anna attempts to overcome her writer's block and understand her disappointment in her own first novel; despite its popular success, she views it as a failure.

The problem of "endings" continues, as the conflicts exposed within the fragmented narratives of *The Golden Notebook* cannot be neatly resolved. Returning to the conventional novel at the end of *The Golden Notebook*, she also returns to an almost conventional ending: marriage for Molly and a new job as marriage counselor for Anna. For all of the novel's unconventional form, the ending is shockingly conventional. In this sense, it reflects the impossibility of providing a novelistic resolution to the personal and political problems that

shape the narrative. If the subjectivity she harnesses within the novel is indeed never truly individual but always a collective narrative, the resolution of these subjective problems cannot be accomplished in the realm of the personal. Like many later feminist writers, the problem of endings and the resolutions they imply proves to be a conundrum Lessing cannot easily resolve. If any real resolution is provided within the text, it is Anna's return to writing—a resolution emulated by later feminist writers—which, while eliding the problem of resolution, nonetheless suggests a continued interaction with the problem of form. In later works, notably in the *Children of Violence* series, which most closely mirrors the political and social concerns of her early work, Lessing turns to science fiction and apocalyptic visions of the world's future to provide resolution to a narrative which raises equally irresolvable problems. This too would be a strategy employed by later feminist writers, Marge Piercy and Octavia Butler among them, for whom the limits of a resolution to collective and political problems within the conventional novel become apparent. If the "subjective" thus provides a new political space for Lessing after she rejects socialist realism, it too has its limitations. Nonetheless, the strength of *The Golden Notebook* lies in its intimate engagement with the problem of form and the struggle of the woman writer to find a form that can encompass and express the multiple political, social, literary and personal dilemmas and conflicts with which she is faced.

Through Anna's struggle with form, Lessing develops her own critique of fiction's structures as well as its role in the fragmented modern world. As Anna says:

> The point is that the function of the novel seems to be changing; it has become an outpost of journalism; we read novels for information about areas of life we don't know. . . . The novel has become a function of the fragmented society, the fragmented consciousness. Human beings are so divided, *and more subdivided in themselves*, reflecting the world that they reach out desperately, not knowing they do it, for information about other groups inside their own country, let alone about groups in other countries. It is a blind grasping out for wholeness, and the novel-report is a means towards it.
>
> [….]
>
> Yet I am incapable of writing the only kind of novel which interests me: a book powered with an intellectual or moral passion strong enough to create order, to create a new way of looking at life. It is because I am too diffused. . . . I suffer torments of dissatisfaction and incompletion because of my inability to enter those areas of life my way of living, education, sex, politics, class bar me from. It is the malady of some of the best people of this time; some can stand the pressure of it; other crack under it; it is a new sensibility, a half-unconscious attempt towards a new imaginative comprehension. But it is fatal to art. (Lessing, *GN* 58–59).

Anna's political commitment requires her fiction to serve a political purpose, to see the world in a new light and to create order in a world that is "cracking up." Fiction serves as an attempt to create form amidst formlessness and unity amidst fragmentation. Yet the distorted social-realist diktats of the Communist Party impel writers to focus on "subjects" or content in such a way as to negate experimentation with form, while also frequently negating the role of the personal in fiction. Her political commitment and her commitment to writing books inspired by intellectual and moral passion prevent her from giving meaningful form to these thoughts.

Anna's success as an author is also ironically her failure. She increasingly realizes the limitations of *Frontiers of War*, the conventional novel which earned her fame and recognition. As Caryn Fuoroli argues in an insightful essay on Lessing's struggle with form,

> The first black notebook section reveals that Anna's writer's block comes partly from her guilt at having written *Frontiers of War*, a traditional and extremely successful novel based on her experience in Africa. What seems to have been a representation of truth at the time it was written, now appears to be dishonest. For, while the facts are based on true events, the novel distorts them because it is informed by "a lying nostalgia, a longing for license, for freedom, for the jungle, for formlessness." Both the black and the yellow notebooks deal with Anna's creation of fictions as ways of knowing herself and the past, of transforming facts into true knowledge of reality by understanding the meaning behind the fact itself. In the black notebook Anna essentially rewrites *Frontiers of War* from a first-person perspective, stopping to criticize and evaluate this fictional means of discovering the past. (Fuoroli 148)

As Anna attempts to use fiction to understand herself, her past and her experiences, she repeatedly runs up against the limits of the form. In the yellow notebook, in which she attempts to fictionalize her life through the story of Paul and Ella (Anna's alter ego), she comes to the conclusion that "literature is analysis after the event" (Lessing, *GN* 216). As such, it can never fully contain the truth; it portrays a truth that is always subject to later analytic frameworks and conclusions. She ultimately decides that her attempt to fictionalize her life in the yellow notebook is an attempt to escape the truth, not record it: "It struck me that doing this—turning everything into fiction—must be an evasion . . . a means of concealing something from myself" (217). As a result, she abandons the attempt and begins a diary in which she plans on recording only the truth, the real events of her life. This notebook is likewise a failure; it soon becomes a record of news clippings that reflect the chaos of the world. She concludes: "So all that is a failure too. The blue notebook, which I had expected to be the most truthful of the notebooks, is worse than any of them" (448). Neither the purely autobiographical nor the fictional can capture the truth of her life.

Ultimately, it is only through the unifying narrative of the golden notebook that the novel is able to tell the story of Anna Wulf. In *The Golden Notebook*, the process, the struggle with form itself, provides the means to construct a narrative that, if nothing else, captures the truth of Anna's struggles as a woman, a writer, and a Communist. As Greene argues,

> The alternation of past and present episodes draws attention to the vital interaction of past and present and allows a circling back over material that enables repetition with revision; final scene returns to first scene, with the difference between them providing measure of change, of a present transformed by remembering. . . . The reworking of material in the four notebooks and two novels she is writing allows her to go over her life again and again until she can get it right—to repeat, revise, to 'name in a different way.' (Greene, "Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory" 307–309)

Despite Anna's (and Lessing's) critique of the limits of the conventional novel, *The Golden Notebook* both begins and ends with the form of a conventional novel. If the notebooks make clear the inadequacies of this form, the narrative also reasserts the formal conventions of the novel as a means of providing order and structure to the fragmented narratives.

As Anna reemerges from her breakdown into some form of wholeness, she begins *Free Women*, overcoming her aversion to the form of the novel and embarking on the literary project that gives a conventional form to the unconventional notebooks. She concludes that "we have to preserve the forms, don't we ?" (Lessing, *GN* 604). Ultimately, Lessing's goal in *The Golden Notebook* is not to reject the form of the conventional novel altogether, but to point to its limitations and inadequacies while simultaneously reasserting the centrality of form to any literary project. It is only by deploying the conventions of the novel's form that she can provide narrative structure to Anna's literary, personal, and political struggles. Fuoroli points out that *Free Women* is "an ironic comment on the inadequacies of traditional fiction. Yet it also provides both Lessing and Anna with a stable social reality around which the notebooks cluster, and this ordering function affirms the value and potential of referential language, personally for the character and structurally for the author" (Fuoroli 156).

The Communist Party's rigid definition of "political" literature and socialist realism create, in Anna's world, thoroughly undialectical caricatures of the relationship between politics and art, putting forward a vision of art that negates the personal and the emotional in favor of grand political narratives that adhere to a party line. Anna rejects this rigid view even before she leaves the Party, as is apparent in an early conversation with Molly. When Molly says to Anna, "After all, you aren't someone who writes little novels about the emotions. You write about what's real," Anna replies, "Do you realize how many of the things we say are just echoes? That remark you've just made is an echo from Communist Party criticism—at its worst moments, moreover. . . . If Marxism means anything, it means that a little novel about the emotions should reflect 'what's real' since the emotions are a function and a product of society" (Lessing, *GN* 41). For Anna, even before she rejects Marxism, the world of the emotions and the personal are not separate from politics in literature. She understands the dialectical relationship between the broad social and economic conditions that govern human society and the impact these have on the world of emotions and the personal. Likewise, Anna mocks socialist critics' reviews of *Frontiers of War*, which ignore Trotsky's insistence that art should be judged by its own laws and instead critique her work for failing to provide a socialist solution to the social conditions and realities she depicts in her work. One such review, which she includes in the black notebook, concludes, "In such a situation she might have found a solution, political, social, spiritual, that could have shed light on the future struggle for freedom in Africa. Where are the working masses in this book? Where are the class-conscious fighters? They do not appear. But let not this talented young writer lose heart! The artistic heights are for the great in spirit! Forward! For the sake of the world!" (Lessing, *GN* 425).

While Anna rejects and mocks this insistence on pure political ideology and propaganda in literature, she nonetheless continues to agonize about the political responsibility of the writer. Despite her rejection of social realism, she continues to hesitate to express the personal in her literary work. For Anna, the personal is a divided part of the self which finds expression only in her private, unpublished notebooks. She refuses to write another novel; in fact, she repeatedly rejects novel ideas that rely on personal rather than expressly political themes. It is only at the end, when after hesitation, she takes Saul's first line as the first line of *Free Women*, that she returns to world of novel writing, giving birth to the novel-within-the-novel that we assume is the

final result of her literary process. Her first line for Saul is, tellingly, about a soldier in Algeria, revealing her continued emphasis on narratives set in the world of collective political struggles that make the mainstream news. Nonetheless, in writing *Free Women*, Anna makes a shift in her writing that allows her to bring the world of the subjective and the personal that is the prime subject of *The Golden Notebook* into the literary realm of the novel.

In tracing Anna's struggle with the relationship between the personal and political in literature, Lessing likewise enacts a justification of her own work in *The Golden Notebook* on political, theoretical, and literary grounds. If the culmination of Anna's political struggle as a writer is *Free Women*, for Lessing the result is *The Golden Notebook*, a novel which if nothing else collapses the division between the personal and political, insisting on a political role for subjectivity within literature. As Lessing herself explains,

> When I began writing there was pressure on writers not to be "subjective." . . . "Bothering about your stupid personal concerns when Rome is burning" is how it tends to get itself expressed, on the level of ordinary life—and was hard to withstand, coming from one's nearest and dearest, and from people doing everything one respects most: like, for instance, trying to fight colour prejudice in Southern Africa. Yet all the time novels, stories, art of every sort, became more and more personal. (Lessing, "Introduction: 1971" xvii–xviii).

In this passage, Lessing expresses the dilemma of the writer with a clear sense of political commitment in a shifting world in which the personal was increasingly becoming the domain of the political. The political movements that shaped her worldview and her literary work insisted on the primacy of explicitly political narratives that promoted a more collective vision of political aims. At the same time, the political movements inspired by Communism were collapsing and new movements against oppression were being born that emphasized the personal in political movements. As such, Lessing accurately places her own work in the context of shifting political and literary tendencies. Searching for a new political expression, Lessing turns first toward the realm of subjectivity and the personal as a means of expressing the political, then abandons a political role for the writer altogether.

In *The Golden Notebook*, she situates Anna in this context. In explaining Anna's own development as a writer, she refers to Anna's "stammer" during a lecture on art as indicating that "she is evading something. Once a pressure or a current has started, there is no way of avoiding it: there was no way of *not* being intensely subjective: it was, if you like, the writer's task for that time" (Lessing, "Introduction: 1971" xviii). For Lessing, this is not a move away from the realm of the political but a new form of expressing the political:

> Writing about oneself, one is writing about others, since your problems, pains, pleasures, emotions—and your extraordinary and remarkable ideas—can't be yours alone. The way to deal with the problem of "subjectivity," that shocking business of being preoccupied with the tiny individual who is at the same time caught up in such an explosion of terrible and marvelous possibilities, is to see him as a microcosm and in this way to break through the personal, the subjective, making the personal general, as indeed life always does, transforming a private experience . . . into something much larger. (Lessing, "Introduction: 1971" xviii)

As Lessing becomes disillusioned with the Communist Party, she rejects the division between personal and political which fragments Anna Wulf's character and imposes limitations on her literary work. Just as later feminists forged by the movements of the New Left insisted that the personal was indeed political, so too does Lessing come to this conclusion in both political and literary terms.

In turning toward the personal or subjective as a means of telling collective and political stories, Lessing also rejects firm distinctions between self and other, arguing instead for the interrelationship between individual and collective experiences and the social and political conditions that inform them. Peel argues that "she has increasingly come to challenge the very distinction between self and other. Her way of bridging the chasm between the two is to decide that no such absolute chasm exists. For her, the self is always an other, even in ordinary autobiographies" (Peel 5). Like Anna Wulf, Lessing has indeed struggled with the form of the autobiography as a means of telling the truth of experience. In the 1993 preface to *The Golden Notebook*, she notes, "Currently, I am writing volume one of my autobiography and thinking about some of the people and events that went into *The Golden Notebook*, I have to conclude that fiction is better at 'the truth' than a factual record. Why this should be so is a very large subject and one I don't begin to understand" (Lessing, "Introduction: 1993" ix). Lessing's insistence that fiction is a better record of the truth points to her continued struggle with form in subsequent work; more importantly, it testifies to her attempt to theorize a space in literature that collapses the firm distinctions between truth and fiction, personal and collective, and self and other, which she finds limiting. The "subjective" or "personal" space she carves out in *The Golden Notebook* is indeed a revolutionary form; it allows for a political subjectivity in which the personal is never "unique" but always an expression of the larger political concerns, crises, and fragmentation which imbue her work with collective meaning and appeal. In her commitment to developing this type of subjectivity, Lessing collapses the boundaries between the personal and political, between truth and fiction. It is the revolutionary form as much as its content (although the two are inseparable) that inspired the incipient feminist movement, particularly the writers among it, who conferred on it canonical status in the realm of feminist fiction.

In later years, Lessing abandoned her pursuit of a revolutionary political form, which occupies such a central role in *The Golden Notebook,* increasingly rejecting the idea that writers should in any way engage with the political questions of the day. Her rejection of political struggle and all "ideologies as deceptive" and serving only a minority leads her to turn instead toward "universal themes of humanity which know neither time nor space" (cited in Shwarzkopf 105). This change in her conception of the writer reflects her political and literary trajectory, as she increasingly turns toward the world of science fiction and mysticism, attempting to move beyond space and time—except in her autobiographical works, which are likewise concerned with questions of space, time, memory, and truth. *The Golden Notebook* written and published at a crucial moment when Lessing had rejected her previous political commitment as an activist writer but was searching for a new form, is imbued with a power and political meaning that in the radicalized world of the early sixties took on a life of its own. The novel's location at such a moment of political and literary crisis imbued it with the power to inspire later generations of writers and activists searching voices and forms to express their own personal and political commitments, forces, and crises.

The Radicalization of Ella Price: Feminism, Consciousness-Raising & the Liberation of the American Housewife

All the housewives are mad.
—Nora Johnson

In 1969, WITCH "launched its national attack on domesticity" by "storm[ing] a Madison Square Garden bridal fair" chanting "Always a Bride, Never a Person!"(Siegel 2). Another feminist group called for "Wages for Housework" saying, "we are serving notice to you that we intend to be paid for the work we do. We want wages for every dirty toilet, every painful childbirth, every indecent assault, every cup of coffee and every smile. And if we don't get what we want, then we will simply refuse to work any longer (…) We want it in cash, retroactive and immediately. And we want all of it" (cited in Douglas & Michaels 28-9). Meanwhile in 1970, several hundred women staged a sit-in at the *Ladies Home Journal* for 11 hours demanding that the magazine establish an on site childcare center for its employees and forcing them to publish an eight page insert with a housewives' bill of rights demanding paid maternity leave, paid vacation, free 24 hour child care centers, and social security benefits (Douglas & Michaels 38). They also "suggested retitling the magazine's famous monthly column, 'Can This Marriage Be Saved?' to 'Can This Marriage'"(Siegel 2). In a testament to the popular appeal of such struggles, Alix Kates Shulman's "A Marriage Agreement," which promoted a formal contract to ensure equal participation in domestic work, earned widespread fame when it was published in *Redbook* under the title "A Challenge to Every Marriage" and was given a cover story in *Life* magazine (Coontz 255). As historian Stephanie Coontz notes, "By 1978 even *Glamour* magazine was explaining how to write your own marriage contract"(255). The wide distribution of Shulman's marriage contract in the mass media brought the feminist revolution to millions of women eager to dismantle the fifties ideological construction of the American housewife.

In literature, the quest to liberate the American housewife was reflected in the plethora of fictional narratives describing the political awakening of the American Housewife. Within these narratives, critiques of marriage and the family were prominent as women began to recognize their personal misery as a reflection not of individual fault but oppression. The full expression of this critique entailed both a struggle against social convention and the subjugation of women within the domestic sphere but also a rebellion against literary convention. If the courtship plot inevitably ended in marriage for the female protagonist, the newly radicalizing housewife of the feminist novel almost inevitably (with the notable exception of the protagonist of Sue Kaufman's *The Diary of a Mad Housewife*) must escape from her marriage in her quest for freedom and selfhood.

Ella Price's Journal is a prime example of the awakening-housewife genre of feminist literature. Written between 1965 and 1969 and published in 1972, a watershed year for feminist publishing, the novel traces the political development and awakening of Ella Price, a working-class suburban wife and mother who returns to school at a community college in her thirties. Dorothy Bryant struggled to find a publisher for this novel (as well as for *The Kin of Ata Are Waiting for You,* a utopian novel she wrote around the same time). Initially, *Ella Price* enjoyed only a small print run, but later achieved a much wider audience after *Redbook* published a condensed version; the story tapped into the frustrations of the predominantly female audience who identified with Ella's plight. A blurb on the novel's cover from the *Nation* tells us, "Ella Price is not a card-carrying feminist…and yet she embodies what the woman's movement is all

about" (Bryant, *EPJ*, cover). The *Redbook* version "was greeted with fifty times more letters to the editor than usual for the magazine's fiction. Readers saw themselves mirrored in Ella's struggles, recognized her preoccupations, shared her despair. . . . Ella was one of them" (Horn 234). Bryant's novel uses consciousness-raising as a framing technique, as Ella Price is challenged to reexamine her personal life and identity through a journal required for her English class by Dan Harkan, the radical professor who becomes the political guide for Ella's developing consciousness in the first part of the novel. As the narrative develops, Ella's personal and political experiences and encounters with literature, other feminists, and radicals push her forward; she begins to reexamine and analyze every aspect of her life from a new political perspective.

While Bryant's novel was not necessarily the most popular of the genre, it is particularly valuable as "one of the earliest to document women's consciousness-raising; it predates, for example, Marilyn French's *The Women's Room*" (Horn 235). In many ways, Bryant's novel is emblematic of the genre as a whole: it consciously (and perhaps didactically) sets out to trace the broader radicalization of a generation of women through the personal story of Ella Price, a literary "everywoman" (albeit a white, suburban one) whose story is anything but exceptional. According to Hogeland, *Ella Price's Journal* is an exemplary text in that it follows the consciousness-raising "overplot so carefully that it seems to have been written from [CR founder] Kathie Sarachild's consciousness-raising outline" (Hogeland *Feminism* 36). Within these narratives, critiques of marriage and the family are prominent as women characters begin to recognize their personal misery as a reflection not of individual fault but oppression. The full expression of this critique entails a struggle against social convention and the subjugation of women within the domestic sphere, but also a rebellion against literary convention.

With respect to *Ella Price's Journal,* some critics found this approach heavy-handed: "too plot-driven, too predictable in showing the emergence of a feminist sensibility. . . . one reviewer complained that the novel reads 'as if the author had based it upon a subject index of Gloria Steinem's speeches'" (Horn 236). But the value of the novel lies precisely in its reflection of the shift in consciousness that the feminist movement signaled in the United States, and its far-reaching effects for women beyond the radical movements that led the struggle. While the women's liberation movement, as discussed in chapter 2, had its roots in the civil rights movements and New Left, it tapped into the growing dissatisfaction of the millions of women suffering from the "problem with no name."

As discussed in the Introduction, consciousness-raising groups around the nation prompted the rise of a new genre, the consciousness-raising novel, of which *Ella Price's Journal* is an example *par excellence*. It tells the story of Ella Price, a woman in her thirties who has spent the early sixties as a housewife, working a dead-end temp job, and raising a child, far removed from the radical movements in which feminism was born. This beginning allows the author to enact the consciousness-raising process throughout the narrative, bridging the gap between the new generation of radical feminists and their disappointed-housewife counterparts in the suburbs. As Ella returns to college, she becomes increasingly aware of the stultifying impact of the domestic ideals of the 1950s on her life–the same ideals her doctors later encourage her to embrace, with devastating consequences for her psyche and sanity. Beyond her growing feminist consciousness, the novel demonstrates Ella's political awakening through her encounters with student movements, antiwar demonstrations and the growing Black Power movement. Her beliefs in American justice, democracy, and meritocracy are challenged as she becomes aware of the myriad ways in which the political is intimately connected with the personal.

Bryant's novel is based in part on her experiences teaching at a community college in California, where she encountered a growing number of women returning to college after devoting years to family and the "feminine mystique." As Bryant explains:

> I first thought of it while a woman sat weeping in my office, telling me that going to school was the only positive thing in her life but that her development was wrecking her marriage and her relationships with relatives, neighbors, and friends. My colleagues confirmed my feelings that there are more and more such women every year and that they are often the best students—aware, intelligent, energetic—but doomed to frustration. No one seemed to care much. I care, so I wrote this book. (Bryant, "Letters," cited in Horn 240)

Indeed, the novel is a tribute to these women, feminism's older sisters in a sense, who just missed the radical days of the burgeoning movements that were just beginning to challenge the very conventions such women's traditional domestic lives upheld. Heeding Friedan's call,[1] a growing number of women, increasingly disillusioned with the myth of domestic bliss, returned to school only to be faced with new obstacles to their attempts to change their lives.

Bryant's protagonist Ella Price, however, is in some ways more complex; she is a working-class woman who has not led the traditional suburban life of the American housewife. Price comes from a family of Okies (migrant farmers from the Midwest who fled the devastation of the Dust Bowl), who pursued the American Dream of social mobility with some success as a result of the postwar economic boom. Ella Price and her husband have achieved the ideal suburban household, complete with all the trappings of consumerist success—but not without sacrifice. Ella is, in fact, no upper-class housewife; she has spent much of her marriage working to support her family's upward aspirations. Working outside the home has not, however, provided Ella with any escape from the drudgery and monotony of wealthier housewives' lives. Instead, the mind-numbing, physically exhausting temp work available to her stifles her creativity and intellect. Her return to school is only possible because of the limited financial stability the Prices have achieved and her daughter's entrance into adolescence. Ella enrolls in only a few classes at a two-year community college in which, we are told, most students fail to accomplish their academic dreams of continuing their educations at more established and prestigious universities nearby. In locating her protagonist in this class position, Bryant provides space for explorations of class relations and exploitation in upwardly mobile American families during the postwar boom. Likewise, Ella's education is a means of personal development and exploration; despite the limited professional opportunities and life changes such an education might ultimately provide her. In this sense, the myth of the American dream is deconstructed throughout the novel—not only in terms of gender, but also in terms of class, which is frequently intertwined with issues of race as Ella becomes aware of the limited opportunities to which the mostly poor, working-class African American population of her community college has access.

From Housewife to Feminist: The Raising of Ella's Feminist Consciousness

At the beginning of novel, Bryant goes to great pains to distance Ella and her family from the radical milieu of the "movement." In her early journal entries, Ella tells us, "I'm an average

[1] In the final chapter of *The Feminine Mystique*, "A New Life Plan for Women," Friedan argues for the importance of education and the "reeducation" of American women, encouraging women to return to school and arguing that "what is needed now is a national educational program, similar to the GI Bill, for women who seriously want to continue or resume their education" (Friedan 356).

person with a nice home, a good husband and a lovely daughter" (Bryant, *EPJ* 18). Nonetheless, "I always wanted to wanted to go to college, but I married instead. Now Lulu is old enough so I have time to further my education" (13). Her family's conservatism is made apparent by their reaction to Ella's return to school; her "brother-in-law insists that she's 'wasting the taxpayers' money because [she'll] never 'do anything' with college" while her sister-in-law "ask[s] if it was true that all the professors were communists" (17). Her husband Joe responds that "he should be glad to spend taxes on me instead of some dirty, pot-smoking, radical kid" (17). Ella describes her husband as a "simple man" who is "happy" as long as he can "eat, drink and screw" (106).

Despite her stultifying suburban environment, Ella, at the beginning of the novel, does not consider herself unhappy. She is satisfied with her life as it is and defends her husband's success and their middle-class status. She is in many ways the ultimate antifeminist, rebuking Friedan by insisting, "I don't have any real problems. I'm healthy. I have a happy marriage. My daughter is pretty and happy. No problems. No real problems" (26). Yet, as the qualifier suggests, beneath the surface Ella is plagued by a host of "problems" she has yet to name. These problems erupt less than a page later, as the controlled voice of the satisfied housewife breaks and we gain a glimpse into the real Ella smoldering beneath the surface. Just as she is about to turn in her journal and drop Harkan's writing class, she writes,

> All right.
>
> I said I was going to be completely honest, then throw this in your face and drop the class. I guess I should stick to what I said.
>
> My problem.
>
> There's something wrong with me, I was all right until about a year ago, but then… no, that's not true. I was never all right.
>
> Sometimes I'm doing something, just going through my normal day, and… but I'm not. Inside, I'm thinking things; inside, things are happening to me—I don't know where they come from. And they are starting to break out. (27)

This break in Ella's attempt to project an image of herself as a happy, controlled housewife is reflected in the writing itself as she breaks from her concern with grammar, full sentences, and complete paragraphs. Instead, fragments and ellipses characterize her writing in this passage, as she struggles to express her "problem." She continues by telling the story of "what happened last summer." While driving, she "all of a sudden was lost"—not because she didn't recognize the area, but because "it all looked the same" (28). She began to drive into parked cars, only stopping herself and swerving immediately before impact. As in her writing, Ella's feelings seethe beneath the surface and erupt as she loses control over the image she projects. After this near-suicidal incident, Ella goes to a doctor:

> He said I was all right, then asked me if there was something troubling me. "No," I said, which was both a lie and the truth—I knew there must be something troubling me, but I didn't know of anything that should be troubling me. I just couldn't seem to come right out with what had happened. If he'd insisted, if he'd get asking, I might have told him about it. But he was busy and didn't have time to coax me. Finally he said something about my getting new interests now that Lulu was growing up. And that was how I got the idea of coming to college. (28)

This is the first real explanation we are given for Ella's decision to go back to college. In the gap between her sense that nothing *should* be troubling her and the deep, gnawing feeling that

something *is* troubling her, we are provided with our first glimpse of the "problem with no name" exposed by Friedan. The lie behind Ella's earlier insistence that she is thoroughly satisfied with her life is exposed, although she has yet to acquire the language with which to express her dissatisfaction and unease. While Ella's initial unhappiness is primarily provoked by the emptiness she feels in her role of wife and mother, it also corresponds with her growing impatience at the mask of middle-class suburban life, which conceals the misery and deprivation on which it is based. Frustrated at the oppressive conformity of her suburban neighborhood, she describes the man who runs the gas station: "His smile looks happy and menacing and cheerful all at once. But above all it's stupid, willfully stupid. That's what I hate most of all about it, the fixed stupidity of grinning over outstretched, empty arms and hands, the stupidity of permanent good cheer, the insistent stupid smiling through and over everything" (30). To underscore the symbolic connection between this grinning man and the problems concealed within her own home and subconscious, she notes, "He marks the street that leads to my home" (30).

From this point on, Ella no longer rebels against her journal; it becomes a consciousness-raising tool through which she begins to grapple with the roots of her own dissatisfaction. As she embarks on this project, however, she expresses frequent hesitation, aware that the cost of awakening from her stultifying life might be too much. Despite her hesitation, once Ella begins to probe the underpinnings of her life and identity, she challenges the ideas and conventions of her world. She also challenges her professor, Dan Harkan, arguing against his dismissive attitude and the way he mocks women Ella sees as victims of the beauty industry, writing,

> But have you ever imagined yourself a woman? You know, if you're a woman you can be nice and decent and intelligent and well educated and all the rest, but if you're not attractive to men nobody cares what else you are, you're a failure. And to know that, after a certain age, no matter what you do you're not going to be attractive to men anymore—what do you have left, motherhood? That doesn't last long, unless you keep having one child after another. Year after year you just move more into failure, with your child growing away from you and still half your life to live, and what are you going to do with it? Don't you see that women wouldn't look like female impersonators if they had something else to do? (37–38).

As Ella begins to write her life, reexamining her previous decisions and the matrix of forces that have influenced her identity, she continues to insist that "nothing important has ever happened to me" (46). However, what becomes clear is that what is "important" to Ella is her increasing drive to understand her past and forge a new subjectivity and sense of self. She examines the mixed messages she received from her early role models:

> What I remember most about growing up was that I didn't seem to be able to please anyone. I didn't seem to be able to do the right things. I was supposed to get an education so I wouldn't be poor, but I wasn't supposed to get so smart that no man would want me. I was supposed to be pretty so I wouldn't be an old maid, but I wasn't supposed to go out on dates too much because I might get "in trouble." I was supposed to study hard and get good grades, but I wasn't supposed to be stuck-up. (Anyone seen carrying a book was called stuck up!) It seemed like everything about my life was like that—contradictions. (Bryant 48).

To find a way out of this bind, she marries Joe, but years later, marriage and motherhood have failed to make her happy. As she begins to analyze the contradictions that have shaped her life,

she increasingly recognizes these as more than "personal" problems: they are, rather, social and collective problems that influence all women. The first of the book's five notebooks ends on this recognition, marking the first step in Ella's radicalization. From this point on, she writes for herself, not for Harkan, as she embarks on a journey of self-discovery that confronts her with the social and political problems woven into the fabric of her life.

Ella's development as a reader is central to her political development. In this sense as well, her experience in college substitutes as a form of consciousness-raising practice through reading, writing, and thinking. Ella's reading enacts the feminist poet and theorist, Adrienne Rich's exhortation to "read as if your life depended on it"— meaning, "to let into your reading your beliefs, the swirl of your dreamlife, the physical sensations of your ordinary carnal life; and simultaneously, to allow what you're reading to pierce the routines, safe and impermeable, in which ordinary carnal life is tracked, charted, channeled" (Rich quoted in Horn 246–7). Reading is a central catalyst for Ella's transformation throughout the novel, as it has been for other fictional heroines searching for a new identity. Gelfant argues that "*Ella Price's Journal* shows clearly how the hungry heroine can transform herself by transforming literature into life" (Gelfant 29).

Ella is particularly drawn to texts with women as central characters; she learns to identify with these characters and, as a result, question her own life and her earlier belittlement of her experiences ("nothing important has ever happened to me"). When a student calls a story a "soap opera" because of its concern with the daily life of an unhappy woman, Ella remarks, "Just what is a soap opera? I always thought it was a silly false story that idle women followed day after day just to hear human voices speaking in their empty houses. But the way that boy used it, it means any story where a woman is a central figure" (Bryant, *EPJ* 25). In recognizing the bias that informs her classmate's perception of what constitutes "literature," Ella reclaims her own life experience as worthy of literature, writing and committing to narrative form. Each new text she reads provides her with greater insight into her own life. Reading Shaw's comment that "when a loved one dies we feel a little relieved" (43), Ella remembers a fantasy she has of her house burning down with her husband and child inside. After initial tears, she finds herself "relieved" (43)—finding her own experience and emotion mirrored in Shaw's comment, she no longer understands this experience as purely individual but can "see it as a pretty ordinary fantasy of escape" (43). For Ella, reading thus becomes a way of not only valorizing her own identity and experience, but expanding from the individual and personal conditions of her life to a broader vision of the world and human experience.

As Ella's literary journey continues, she prioritizes novels with female protagonists, attempting to analyze her own life. From *Madame Bovary* to *Washington Square* to *Anna Karenina*, Ella's reading confronts her with a new understanding of her own life and the collective oppression of women while highlighting the absence of real discussions of personal lives of women in canonical literature, asking,

> I wonder why no one has ever discussed the trauma of birth for the mother. . . . Books are written about the effects of comparatively trivial experiences—deep lasting effects, supposedly—but discussing childbirth is taboo.
>
> I remember when I had Lulu a lot of women were having "natural childbirth" (as if there's any other kind), and I read some articles that said women only felt pain in childbirth if they were tense and neurotic. It seemed as if, if you couldn't hypnotize yourself into believing it didn't hurt, you were a nut. Such a

> profound experience for so many women—and you can't even be honest with yourself about it, much less talk about it.
> [. . .]
>
> And I remember that when I got pregnant I was angry. . . . I hadn't decided—it had happened to me, in spite of being careful. And my first thought (I'd forgotten until this minute, because I was so ashamed of it) was, "Now Joe's got me." I didn't like being dependent.
> [. . .]
>
> And after a while I started to have another feeling (which is another reason why I didn't have more children), a nagging feeling that there was something else I should be doing instead of doing things with Lulu. But I have that feeling while I'm doing most things—a feeling that there's something missing, something else. . . . But I don't know what. (I don't feel that way while I'm studying.) (70–71)

Like Plath and French, Bryant exposes in Ella's journal the sense of alienation and isolation of women's experience in childbirth and the gap between her own experience and the myths perpetuated by the media and medical establishments. In doing so, she comments ironically on her own project, a narrative devoted to precisely the types of experiences that Ella can't find in canonical literature. In stark contrast to the media's idealization of motherhood as the ultimate fulfillment for women, Ella is deeply aware of her own lack of fulfillment and is plagued by a nagging sense that there is something missing. At this point in the novel she is not yet able to give voice to what precisely that is, but she is clearly aware that she cannot find it in the home or family. This foreshadows Ella's ultimate decision at the end of the novel to abort her pregnancy to make way for her own rebirth. Even at this point in the novel, though, she is aware that studying and learning provides her with fulfillment that is lacking in her experience of motherhood. Thus, early on in the novel, Bryant sets up a clear opposition between the lack of fulfillment Ella experiences in her role as a mother and homemaker and her awakening and engagement in learning, reading and developing her own mind and identity. This opposition grows throughout the novel as her house becomes "solitary confinement" (95) and the university becomes "home," thus increasing the novel's symbolic shift away from confining myths of female domesticity and into the public realm of knowledge, self-development, and political consciousness.

Ella's education puts her at odds with women in her neighborhood and social circle, who tell her, "I found that fun for a little while too, but I just couldn't neglect my family any longer" or criticize her for "tak[ing] the classroom space away from some young person" (73). She also experiences growing conflicts within her family, leading to alienation, isolation and boredom, particularly during holidays, which become unbearable. Ella's newfound distance from her social circle and family is intimately connected to her growing anger at the oppression of women—an understanding spurred on by her reading. She begins to recognize that her unhappiness is not a personal failure but a collective problem. While her reading opens her mind and awakens her to the oppression of women in society, it provides no solutions. As a result, Ella becomes frustrated with her reading, especially with endings that inevitably fail to liberate their female protagonists. *Anna Karenina* particularly enrages Ella in this regard, prompting her to write:

> Doesn't anyone ever win? Emma swallows arsenic, Carol goes back to her dull life, and Anna jumps in front of a train. Are women like these always destroyed?

> Dan Harkan says, "You missed the point. Destruction of the protagonist implies indictment of the society." . . . If you destroy the rebel, aren't you saying that rebellion is useless? If a writer puts a character into a trap and says to the reader, Look this is the trap this person is in, it's intolerable, it's killing her. . . . Does the writer's responsibility end there? Only if he assumes the his readers are just observers, outside the trap—like men reading about poor Anna Karenina, shaking their heads and pitying her but not really seeing themselves in her place.
>
> But if the reader *is* an Anna Karenina? If she sees herself in the book, and the author shows her being destroyed one way, then rebelling only to be destroyed another way . . . what does that do to the reader? I think it destroys the reader a third way—it teaches despair. (Price *EPJ* 77-78).

In contrast to Dan Harkan, Ella reads not only to indict society, but also to search for solutions—which she finds sorely lacking in conventional novels. In recording Ella's responses to these canonical works, Bryant thus comments more broadly about the limits of the conventional novel and the political implications of its impact on the female reader. For Ella, it is not enough to raise one's consciousness about the problem; books should also provide inspiration and possibilities for change. In Ella's conscious identification with Anna Karenina (as opposed to Dan Harkan's reading), the ending becomes more than a literary convention or an aesthetic decision—it actively promotes the destruction of women and teaches the inevitable failure of rebellion. Through Ella, Bryant argues for the writer's responsibility to provide not only analyses of oppression and indictments of social problems, but also hope, inspiration, and models of resistance for female readers.

If the ending of *Anna Karenina* provokes anger in Ella at the destruction of the female protagonist, *Washington Square* strikes her with even greater force; the powerful sense of identification she feels is a testament to literature's consciousness-raising power. It is James's novel with which Ella identifies the most, arguing,

> It happens every day. We don't get chopped down like redwoods, we wither. There's no big rebellion crushed. And we don't jump in front of trains. We just keep going. Not dead but not alive. And nobody ever knows. That's what's so awful, that no one knows. And that's why this book means more to me, I guess, because the author says, "Yes, I know, I know." (84)

This intense feeling of recognition provides a clue to Bryant's understanding of the political power of literature. Despite the lack of a positive resolution, Catherine's continued endurance in *Washington Square* makes public the private struggles of the millions of Ella Prices who read such works. If this feeling fails to provide a solution, it nonetheless provides Ella with a deep sense of understanding that legitimizes her life, her struggle, and her growing sense of alienation in a world that systematically denies her fulfillment and selfhood. It reveals what had up to now been a personal and profoundly isolating struggle.

Through Ella's reading of canonical literature that features female protagonists, Bryant points to both the power of such works and their limits in providing women with models for resisting oppression. Limited to indicting social conditions, they fail to provide women with realistic avenues for developing subjectivity and political agency. In this sense, she makes a powerful case for the development of feminist literature, which can provide a new political realism and new forms to transcend the limitations of the conventional novel.

Nonetheless, in the period in which Bryant is writing, few such models existed. Indeed, Ella's journey through literature is marked by an absence of female authors. As Horn argues, this has its roots in the book's specific historical moment, as feminist literary projects were in their infancy: "While the establishment of the Feminist Press in 1970 (followed by others such as Virago) did much to remedy the dearth of women's voices, few works by women, even the journals of Virginia Woolf or Anaïs Nin, would have been available" (Horn, "Afterword" 231). The notable exception, for Ella, is Lessing's *The Golden Notebook,* which is the only female-authored novel Ella reads in the course of her education. It is not surprising, given its popularity in the emerging women's liberation movement, that Lessing's novel is given to her not by Harkan, but by Laura Wilkens, a divorced woman living in Berkeley whom Ella befriends. Laura Wilkens is Ella's introduction to the world of feminism; she functions in the novel as a link between Ella's incipient feminist consciousness and the political movement itself. Laura's gift of *The Golden Notebook* symbolically places Lessing's novel in the realm of the consciousness-raising circles and feminist political discussions of the late sixties and seventies and locates Lessing as the feminist writer *par excellence*. Nonetheless, while *The Golden Notebook* gives Ella a glimpse of the "new woman" of the feminist movement, she is not particularly impressed: the independence and freedom Anna Wulf represents comes at quite a cost. She writes,

> I don't know anything about women like this—free, independent women who earn their own living, raise their own children, sleep with whoever they want, make their own rules. But in some strange way their lives don't seem to be much different from mine.
> [. . .]
>
> They remind me of what my history teacher said about slaves in America. After the civil war they were put to work doing the same old things, at a wage that didn't buy them any more that [sic] what they had before . . . for some of them being free meant just being free to die.
>
> That doesn't mean slavery was better than freedom and it doesn't mean women ought to go back to leaving votes, money and everything else under male control. But the women in this book are used and hated by men. Anna keeps saying, We are the new women, but where are the new men for us? (Bryant, *EPJ* 88)

Yet again, Ella is confronted with the question of solutions and the relationship between internal change and larger changes in social relations. Mirroring sentiments expressed in much feminist fiction of the period, Ella recognizes that the development of a feminist consciousness and a declaration of independence does not translate into equal social or sexual relations with men. Her comparison to the continued presence of racism after the abolition of slavery, while slightly problematic in its too-easy elision of the differences between women's oppression and chattel slavery, points to the limits of legal equality in the absence of wide-scale social transformation, including in the private sphere. Formal equality does not necessarily mean equal access to personal fulfillment, nor does being a "free" or "independent" woman equate to being a happy woman. If Lessing introduces Ella to feminist consciousness, she also exposes her to its limitations.

As a model of resistance, *Antigone* provides Ella with the greatest sense of power and inspiration. She writes, "Why did I get so excited? It's that Antigone faces a problem that's not a

woman problem, it's a human problem…. She's not trapped in sex" (90). For Ella, *Antigone* transcends the role of women within conventional fiction. In contrast, French's Mira sees it as yet another example of the endings that fail to provide models for real life, as it is only through Antigone's demise that her heroism is possible. As Mira argues, echoing Ella's sentiments about literature while differing in her interpretation of *Antigone*, "The problem with the great literature of the past is that it doesn't tell you how to live with real endings. . . . Suppose Antigone had lived. An Antigone who goes on being Antigone year after year would be not only ludicrous but a bore. The cave and the rope are essential" (French 138). Antigone nonetheless, provides a positive role model for Ella precisely because she is defined by her heroism, not her gender. Her rebellion is not limited to the private sphere; she fights a political and moral battle against unjust laws. Ella's growing feminism is portrayed here as a form of humanism, seeking models of female resistance that break out of the boundaries of the private/public dichotomy. Her growing awareness of the oppression of women corresponds to a desire to escape these limitations and to no longer be "trapped in sex."

If reading is key to Ella's political awakening, so too are her shifting relationships to men. As her responses to literature make clear, freedom for Ella means not only recognizing the political roots of her personal unhappiness, but also transforming her social relations. As Ella radicalizes, her relationships with men, most notably her husband and Dan Harkan, are likewise transformed. Indeed, the portrayal of men in feminist fiction is a literary minefield, as Hogeland contends, eliciting much hostility from reviewers who argued that negative depictions of men undermined the realism and credibility of the genre. She argues,

> Two central and related issues emerged: the surprising centrality of men characters to evaluations of feminist novels . . . and the strategic problem of political realism. "Men can't be that bad," argue the reviewers in the mainstream press and in *Ms.*, and thus any novel that portrays men negatively or shallowly cannot be realistic or credible. These reviews highlight the limitations of political realism's persuasive power and suggest as well how feminism has come to be associated with man hating, even by liberal feminists. (Hogeland, "Men Can't Be That Bad" 287)

As reviews of diverse works from the feminist canon, including *The Bell Jar*, *The Golden Notebook*, *The Woman Warrior*, and *The Women's Room,* make clear, negative depictions of men are invariably decried as unfair and unrealistic, proof that women's liberation is inextricably linked with male-bashing.

The literary double standard at work in these responses points to the inherent bias of such reviews; centuries of oppressive depictions of women scarcely raise an eyebrow, while political women writers are held to an entirely different standard and required to exercise absolute balance and equanimity in their fiction. Thus, "'Men can't be that bad,' [Lehmann-Haupt] want[s] to shout at the narrator" of *The Women's Room,* while a *New York Times* reviewer goes so far as to propose "'a program of civil rights for characters in novels' because it is not 'fair for authors to push them around or malign them just to make a point or put across a message'" (cited in Hogeland, "Men" 289). That the feminism of French's novel enrages these reviewers not because of its blatant exposition of the inequalities faced by women, but rather the unfair treatment of male characters by the author, is perhaps a telling irony. This attitude exposes the frequent use of the language of equality and civil rights to undermine the political struggles of the oppressed; it also exposes the limits of the feminist movement's acceptance in the mainstream press. While the liberal wing of the movement sought desperately to portray itself as

male-friendly, encouraging men to be active in the movement and focusing primarily on overturning legal obstacles to women's equality, the radical wing of the movement sought a total transformation of social and sexual relations. In some cases, as in Valerie Solanas's much-publicized *SCUM Manifesto* and her infamous shooting of Andy Warhol, this did indeed mean seeing men as the enemy. In other cases, attempting to transform personal, social, and sexual relations was not an attack on men per se, but rather an insistence that women's liberation implied more than just a personal change of consciousness on women's part; it demanded a radical transformation of society in which men too must change in the pursuit of equality. Ultimately, however, all feminists who sought more than personal transformation and began to challenge existing power structures and social relations were branded as male-hating, castrating extremists in much of the mainstream media. This has less to do with actual depictions of men than with using the extremist faction of the movement as a bludgeon with which to undermine the goals of the movement as a whole. Thus, Hogeland argues based on her reading of reviews of feminist fiction, "as a self-help movement for women, feminism is perfectly acceptable to the mainstream press. When feminism begins to impinge on, set limits to, or critique men's behavior, however, feminism must be delegitimated" (Hogeland, "Men" 288).

On the other hand, feminist representational or testimonial fictional texts' role in a consciousness-raising framework encourage them to be read as political indictments of men and male behavior as a whole. If, as in Millett, patriarchy is the target of such works, the sexual politics they project analyze not only the roots of women's oppression and subjugation, but also the roles men play within such a system. If these texts are political and the female protagonists are meant as representational figures to expose the sexism inherent in American democracy, their fictional male counterparts, too, are frequently read as symbolic of masculinity as a whole. In this sense, feminist fiction falls victim to literary biases against political fiction more generally as inherently ideological and thus incapable of objectivity. In exposing inequality and harnessing fiction for political purposes, feminist writers, like abolitionist writers or the radical social realists of the thirties and forties (such as John Steinbeck and Richard Wright), are accused of clouding realism with ideology and politics. In this logic, negative depictions of the oppressed in realist works that uphold the status quo are simply read as expressions of the real (i.e., not political, simple a reflection of the world. Meanwhile, any attempt to challenge the status quo through negative depictions of oppressors elicits charges of ideological bias and didacticism, delegitimizing the work's political critique inherent and undermining its claim to realism. As Hogeland argues,

> depictions of men characters are made to stand in for all men. Even the most minor of such depictions, in other words, signal the eruption of 'ideology' into 'objective' and 'fair' realist fiction. . . . By extension, then, feminist realist fiction can be credible only insofar as it critiques women and not men—only insofar as it upholds a prefeminist understanding of women's oppression as personal and not political or participates in antifeminist victim blaming. If, as the reviewers argue, men can't be that bad, then the problems of women's inequality must rest solely with women. These reviews thus work to contain feminism's critique of the political relations between men and women by delegitimating any negative depiction of men. (Hogeland, "Men" 289–90)

In making the personal public and exposing the roots of the oppression of women within the personal sphere, feminist writers were frequently lambasted for putting male readers' "testicles in a nutcracker," as Kate Millett's advisor described the experience of reading *Sexual*

Politics (*TIME,* "Who's Come a Long Way, Baby?"). Bryant negotiates this minefield with care. Although male characters affect Ella's life negatively, Bryant goes to great lengths to depict them as "not that bad," pointing instead to the ways in which oppression and subjugation of women and the myth of the ideal nuclear family pervade all relationships and undermine any potential for equal and fulfilling relations between the sexes. While Ella's husband Joe is frequently depicted as a "simple" man with limited desires and thoughts, he is certainly not one of the many "bad" men who make the critics reel. Ella writes, "I don't want to hurt Joe's feelings because he's so good, not like some other men. There are two women on the block who went to the junior college once but don't dare go anymore. Their husbands won't let them" (Bryant, *EPJ* 31). One woman tells her, "he says . . . I don't need to know anything else to be a good wife and mother. Can you imagine a man–in the twentieth century—talking that way? You'd be surprised at how many men are just like that" (31). Nonetheless, by the end of the novel, Ella has outgrown Joe and his mantra that "I'm happy if I can eat, drink and screw," to which she responds, "So is a pig!" (213). Her education and political awakening put her at odds with him and his simple life. Ella can beat Joe with words; therefore, he sees her books and writing as threats. As she contemplates later, "That's the trouble with reading books. It's not just a question of me doing what I want and Joe doing what he wants, and each letting each other. In some deep way, we're enemies of what the other wants" (215). If Joe becomes the enemy, this is not blamed on any personal fault in his character. Ella recognizes that their entire marriage and relationship have been predetermined by gender roles and by women's assumed dependency on men in the traditional nuclear family. Thus, she recognizes that he is in fact happier when she is miserable and feeling insane, because then he feels useful and in control. Once Ella achieves a stronger sense of independence and subjectivity, her relationship with Joe becomes confining; he is incapable of relating to her as an equal.

This "cannibalism," as Laura characterizes the relationship, is not a personal failure of their marriage. It is characterized as a social and political problem inherent in the "bargain" of marriage and its promise of eternal happiness at the expense of women's personal development, fulfillment, and independence. Ella does not blame Joe, but rather writes, "I thought of our whole life together, and of how I made the bargain too, out of my cowardice, marrying Joe because I too wanted to own something, the love and acceptance he got from people. Because he was what I wanted to be—just like everyone else" (224). Ella's rejection of Joe is thus also a rejection of the conformity of the 1950s familial ideal and of the suburban lifestyle and its trappings. Most importantly, it is a rejection of the marriage bargain, which entails Ella's loss of self, independence, and critical subjectivity. Her political awakening makes this an untenable sacrifice. Thus, she ultimately decides that she will leave their home altogether, rather than just Joe. Leaving both her husband and Lulu, Ella makes clear that her decision is not about a man, but about a life and a self that she has outgrown.

Dan Harkan is the other central male character of the novel—Joe's foil, in a sense—who plays a crucial role in Ella's personal and political development. He too must eventually be discarded to make room for the new and improved Ella to emerge from her chrysalis. At first, Ella hates Harkan; he challenges the world of conformity symbolized by Joe. She sees him as attacking her world. Nonetheless, as Ella haltingly heeds his call to develop her mind and her political consciousness, and to examine her life through writing, she veers from hatred to adulation. Harkan becomes her political guru and guide in her journey toward a new subjectivity. As Ella remarks, "At first I hated him. Now I've swung over to believing anything he says. I have to learn to think for myself" (57). As Ella outgrows Joe, in part through Harkan's influence,

she learns that both relationships imply dependency and negate her independence. Thus she must separate from Harkan as well and learn to think independently, challenging, for example, the sexism that underlies some of his critiques of conformist culture and women's role within it.

This separation is not an easy process for Ella; her first inclination is to look for another man to provide her with the new life she seeks. Thus, in the fourth notebook, Ella begins to fall in love with Harkan. This takes root, notably, after her first political protest, against the Vietnam War, about which she lies to her husband—also a first for Ella. The loneliness of Laura Wilkens and of the women in *The Golden Notebook* makes feminist independence seem less than ideal to Ella. Her love for Harkan is thus a projection of her desire for escape and her unwillingness to pay the price of loneliness she sees in the feminist role models she has encountered. At the same time, her relationship with Harkan provides a crucial training ground for Ella, who realizes that, even in Harkan's radical milieu, sexism pervades human relationships. She cannot change her life by simply exchanging men.

In the early stages of the relationship, despite her guilt and hesitation, Ella is exhilarated; her senses are heightened; she feels reborn to a feeling that has been numbed and deadened in her marriage. Nonetheless, her relationship with Harkan is also characterized by competing needs that prevent either character from fully flourishing. Harkan sees the relationship as both of them using each other. Ultimately, despite our growing awareness of Dan's less-than-feminist leanings, his analysis is at least partially correct. As she becomes increasingly disillusioned with him, her understanding of relationships and of her own subjectivity is transformed. To achieve true independence, Ella must break out of idealizing Harkan and forge her own path.

Indeed, Harkan's professed radical politics are limited to the classroom. After their first sexual encounter, Ella writes, "It was like rape. No, because I was fighting him. It was more like the way a man might act with a prostitute—a very conventional puritanical man who is ashamed of what he is doing" (167). His radicalism collapses in the bedroom; he becomes a conventional man, showing the limitations of radical politics in transforming personal relationships. In many ways, Dan Harkan becomes a symbolic figure for the male-dominated New Left and SDS, within which, despite all the radical reappraisals of sexuality within the movement, women continued to feel oppressed and confined by the secondary roles imposed on them. As Evans writes of activists in ERAP and SDS, "They rejected many social norms concerning sexual relationships, but they were confused about what should replace them. People talked about openness, honesty and democracy in relationships, but few felt sure how such values might be achieved. In the absence of any clear understanding of the way sex roles continued to shape behavior, the double standard collapsed into a void" (Evans 153). All too often, the new sexual freedom ensconced women in new but oppressive roles that continued to undermine genuine sexual liberation.

Harkan is Ella's closest connection to the radical politics of the New Left. Despite his open marriage and professed sexual liberation, she gains no liberation from her relationship with him. In fact, she concludes, "I feel as if *I'm* being used" (171). This realization culminates in humiliation after Ella overhears two professors talking about housewives at the college: "Oh, they hang around for a year or two, then drop out. A few turn into good students, go on to the university. Get a degree—along with a divorce decree" (173). To get rid of these housewives who they perceive as nuisances, the professors suggest encouraging them to sign up for Harkan's class. The implication is clear; Ella is made aware that her story is not unique. When one professor questions "what he sees in these worn-out weepers" (174), her humiliation is complete. The political and sexual awakening that has transformed her is relegated in this conversation to a sad narrative of the trapped and disappointed housewife who seeks escape through a predatory

man. Yet she refuses to blame Harkan, noting that he feels equally "humiliated, rejected." She wonders, "If each of us were to tell the story of our 'affair,' would each version come out the same, only with a different victim, different villain?" (175).

While Harkan represents the failure of New Left politics to transform the realm of personal relationships, men alone are not to blame for this failure. In opening the possibility of multiple narratives of this relationship, Bryant anticipates the accusations of critics that "men can't be that bad," pointing instead to the pervasiveness of sexual oppression in all personal and sexual relations between men and women. Her own words perhaps mirror Todd Gitlin's assessment that "what movement men had done to movement women, we have also done perhaps more subtly, to movement men. Women have been oppressed as a caste; we have all been oppressed, damaged, twisted, neglected by each other" (cited in Evans 154). Likewise there are no simple victims and villains in Ella's story, only a political system of oppressive gender roles that prevents the full and equal expression of human sexuality in all personal heterosexual relationships.

In the immediate aftermath of her failed relationship with Harkan, Ella abandons the possibility of change and returns to the safety and sanctity of her family, vowing to try anew to be the perfect wife and mother. The failure of her personal sexual revolution sends her running back into the domestic sphere she sought to escape in the first place. Nonetheless, by the end of the novel, she recognizes that her mistake was not the escape attempt, but the method:

> For all the writing I've done in this journal about problems of women, I must have fallen into the oldest, stupidest woman's attitude—seeing myself and my problems and my needs in terms of men. I had realized that I had to make a change. But I saw that change as a change in men, as if I don't exist except as part of a man…. And what I need to do has to happen in myself, Everything else is just a detour—falling in love, getting pregnant, whatever—just detours away from doing the real job, whatever that is.
>
> That's what I have to learn to do: face things head on; no evasions, no detours, no easy ways out. (209)

Laura Wilkens plays a crucial role in this realization, introducing Ella to the women's movement, which provides her with a new alternative to the life and encourages her to develop a feminist consciousness that allows her to "face things head on" without "easy ways out." As Evans argues, the roots of feminism lay in the contradictions women experienced in the New Left: "Feminism was nurtured in the contradiction that the intensification of sexual oppression occurred in the same places where women found new strength, new potential, and new self-confidence, where they learned to respect the rebellion of strong women" (Evans 154). Similarly, Ella's incipient feminism is born out of the contradictions of the new consciousness nurtured in Harkan's classroom and simultaneously stifled in their sexual relationship. She needs a movement to provide her with the space to develop her own political agency. Laura Wilkens replaces the male role models in Ella's life, taking her beyond the confines of the college and initiating her into the feminist movement itself.

As a role model, Laura Wilkens is initially problematic. Ella is all too aware that Laura's "freedom" has come at the price of increased isolation and loneliness. Married to a husband who "chased women," Laura felt "ashamed" and "inadequate." After she went back to school, he became jealous and she ultimately divorced him. From Laura, Ella learns about the pain of divorce and isolation and the "double standard" facing women in relationships vis-à-vis social

norms regarding sexuality and monogamy. For Laura, divorce seemed to be the answer—but she finds that it doesn't necessarily make her free. Her children, blaming her for the divorce, begin acting out; when she seeks help, she is blamed for causing their problems.

Through Laura's son Marty, the novel introduces the gay liberation movement, albeit in complicated, conflicted, and somewhat homophobic terms. Laura's son comes out to her shortly after her separation and she sends him to see a psychiatrist—in and of itself a testament to the rampant homophobia of the medical establishment (which Bryant does not challenge).[2] Laura sees her son's homosexuality as a form of rebellion meant to torture her. Marty simultaneously tells her it's her fault and that it's "perfectly natural" (142)—a contradiction that infuriates Laura. When she stops paying for the psychiatrist, he joins the gay liberation movement. Laura sees this too as Marty's way of punishing her, by "trying desperately to get his name in the papers. . . . Can you imagine the reaction of the neighbors?" (143).

While lesbians were active in the feminist movement from the start, they frequently faced hostility from liberal feminists. As D'Emilio and Freedman note:

> Products of their culture, feminists were no less likely than other Americans to view lesbians with disdain, to see their sexuality as a pathological aberration at worst, or a private matter of no political consequence at best. Sensitive to the reaction that the movement was eliciting in the minds of Americans, many feminists sought to keep the issue quiet, to push lesbians out of sight. (D'Emilio & Freedman 316–17)

While lesbianism is thoroughly absent from the novel, Laura's troubled relationship with her son provides a brief glimpse into the troubled relationship between feminism and the gay liberation movement it in part helped to inspire. Despite (or perhaps because of) her own alienation and isolation from her "neighbors" (because of her divorce and nonconformity to gender roles), she exhibits little understanding of her son and sees his actions as solely exacerbating her public condemnation. While this fear does not prevent her from asserting her own independence as a woman and joining the women's movement, she implies that her son's decision to become politically involved in the Gay Liberation Front hinders her cause and her independence. In this sense, Laura's attitude to some extent mirrors the concerns of some feminists that the movement's goals would be undermined by lesbians active within it. Kate Millett's highly public coming-out in *TIME* magazine created waves in the movement; her later memoir *Flying* vividly describes the conflicted relationship between women's liberation and gay liberation. Describing her own reaction to the *TIME* article, which made her sexuality a subject of national and international news as it proclaimed her "a lesbian in ninety-three languages," she fears that it will backfire on the movement, "transforming into a stick with which to beat other women" (Millett, *Flying* 14). Nonetheless, she defends her decision, arguing (as did many other writers and activists) that the women's liberation movement must take a stand against the oppression of gays and lesbians: "Hell with it. It's the truth. That will have to do. I cannot, must not hurt the movement. But the movement cannot sell out on gays, cringe before dyke-baiting, shuffle into respectability" (Millett, *Flying* 17).

[2] The American Psychiatric Association defined homosexuality as a mental disorder until 1974; see *Intimate Matters* and Bryant's reference to this in relation to her son in *Literary Lynching*, chapter 7, 109 as well as Bryant's novel *A Day in San Francisco* for further discussion on this topic.

It is difficult to get a firm grasp of Bryant's relationship to the gay liberation struggle in the novel, since the only mention comes from Laura, with Ella uncharacteristically silent on the subject, but *Ella Price's Journal* resonates with larger concerns about the radical feminist movement and its conflicted relationship with liberal feminism. Indeed, Bryant herself has a particularly complicated political and personal relationship with the gay liberation movement. Laura's experience is clearly based on Bryant's own experience: her son came out to her after her first divorce, was sent to a psychiatrist, and ultimately became active in the gay liberation movement in San Francisco:

> I was the only person he knew who had not displayed contempt at his casual mention of homosexuality, and who even had close gay friends. John also considered me responsible for getting psychotherapy for him because, of course, his "illness" was my fault. I thought he must be right. So did most "authorities" in 1966. . . . I know now that I underestimated John's suffering and fear. He needed much more than my nervous acceptance of his sexuality, and in 1966, more than that was hard to come by. (Bryant, *Literary Lynching,* Chapter 7)

Bryant later professes full support for gay liberation and insists that her critiques come from a liberal, anti-homophobic perspective. Nonetheless, her perspectives are somewhat ambivalent—and at times overtly hostile—toward the movement's focus on sexuality and frequent association with radical sexual liberation, criticizing not only heterosexist institutions such as marriage and the family, but also monogamy. (She explored these issues in a later novel, *A Day in San Francisco*.)

The ambivalence Bryant expresses toward the gay liberation movement in *Ella Price*, places her squarely in the liberal feminist camp. It demonstrates her concern about the radical sexual revolution advocated by radical feminists, who also questioned heterosexuality and monogamy. As the key link to the feminist movement in the novel, Laura represents its liberal wing, committed to the cause of women's liberation but clearly demarcated from the radical feminist movement that was simultaneously developing nationally and giving the movement much of its momentum.

Laura tells Ella that her activity in the movement helps with her loneliness and social ostracism "It's wonderful . . . the way I've gotten to know—to love—some women. It's not so lonely now." (201). This crucial development occurs at the moment when Ella is finally ready to break free from her role as a wife and mother. If neither men nor the family are the solution, it seems that activism in women's groups can provide Ella with the solution she seeks. This new possibility helps move her toward her final steps to freedom.

Ella's transformation from housewife to feminist is likewise marked throughout the text by her increasing concern and political awareness about a crucial battle of the women's liberation movement: the fight for reproductive freedom. Her awareness about the relationship between women's access to birth control and the right to abortion develops against the backdrop of rapidly shifting legal gains, as the feminist movement garnered greater success in reproductive freedom. As Ella begins her affair with Dan, fear of pregnancy increasingly haunts her. She recalls her early indoctrination that an "illegitimate" pregnancy was "the worst thing that could ever happen to me." As a result, "in my guts I still believe getting pregnant is the worst thing that could happen" (157). Ella's ambivalent feelings toward motherhood and pregnancy reflect the contradictory impulses of the 1950s ideals of domesticity. On the one hand, as women became increasingly sexualized, they were idealized as mothers. As contraception became more available, sexual experimentation among youth became somewhat more acceptable, but the

danger of social ostracism for women who became pregnant outside the confines of marriage became all the more extreme (Coontz 239). The policing of women's sexuality by limiting access to birth control and abortion had devastating results, leading to mass numbers of illegal abortions, with a high death toll.

Ella's political radicalization is thus also accompanied, like Esther Greenwood's, by a desire for increased control over her sexuality and reproductive choices. She visits a Planned Parenthood to obtain birth control she can control herself, rather than relying on men. This is where she first learns of changes in abortion laws as a result of the feminist movement. Indeed, the novel is set at a crucial juncture in the history of the women's movement; access to abortion changes radically throughout the narrative. On her first trip to Planned Parenthood, she is told that the law allowing limited access to abortion has changed from "if dangerous to the mother's health" instead of "fatal" (160). While still far from legal and involving a "complicated process," the fact that women have any legal access to abortion gives Ella an option other than motherhood when she ultimately decides to terminate her pregnancy at the end of the novel.

This decision marks a crucial step, providing Ella with the material and psychological freedom she needs to leave her home, her marriage, and her old life as a housewife. At first, believing she needs the approval of two doctors for an abortion, she visits her psychiatrist, who refuses to help her without further counseling. This would take her past the first trimester and make an abortion all but impossible. Ella's anger at his abuse of power is palpable. She writes, "He held power over me. He could decide whether or not I was to have a baby. I felt rage well up in me, and I swallowed it. . . . He was exploiting a stupid law to make money on my misery. And I was powerless" (195). Through this incident, Ella exposes the inherent flaw in legal restrictions that deny women power over their lives and bodies. In this case, however, Dr. Redford's power is eclipsed by the rapidly changing legal status of reproductive rights. From Laura, she learns that Dr. Redford has in fact lied to her and that "last month a county judge declared all abortion laws unconstitutional. It still has to go up through the courts, but ever since then hospitals all around are doing abortions on demand. Your medical insurance even pays for it" (196). Ella's story thus illustrates crucial gains in reproductive freedom and sets Ella's radicalization against a backdrop of victories for the women's liberation movement. This places the novel historically between 1967, when the "therapeutic law" first went into effect in California, and 1969, when the California Supreme Court ruled all anti-abortion laws unconstitutional (although the earlier reference to the Gay Liberation Front places the novel after its formation in 1969). Published in 1972, one year before *Roe v. Wade* upheld the right to an abortion on a national level, the novel makes an important contribution to the political argument for the importance of this crucial right to any possibility of women's liberation. (Dynak et al).

As Hogeland points out that "by 1972, abortion had become such a commonplace of women's and feminist fiction that one reviewer referred to the 'obligatory abortion episode,' highlighting the proliferation of abortion narratives and their importance to the struggle for reproductive freedom to the movement as a whole (Hogeland *Feminism* 62). In *Ella Price's Journal*, this "obligatory episode" reflects the broader proliferation of abortion narratives but has even greater narrative and political importance because it comprises the final scene of the novel, which symbolically represents Ella's rebirth. As her family celebrates Christmas Day, Ella is in a clinic, preparing to terminate her pregnancy. This dramatic and ironic representation of her abortion as the precondition by which Ella herself can be reborn as a new woman, politically awakened to her feminist consciousness, is underscored by the symbolic timing of the event and

its placement as the final scene of the narrative. As she awaits surgery, she describes her feelings:

> I feel like a sacred virgin chosen for an elaborate initiation rite, prepared and purified according to ancient rule.
>
> I feel like a plucked chicken about to be gutted.
>
> I feel (Bryant, *EPJ* 227)

The juxtaposition of these images points to an Ella still caught in a medical establishment that denies her subjectivity, even as she takes control of her future. The final words, without any final punctuation mark, establish not an end but a beginning— the reader is made aware that a new Ella will be ritually reborn through the termination of her pregnancy. This new Ella, if nothing else, will feel and be. She emerges as a subject of her own narrative and life, no longer an object denied agency.

Barbara Horn writes that

> the shockingly paired metaphors of sacrifice and evisceration mark Dorothy Bryant's first novel as one of awakening, of becoming, of *rebirth*. . . . In deciding to have an abortion and scheduling it on that most celebrated day of birth, December 25, Ella defies many institutions; in the process, she claims ownership and control of her body, her life.
>
> That Ella's rebirth depends upon not giving birth is perhaps the most striking irony. . . . With that utterance ("I feel") our initiate completes a series of life-altering decisions that have everything to do with her education. (Horn 229–30)

Ella's rebirth through abortion and her assertion of her right to unfettered reproductive freedom places her action within the historical narrative of the women's liberation movement and its fight for women's control over their own bodies and reproductive decisions. It is the final rejection of her previous life as wife and mother and, as such, a rejection of the idealized myth of the feminine mystique. In carefully constructing an ending that avoids the despair of female protagonists in the books Ella reads, Bryant is perhaps not capable of providing a new world for Ella to be free in—but ends her novel with the sense of hope and possibility contained in Ella's assertion of the "I," her rejection of the stultifying and emotionally deadening role of the housewife, and an autonomy which we assume will continue past the pages of the novel. As Gelfant argues, "She ends with a simple assertion: *I feel*. Then she stops, without a final period, so that her journey can continue even though her journal has come to an end" (Gelfant, "Hungry Woman" 29). In rejecting the final period, Bryant places Ella in the continuum of the women's liberation narrative. Her journey has only begun. Nonetheless, the ending is pregnant with possibility and a sense of hope for the emergence of a new woman, a new self, and a new world in which women's liberation is not guaranteed, but at least possible.

The Personal and the Political: The Radicalization of a Generation

While Ella's quest for liberation is primarily an internal or psychological journey, in which feminist consciousness-raising is her primary means of personal and political development, this internal radicalization is set against the backdrop of a much broader political generalization of the generation coming of age in the sixties. Ella herself is a product of the

fifties and of that decade's idealized visions of the feminine mystique contained within the ideology of the family. Nonetheless, her personal transformation and liberation are made possible by her close proximity to the student, Black Power, antiwar, and feminist movements. Ella occupies a position on the margins of these movements, at the intersection between the political movements of the younger generation and the disillusionment of women of her own generation, whose founding myths have been exposed as lies. As Horn argues:

> Bryant wisely situates her retiring heroine well on the periphery of any potential upheaval. Ella's rebellion is internal; what action she takes grows out of personal, not public, concerns. Yet as the novel progresses, Ella experiences her first, flickering intimations that the personal can be political . . . while Bryant sets her novel near San Francisco, on the fault line of cultural change and upheaval, she does not focus on movement leaders, dramatize historically defining moments, or posit theories about racist, sexist hegemony. What *Ella Price's Journal* does capture, however, is perhaps more powerful and essential, although quieter—a revolution from within, of the kind that took root for so many in the fruitful soil of the 1960s. Our heroine reminds us that an ordinary woman is capable and deserving of the extraordinary. (Horn 252)

The relationship between Ella's personal radicalization and the radicalization of a generation provide the novel with a productive tension, as Ella's political views and perception of the younger radicals and their political demands shift and transform throughout the novel as her own internal revolution gains force. The political setting reinforces her growing sense of disillusionment with the status quo while forcing her to question the dominant political ideology and social and cultural biases within her immediate environment.

While reading provides Ella with an early path to feminist consciousness-raising, it also introduces her to this generational radicalization. Ella is initially shocked at the reading list for Harkan's class, which she describes as follows:

> One is the autobiography of a black nationalist who preached ideas that are tearing this country apart. One is a novel by a man convicted of marijuana possession. The essay book contains one essay by a rapist and one by a philosopher who's been in and out of jail all his life for refusing to support his own country. In glancing through the short-story book I found a couple of paragraphs I hope my daughter doesn't see. And the last book seems to be mainly on the subject that going to school is worthless because all schools and colleges are no good. No grammar book is required, just a thin little handbook that gives rules for punctuation and things like that. (Bryant, *EPJ* 13)

Initially, Ella shares her family's despairing view of the influence of the radical left (and communist professors) on the campus. She rejects Harkan's teaching methods, yearns for grammar and canonical literature, and finds political discussion and radical ideas a waste of time and energy. Indeed, she challenges Harkan's methods of teaching students to critique the president's speech and challenge authority (both political and literary). She argues, "I think you encourage young people to be disrespectful toward their elders and leaders. After all, doesn't disrespect for leaders account for most of the disrespect for law and order and decency in this country and in this college? Why, half the students here are just playing, and the other half are always marching and carrying signs and trying to stop the rest of us from learning anything"

(22). For Ella, the radical students on campus are at odds with the goals of the university; indeed, their political struggles are destructive to the education process itself. Later, she further defends domestic values and consumer ideology, saying:

> I don't think that there's anything wrong with enjoying life and the things people have worked for, like new cars and color TV and a swimming pool (which we don't have, but I wouldn't mind having one) and martinis before dinner and—it's as if you looked into our lives and decided to tear them apart. Well, my husband has worked hard for all of these things, and there's nothing immoral about enjoying them instead of agonizing about all the people who don't have them. Maybe if those people had worked as hard as my husband, instead of collecting taxpayers' money to support their illegitimate babies, they'd have those things too. But according to your ideas they shouldn't want them anyway, so why try to make us feel guilty about having them? (23)

In both of these passages, Ella is clearly positioned as a representative of the conformist suburban middle-class mainstream, with an immense faith in the American dream and the role of education and hard work, blind respect for law and order, and disdain for those who fail to live up to the work ethic or challenge the status quo. Nonetheless, as Ella reads and engages further in discussion, however, she not only awakens the feminist consciousness within, but also comes to challenge her own biases and those of her family. Her early characterization as an upholder of the same values she ultimately rejects makes her transformation all the more dramatic, enacting on a personal level the broader radicalization and shifts in mass consciousness that would transform American society and culture.

Reading is the catalyst for Ella to challenge her previous assumptions and beliefs. After reading Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery," for example, Ella begins to challenge the ideological bases of American "civilization. She writes that "the story means we're barbaric, killing people by lottery. Or we're doing things without thinking, like the people in the story, who didn't know why they still did this every year. We think we're civilized but we don't even question doing terrible things to one another—in an everyday sort of way" (58). Ella's reaction to "The Lottery" mirrors her early feminist consciousness as she gradually becomes cognizant of the everyday acts of violence and cruelty that pervade the social fabric of American democracy and civilization. In becoming a thinking, reading being, Ella is confronted with new ideas that reverse the ideological tenets that previously governed her life. Despite her initial revulsion at reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which she initially dismisses along with her husband as nothing more than the autobiography of a "convict, dope peddler, [and] pimp" (105), she later encourages her husband to read it, asking him, "Are you afraid to find out the truth? . . . You can find out why he died, what he really was, why we didn't know the truth about him, why . . . we were told lies about him, that if we'd listened to him maybe there would be so much trouble now" (105).

With Harkan's guidance, Ella likewise makes the connection between Jackson's story and issues in American politics, comparing the death penalty to an equally cruel and arbitrary "lottery." Increasingly, Ella's political education exposes her to the hypocrisy at the heart of American claims to civilization, as the racism, sexism and imperialism that form the lie beneath the claims of American democracy and political hegemony are revealed. This broader political radicalization is spurred forward by her developing feminist consciousness, rooted in her dissatisfaction with and alienation from the promise of happiness in the suburban home and family. As she writes,

> I say that in the last couple of months I've changed my mind about a lot of things. But it really wasn't a change. It feels more like opening a door, the door of a closet where I'd hidden a lot of things that didn't seem to fit into my life, a closet stuffed so full that once I'd opened the door just a crack, I couldn't push it closed again, and things started tumbling out. At first I tried leaning against the door, but that was too tiring. So I started to relax, just letting it slowly open. If I had more nerve I might just swing the door open and let it all out.
>
> I guess I'm afraid that if I let that stuff out it'll make a mess of my nice, neat little house. But it's too late now. (77)

The closet is an apt metaphor for the repressed consciousness which has by necessity remained closed off to Ella in order for her to accept her role as wife and mother. In this sense it echoes the more ubiquitous use of the metaphor by the gay liberation movement to describe the repression of a heterosexist society which seeks to contain and hide gay identity and sexuality under a mantle of conformity. Ella's own experience of subjugation and self-negation within the family, once she is in the politically charged environment of the campus, provides the basis for her growing political consciousness. Once opened, this door can no longer be shut, and Ella's growing political radicalization cannot be contained with the "neat little house" that has kept her imprisoned for so long.

Central to Ella's changing political consciousness is her newfound recognition of the profound intersections between race and class woven into the fabric of American society and her own family's narrative. Indeed, while Ella and Joe have achieved some semblance of social standing in their suburb, the narratives of their families intertwine to provide a frank and open discussion of the multiple class, religious and racial biases that determine social relations. In discussing the conflict between her own family and Joe's, Ella writes, "I think Joe's family still thinks of us as Okies. But it's kind of funny because my parents look down on the Prices because they're Catholics. My parents really lost face when Kennedy was elected President. But Joe's family couldn't crow too much about a Catholic being President because he was a 'nigger lover.' I think they were all relieved when he was killed" (15). This growing awareness allows her to reinterpret her own life experiences, family background, and class status in light of the growing demands of the civil rights and black power movements. Ella talks about the class biases faced by her family, who were from Nebraska but were called "Okies" anyway. They were poor, but as her mother says, "we weren't white trash" (46). Instead, they bought into the American Dream and worked hard to gain social mobility, viewing education as the primary means of moving out of poverty and gaining class status—along with a successful marriage. Race becomes a crucial symbol of social status for her father; his aspirations for improved class status entail, in his mind, moving to an all-white neighborhood. As Ella writes,

> As soon as we could, we moved to a house that "wasn't so near niggertown," as my father always said. That was what they always wanted, to get away from "the niggers." My father isn't really a bigot. What he really meant, I think, was he wanted to get away from being poor and to him that meant getting away from the "niggers," away from the flatlands.
>
> And finally they made it and bought a house on the hill. The people who lived there (mostly Italians and Irish) called us Okies and were never very friendly. But we stayed there anyway. It was only about the time I married that the neighbors began to accept us. Then—last year, a Negro family bought the

> house next door. And my father is bitter now and keeps mumbling about not ever being able to get away from the niggers. It would never occur to him to compare that Negro family's move to the hill with our own. (48)

Ella's working-class family typifies the 'white flight' of the postwar period: the prolonged economic boom and increased urban sprawl, along with increased residential segregation and redlining, led to profoundly unequal access to the new suburban dream homes. For Ella's family, civil rights pose a threat to the meager "wages of whiteness"[3] that separate them from the bottom rung of American class society, in which poverty is associated with blackness.

Ella's family's narrative provides a concrete illustration of Du Bois's famous argument about the role of racism in dividing working-class whites from their black counterparts, in which he argued that racism "drove such a wedge between the white and Black workers that there probably are not today in the world two groups of workers with practically identical interests who hate and fear each other so deeply and persistently and who are kept so far apart that neither sees anything of common interest" (Dubois 700). Her family clings to the mythology of the work ethic and dreams of social mobility, even while systematically denying the existence of social oppression and the inherent class inequalities of a system in which racism functions as a convenient scapegoat for society's failure to deliver on its promise of equal opportunity. Ella at first echoes the racially biased myth of equal access; in one particularly virulent diatribe, she argues, "I'm sick of Negroes and Mexicans and this group and that group who are always yelling. They're not the only ones who suffer. If they only knew it, there are just two kinds of people in this world, the ones who howl and complain and the ones who suffer in silence. So why don't they keep still for a change" (Bryant, *EPJ* 32). Far from providing common experiences and interests that could form a political basis for examining the "suffering" of America's working poor, racism here provides Ella with a crucial marker for distinguishing between the noble and the complaining poor. Oppression here is belittled as simply a complaint, while those who suffer in silence (i.e., the white working poor) are the heroes for refusing to yell about their exploitation, channeling their energy into aspirations of improved class standing, and of course, scapegoating those who refuse to accept the logic that they themselves are to blame. Nonetheless, as Ella herself increasingly breaks her silence and refuses to keep still, she begins reconsidering her position. Indeed, later the same day, she feels ashamed of her diary and asks, "Does it mean I'm prejudiced? I don't think I really am" (34). She keeps these pages in her journal, rather than destroying them, to "remind me of how stupid I can be if my ego gets bruised" (34). As Ella questions her own biases, she scrutinizes her family's success narrative and gains a greater understanding of the role of racism in maintaining social and economic inequality in the midst of American postwar plenty.

Ella's experience at the community college likewise provides her with ample opportunity for interacting with its primarily poor, working-class, and people-of-color student body. This experience removes her from the all-white milieu of racially segregated suburbia and forces her to confront her own biases in an entirely new way, while providing her with an opportunity to share common ground with students of different races who share her sense of alienation and exclusion from elite upper-class social and cultural institutions. Ella's class background—in

[3] This phrase was originally coined by W.E.B. Du Bois in his classic *Black Reconstruction in America.* David Roediger in his 1998 book *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso Books) draws on this concept to discuss the social construction of race and particularly whiteness.

stark contrast to the primarily upper-middle-class white women of other feminist-housewife novels—thus provides Bryant with a different lens through which to frame the intersections of class and race on American campuses at the height of the Black Power movement.

Ella's breakthrough moment occurs when her class is assigned to go to a film and lecture at the university. Harkan berates them for not taking advantage of the events available to them through the nearby (and much more prestigious) four-year university. Ella describes the scene as follows:

> Everyone was quiet for a while. Then a Negro girl in the back row raised her hand. "I know why I don't go," she said. "Cause I don't feel right—I don't feel welcome; like, this isn't my place, it's for white people."
>
> "That kind of segregation ended before you were born."
>
> She shrugged. "I still feel…. Something. I don't know—a concern, a lecture, that's for white people. They let us in, but—well, I just don't feel right, not comfortable, like I do in a drive-in movie or something."
>
> "I know, I know." I was nodding and talking without even raising my hand. "It's not race. I feel the same way. It's as if you have to be born in it, like being part of a different world, where people talk about books and go to the ballet when they're young. That's what the division was to me when I was a child: the big line between the kids who went to the ballet and the ones who didn't. Only a few did—and they didn't associate with me."
>
> "You're talking about class," said Mr. H. . . .
>
> We started talking about class structure, about America never admitting we had different classes but having them just the same. But it was only me and the Negro girl and Mr. H talking." (61–62)

Class provides the common ground to break down racial barriers in this scene. This discussion reveals a shared understanding between Ella and Georgia which provides a starting point for interracial unity. As a result of this discussion, Ella gets to know Georgia, the "Negro girl" whom she had assumed was "tough, hostile and anti-white" (62). They go to the cafeteria together, where Ella notices its segregation for the first time. Georgia introduces her to black students on campus who are disillusioned with the education system in general and the community college they attend in particular. While education for Ella is radicalizing and provides a means for self-determination and self-realization, for many of the African-American students she encounters, it is profoundly alienating as the lie of equal opportunity it promises runs up against the barriers of racism that shape every aspect of their lives.

Despite this emphasis on understanding racism in the community college setting, Bryant expresses a deep ambivalence about the politics of the radical Black Power movement on campus; she seems to both sympathize with it and critique what she perceives as its anti-educational leanings. This latter view is reflected by Dan Harkan, who depicts the student movement as running counter to the emancipatory potential of education he espouses and falling into "easy slogans" that are ultimately limiting and even potentially self-destructive. Of Georgia, for example, Harkan says, "But I'm afraid we've lost her already . . . to thinking. To becoming a real student. The pressures on her are too great, the slogans too easy—and the reward, financial and otherwise, too clearly earmarked for racial blackmail" (66). Harkan's depiction reflects Bryant's own uneasy relationship with the movement. While Bryant clearly exposes the

alienation of black students within the college environment and the hypocrisy behind the lie of education as a level playing field, this characterization is problematic in its implication that in relying on "easy slogans," these students refrain from more profound political and intellectual analysis of the system and the racial inequalities it perpetuates. While sympathetic to the political roots of the Black Power movement, Bryant is clearly uncomfortable with its political implications and strategies, in part because it presents a challenge to the liberal ideology that imbues her work.

In later work, Bryant revisits some of these questions through an analysis and, ultimately, defense of William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner*. Although black intellectuals in the seventies condemned it (which will be discussed in more depth in the next chapter), Bryant gains new sympathy for Styron's book after her own work is attacked by the gay liberation movement—an experience that profoundly conservatizes her. In her treatise against "literary lynching," she characterizes Styron's critics as knee-jerk radicals who fail to read the text or grapple with its content. Her discussion of the development of the Black Power movement and her own experience on campuses in the seventies is particularly enlightening in clarifying the somewhat ambivalent and contradictory depiction of the movement in her earlier work. As Bryant writes of the period,

> During the five years Styron spent working on the book, the Black Power movement was born. The civil discussion between blacks and whites that had barely begun—like the long talks between Baldwin and Styron—was replaced by the purging of whites from civil rights groups, the cutting of alliances, and by confrontation alternating with seething self-segregation. (A minor example: in April 1968, at a community march of mourning for King in the town where I was teaching, there was a brief hitch when some angry young blacks protested that white people, like my children and me, should be barred from the march. Black monitors quickly cooled them off and we proceeded. Insignificant, except that such an incident would have been inconceivable five years before.) (Bryant, *Literary Lynching*, Chapter 6)

In reviewing her own relationship to the movement during this period through the lens of Styron's novel, Bryant writes:

> Well-intentioned white liberals, like me, who did read the novel, made the politically correct judgment that *Confessions* should be dismissed as a racist book. Knowing nothing whatever about the historical sources or the lack of them, I joined others who took the position that Styron had reduced a great revolutionary leader to a black man who wanted sex with white women, just another version of the stereotype of the black rapist despoiling pure white womanhood—the KKK myth justifying the lynching of black men.
>
> Looking back over thirty years and trying to remember how I felt, I think the real reason I condemned the book was my eagerness to placate my increasingly distant black colleagues and my increasingly volatile black students. I placated no one, of course, and as imitations of angry Black Power rhetoric erupted in sudden, irrelevant bursts, I made the retreat many white teachers and many older black teachers did—into silence. (Bryant, *Literary Lynching*, Chapter 6)

Bryant's revisitation of the period in this passage is particularly illuminating; it reflects the contradictory relationship of "well-intentioned white liberals" with the radical, revolutionary politics of the Black Power movement's struggle for self-determination. If Bryant is sympathetic to the roots of the movement, her constant depiction of its "inappropriate," "misdirected," "irrelevant," " imitations" of anger, which ultimately alienated white liberals and led "volatile" students along a pathway replete with "errors," is dismissive and patronizing at best. Bryant's easy reliance on stereotypes of angry, unthinking students caught up in a wave of outrage and hostility and thinking white liberal professors placating them in fear of being deemed racists reflects precisely the patronizing attitude that groups like the Black Panther Party sought to challenge. For Bryant, the early civil rights movement reflected the beginning of a civil discussion about race and civil rights that was derailed by the subsequent Black Power movement, whose revolutionary fervor undermined liberalism's commitment to civil dialogue, education, and nonviolent protest. That the Black Power movement erupted precisely from the failure of such strategies to fundamentally alter the political landscape of America's racial inequalities and stem the tide of racist violence against African-Americans is hardly mentioned. Instead, she depicts the Black Power movement as an attack on the rational thinking and progressive liberal ideology of well-intentioned professors like Bryant, who failed to "educate" her students against the errors of these politics.

Bryant's later, more explicit critique of the movement and her retreat from the radical political atmosphere of the sixties and seventies can be understood in the context of the collapse of these movements, a far more conservative political period, and the political attack by the left on her later work. *Ella Price's Journal* reflects the contradictory relationship between white liberalism and the radical black politics of the period. While Ella increasingly moves toward political activism and struggle, the novel's emphasis is primarily on internal revolutions—revolutions of the mind. Bryant demonstrates the material inequalities that prevent liberal ideology's commitment to education as the key to political and personal change and the fulfillment of one's potential. Nonetheless, for Bryant, it is only through education and the liberation of the mind that such structures can be changed. This dynamic is reflected in a conversation between Ella and Harkan in which the latter decries students' false hopes and expectations about education and the material limitations to their fulfillment, explaining:

> They all plan to transfer to a four-year college. Do you know how many do? Maybe fifteen percent. They're not going anywhere from here, but they get a chance to dream awhile, hang around for a year or so, getting used to the idea that they're going to spend the rest of their lives outside—outside the places where money is made and jobs fairly easy, or at least not totally dehumanizing.
>
> They come to me asking to learn how to read and write better so that they can get a place in the system. But there is no place for them. It was all decided, a long time ago, who was getting a place and who wasn't—not them, or they'd be in a four-year school to start with. I try to tell them the truth, tell them the way it is, but they don't want to hear it. . . . They are the staunchest supporters of all the lies that they're the victims of: that competition is great because it weeds out the unfit, that if everybody got an education they'd all have good jobs, that they're free, that if they could just learn grammar rules. . . . Oh, the poor bastards. . . . The only way these kids are going to come alive is to know the truth, to see where they are. And when they do see, the sign of their brains coming alive, the sign

> they're becoming educable . . . is that they'll tear the place down. . . . And, most likely, me with it. (98)

Education is both the problem and the solution in this passage. Harkan critiques the idea of education being the great equalizer despite material inequalities that systematically prevent the development of human potential or true human liberation. Nonetheless, the solution is to "see the truth" and to revolutionize one's mind. This is the logic behind his radical pedagogy—a logic that is frequently patronizing, privileging the teacher as purveyor of truth to the deluded masses and denying students' political and personal aspirations. Nonetheless, Harkan's focus on politics as a personal and intellectual journey also reflects the logic of the feminist consciousness-raising practices upon which the novel is built. The personal and intellectual journey—the consciousness-raising—is the novel's primary impetus. Ultimately, for Bryant, all struggles converge in a process of internal radicalization and political awakening, as with Ella Price.

If the Black Power movement occupies a somewhat contradictory place in Ella's political development, the war in Vietnam provides the linchpin for Ella's entry into the political movements of the period and her personal and political development. Her growing concern with the war puts her at odds with her family, who see her views as the product of brainwashing by communist professors and a diversion from her "first duty . . . to her family, not to get mixed up in other people's problems" (74–75). While she doesn't reply, she comes to the conclusion that "the war [is] everyone's problem" (75). When a protest against the Vietnam War becomes a focal point for campus political activity, Ella at first does not plan on going because she does not believe that protests "accomplish anything" (116). In trying to come up with a list of reasons to support her opinion, she ultimately discovers that her two main reasons are not political, but personal: she is "afraid," and, simply, "Joe" (118). In the lead-up to the march, the tension between Ella and Joe grows —albeit silently—as Ella becomes aware of the growing separation between her life at school and at home, and the difficulty of maintaining these separate spheres (12). Ella's decision to go or not to the protest takes on heightened symbolic importance as a choice between her previous life, tied to Joe and her family, and her new life at the college, in which her independent mind and newfound political consciousness take priority. To highlight the narrative significance of the protest and this decision, Bryant sets the protest around the time of Ella's thirty-fifth birthday. This is the longest diary entry of the novel and clearly a climactic moment in her development. She doesn't "know what to do or even why [she has] come" (124). Nonetheless, she is quickly caught up in the excitement, amazed at the numbers of people who turn out and the sense of closeness that their common political purpose produces. At first she just watches, unable to join in the march. But, after hearing counter protesters criticizing the marchers, she steps off the curb. Overcome by a feeling of "fear, a deep, cold, blast of panic chilling my insides," she internally debates her choice:

> What are you doing, you idiot? Now you've done it, stupid!
>
> Done what?
>
> Gotten out in the middle of the street to make a fool of yourself as publicly as possible. Why are you doing this?
>
> Because I'm against the war.
>
> Why?
>
> I'm not sure. I never even thought about it until a couple of months ago. I still don't know much about it. But I think it's wrong.

> And you're marching in the street because you tried everything else—letter to your congressman, et cetera—and none of it worked.
>
> No, I didn't try anything else.
>
> Nothing else?
>
> No.
>
> Never written a letter? Never worked to elect someone who'd change things? Never even licked a stamp?
>
> Never.
>
> Oh, those things weren't dramatic enough?
>
> No, it wasn't that, it was just that I never thought much about such things.
>
> Never thought. What makes you think you're thinking now? (129)

In stepping off the curb, Ella symbolically leaves behind the world of her home and familial duties to join a burgeoning political movement. She lets go of an old way of life in which life was decided by other people and chooses to identify herself as part of a collective political struggle. As the march progresses, she stops feeling afraid and conflicted. Suddenly,

> I felt calm and peaceful. And pure. Pure in the sense of being concentrated, free of distractions and anxieties. I felt right—not self-righteous, not smugly correct, not right while others are wrong; I don't mean that. Just right, like a piece of tile dropped into place, fitting its place in a design. And warm with closeness to the people walking beside me, not physical closeness, something more. Something I had missed all my life without knowing it existed. (130)

The "closeness" Ella feels amidst collective political struggle and action stands in stark contrast to the alienation and self-negation that have characterized her family life. It is through political, rather than personal, relationships that Ella first feels the sense of peace and belonging that has eluded her throughout her life. Ella's experience on the march also forces her to confront the role of law enforcement and state-sanctioned violence through her direct experience in struggle, challenging previous held beliefs about American democratic political institutions. As she watches the police use force to prevent marchers from crossing the Oakland line, then later stand by and watch as hecklers attack the crowd, she gains new insight into the use of power structures to prevent the peaceful expression of political dissent. Participating in the march is not only Ella's first foray into political action and the externalization of her internal political awakening, but a crucial turning point in her relationship with Joe and her family. It is the first time she lies to her husband, waiting until he goes to sleep to secretly write about her experience in her journal. She writes in the first entry of the fourth notebook, as a new Ella is born:

> And now the reaction has set in, like a hangover. The peace march did something to me, changed me. I'm not the same person anymore. Why?
>
> It was an act, not a thought, not an idea safely written down in a notebook and tucked away in the drawer. An act. Now I begin to understand the importance of moving the body, walking from here to there or even just standing—maybe that's why we call taking a position "standing for something." (139)

Protesting the Vietnam War is Ella's starting point for turning political thought into action. It marks her entry into the world of political activism; now radicalization steps beyond the safe confines of her notebooks and exits the bounds of the domestic sphere.

The war in Vietnam, Horn argues, is crucial to the text not only in terms of locating Ella within the political landscape of the sixties and seventies but also as a catalyst for what is a political—and yet primarily personal—transformation. Horn argues that "Ella neither theorizes about politics nor debates controversial subjects in her personal journal, and, indeed, we do not know her arguments against United States involvement in Southeast Asia. . . . Her halting steps toward connection and community are, however, privately productive. In her case, the personal may be political, but, more importantly, the political is personal" (Horn 253). Horn downplays Ella's political development throughout the novel, ignoring, for example, her attempt to use her journal to politically justify her opinions on the validity and efficacy of political protests, as well as other moments in which Ella reflects on "politics" and "controversial subjects." Nonetheless, Horn makes an important point in highlighting Bryant's tendency to evoke broader political debates in Ella's journal primarily as a means of underscoring her personal transformation. The political is indeed personal for Ella; it is always a lens through which she can reinterpret the world and, most importantly, her own life to forge a new self. Horn underestimates Ella's growing political consciousness, in part because her political awakening is crucially located at the juncture between her personal crisis, which drives her to change internally, forging a new life story, and the broader political crisis that compels an entire generation to struggle for social and political change on a national level.

The Psychology of Ella Price (A Cautionary Tale)

Ella's quest for selfhood is primarily an internal journey, through which the liberation of the mind is the precondition for personal, social and political transformation. Like the heroines of Plath's and Lessing's novels, passing through madness is a necessity on the road to selfhood for the female heroine. Likewise, Bryant's novel makes clear that madness is not a personal but a social problem, rooted in the profound social and political inequalities of a system that depends on women's subjugation and abnegation of selfhood. Ella, like her counterparts in other feminist novels, suffers from the "housewife's disease," the "problem with no name" that plagues women who attempt to conform to the normative roles expected of them. It is not a personal but a political problem. Johnson points out that "these women have been driven mad not by men, but by the social principles of the patriarchy, so familiar as to be almost invisible" (Johnson, "Housewives and Prom Queens"). As such, Ella's development of a feminist consciousness throughout the novel requires the ability to make these social principles visible, to show the social and political roots of her personal "madness," and thus to reject the world that maintains her subjugation and the unhappiness it breeds.

At the beginning of the novel, Ella's deep unhappiness and dissatisfaction are framed as a personal problem that keeps her dependent on her husband for stability and mired in guilt. Her husband's simple needs and general satisfaction stand in stark contrast to her own agitation; his efforts to calm her exacerbate her sense that "I really am crazy or something and he's gone on for years and years humoring me" (Bryant, *EPJ* 39). Like Plath's Esther, Bryant's Ella is extremely conscious of her own failure to conform to conventional gendered roles and to display the requisite happy disposition expected of desirable women in their pursuit of marriage. Her marriage to Joe is an attempt to conform to these roles and to adopt the cheerful simplicity that he represents. As she notes, "Among the people I grew up with I was considered a freak, because I was "too serious" and read books and "brooded." I thought they were right, that something was wrong with me. By their standards I was sick and Joe was healthy—always cheerful, happy, unthinking. Well adjusted" (162). Nonetheless, in marrying Joe, Ella does not achieve the

unthinking, well-adjusted selfhood he embodies, but rather defines herself in contrast to it. She is confined to a dependent relationship in which she is inevitably deemed mad. As she argues,

> Suicide is a thing you can't talk to your husband about because he would take it as a criticism of him. Maybe it doesn't have anything to do with him. But he'd see it as either an accusation that he'd failed to make you happy or just see another sign of your craziness, and you'd be so busy reassuring him you'd never get back to the subject. (39)

Within the confines of the family, Ella's failure to achieve the idealized image of the happy wife and mother is always defined as a personal failure. This sentiment reflects the unrealistic and unattainable expectations of the fifties ideal of marriage, in which failure is "seen as a failure of individuals rather than of marriage" (Coontz 235).

Ella's decision to return to school—a decision itself born out of her dissatisfaction with life as a wife and mother—propels her into a new world that forces her to reexamine her own happiness or lack thereof in a new political light. Her experience in college teaches her that she is not alone. As she says of the younger students she meets, "They ought to be happy—I ought to be happy. 'Ought to be' doesn't mean anything. Maybe I'm not crazy, or all these kids are crazy in the same way I am—all of us sharing the same craziness" (Bryant, *EPJ* 35). Ella's experience in college increasingly encourages her to perceive her own unhappiness and "madness" as a collective or social problem rather than a personal one. The collective madness that she begins to identify in the passage above is nothing less than the madness inherent in the fifties "American dream." This "shared craziness" is the experience of those for whom this dream does not represent the absolute pinnacle of happiness, but rather an empty promise devoid of meaning or fulfillment. As Ella slowly breaks from Joe's world, she increasingly questions what "ought" to make her happy, fulfilled, and "sane."

Dan Harkan plays a crucial role in Ella's growing awareness of madness as a political or social problem rather than simply a personal failure. As the radical New Left teacher, Harkan is also implicitly associated with Laingian theories of madness, telling his students, "Any truly human person is driven half insane by the kind of world we live in" (38). While Ella at first rejects this idea, it clearly resonates with her own experience as she begins to question the roots of her own fears, depression, and lack of fulfillment. As hard as she tries to find contentment in her suburban home, her subconscious rebels. Madness and depression become her only means to express her deep dissatisfaction. She describes the real nightmare behind the dream of the suburban nuclear family, asking: "Why don't more people commit suicide? Although I have a nice home and husband and child and all that, I often think of killing myself. All of a sudden, with friends or in the middle of a party, when someone has told a joke and everyone is laughing, a voice inside me might say, 'Why don't you cut your wrists tonight?'" (Bryant *EPJ* 39) Ella's suicidal thoughts are chilling reminders of the violence and symbolic death of self that prop up the image of the happy housewife. This is further elaborated in a dream she describes in which she is under something and feels and hears footsteps above her, heavy boots trampling over her. As the boots grow larger and larger, she writes, "I never know exactly what it is that I'm afraid of—that the boots will come through the thick covering and trample me? There's the feeling of suffocation. . . . What is the covering over me? Blankets? No. Earth. Soft earth. I'm underground with feet walking over me. But I'm not dead. I'm buried alive" (41). The symbolism in this passage fits the housewives for whom conforming to social expectations has meant death for any creativity, self-awareness, subjectivity, or political agency. Ella's home is a coffin in which she is suffocated and buried alive.

While college provides Ella with an escape from feeling buried alive in her home, she begins having doubts once again after the end of her affair with Dan Harkan. His departure from her life and the departure of the text as the crucial motor of her personal, intellectual, political, and literary growth leave a vacuum that is not immediately filled. Falling once again into a state of depression, she returns to her psychiatrist, Dr. Redford, who far from being a solution for Ella's dilemma, is very much part of the problem. Like the psychiatrists in many feminist novels, from Plath to Lessing to Jong, Redford represents the sexism and misogyny prevalent in much of the medical establishment, which appear at their most extreme in Freudian psychoanalysis, where "anatomy is destiny" and the solution for unhappy women is reconnecting to their femininity. Unable to understand Ella's frustrations with the gendered role expected of her, he encourages her to see any deviation from such a role as the source of her problem rather than a potential to escape her subjugation. The recurrence of patriarchal, misogynist psychiatrists in feminist fiction is a crucial commentary on the profession's failure to understand the roots of social oppression—and, indeed, the way that psychiatry perpetuates oppression by labeling all failure to conform as personal failure, madness, and disease that can be diagnosed, treated, and cured to preserve the sanctity of the American family. As Johnson argues, "In a confessional novel, the heroine's psychiatrist, if she has one, leads her kindly but firmly back to the status quo values and redemption. But it's these very values that have driven the housewife-heroine crazy in the first place. And so the psychiatrists are a deplorable lot" (Johnson, "Housewives and Prom Queens").

Laura Wilkens, Ella's feminist friend, likewise provides a harsh condemnation of the profession, saying,

> Parasites, that's what they are—the psychiatrists, family counselors, all of them—trotting out their little labels and clichés: "increase communication with your children" and all that. Let me tell you something. If there's something wrong with you and you go to a psychiatrist, he'll say, Let's find out what's wrong with you. But if there's something wrong with your children and you go to a psychiatrist, he'll still ask, What's wrong with *you?* (Bryant, *EPJ* 141).

In Laura's case, as noted, the very fact that her son was sent to a psychiatrist for being gay is a testament to the inherent biases of the profession, which classified homosexuality as a disease until 1974, when it changed the definition in response pressure from the growing gay liberation movement. If Laura aptly describes the way in which psychiatry functions as a means of diverting social problems through a rhetoric of blaming the personal failures of mothers for any failure of the family, the very fact that her son was deemed in need of psychological help at all is a testament to the use of psychiatry to define deviance from the family as a personal disease, thus policing those who fail to conform and upholding the primacy of the nuclear family as the arbiter of social welfare and mental health.

Despite Laura's warnings, Ella does reenter psychoanalysis, with terrifying results. Through discussions with Dr. Redford about being "frigid" and her "baby dream," she too learns to blame her mother for her personal failures as a wife and mother, saying, "It's amazing the things you can remember about childhood, things buried so deep. I'm beginning to understand so many things about myself, my overseriousness, guilt about sex, my undeveloped maternal feelings. It all goes back to my mother" (180). She concludes, with Redford's unfortunate guidance, that her 'baby dream' is in fact a "manifestation of the stifled feminine part of me, resulting from my mother's indoctrination" (182). Eventually, Redford's Freudian misogyny is made even more explicit to the reader as he "says to some degree every woman has the same

problem, recapturing the feminine side of her nature, which is left undeveloped because of our society's emphasis on the male. I've always know I wasn't much of a woman, hated being one. Never knew how much it poisoned my whole life" (182). Unfortunately, while the reader is made painfully aware of the detrimental impact of Redford's brand of therapy on Ella's incipient selfhood and feminist consciousness, she falls under his spell. Ella's relapse into the feminine mystique under Redford's influence is marked in the narrative by shorter journal entries with less frequency. The gaps between her writing grow longer (as much as two months between entries) symbolically mark her distance from the process of self-reflection and consciousness-raising to which the diary has given voice. As she writes less and less, she is likewise overcome by perpetual tiredness as she drops out of school and works to pay for her therapy. Without school, her relationship with Laura suffers; Ella no longer has anything to say to her. The complete absence of reading and any personal development in Ella's life leads her to turn to Dr. Redford's suggestions despite what is an apparent state of depression, exhaustion, and dissatisfaction with a world defined by meaningless work at her temp job and a stultifying life with her daughter and husband at home. Writing, which once awakened and enlivened her, now depresses her; she thinks, "I should get rid of it. Too much introspection. Dr. Redford is enough" (183).

Dr. Redford's final victory over Ella's politically awakened self occurs when she joyfully greets her newly discovered pregnancy as a means of fulfilling her role of wife and mother and overcoming the failure of her first attempt at true Freudian femininity. Despite her previous ambivalent feelings about motherhood, she declares:

> Of course, I'm very happy. It's the fulfillment of my recurring dream. A second chance to be a good wife and mother. Last Tuesday was my final session with Dr. Redford, and I quit my job.
>
> And now there's no need to be writing.
>
> In ending this, I remove the last obstacle between Joe and me.
>
> THE END

Thus ends the fourth notebook. Ella's finality in the passage above appears in stark contrast to the open-ended sentence at the end of the novel. The fourth notebook belongs to Dr. Redford and concludes with the death of Ella's writing and thinking self; it marks the triumph of Freudian visions of femininity over the politicized self, as Ella renounces the journal in favor of pregnancy. But, of course, it is not the end.

The very next day, a new notebook begins with an entirely different tone, as the Ella who has been buried alive under the foundations of her suburban household and the blueprints of Freudian femininity reemerges with a vengeance, refusing the symbolic death Redford's therapy has encouraged her to accept. The new notebook begins with a profound reassertion of the self and a negation of all that Redford stands for. Ella writes:

> I can't
> I CAN'T
> I CAN'T
>
> What's wrong with me? I just want to write that over and over again. I want to scream it.

NO

NO

I'm going to die. I'm terrified that I'm going to die and I know what death is, I know what hell is. I know that after I die I'll go to hell and be tortured. And my torture will be this—to go on just as I am, where I am, how I am. (Bryant 187).

The intense negation of Redford's vision of Ella's life and self is marked by an equally intense and almost primal negation of her previous state of false contentment and serenity. The terror and fear that well up in her in response to this certain death of the self requires her to accept crisis, madness, and psychic breakdown; Ella must reject the sanity on offer by Redford's version of psychiatry. She embraces her "madness," recognizing in it the power to liberate her imprisoned self from the structures that confine her life. Like Anna Wulf, Ella must travel through the region of psychic breakdown and embrace her madness so as to achieve wholeness and create a new self. The repressed part of her consciousness, the part of Ella that refuses to be confined to a life as a wife and mother, can no longer be repressed.

At the same time, the world of Freudian psychiatry to which Redford introduces Ella makes a complete breakdown a threat, encompassing the possibility of confinement in a mental institution where, as with Esther Greenwood's early experiences with such institutions, Ella may never reemerge as a whole, thinking, writing person. Writing becomes the key to Ella's survival, allowing her to embrace and take strength from the madness, bursting out of the repression built by Redford, Joe and all the arbiters of social convention. She learns to harness her madness for positive change and to create a new self and consciousness—and, ultimately, a new narrative that begins with the un-final open sentence of the text's ending.

As Ella breaks out of the bonds of repression, she has a new "baby dream"—and this one has a twist. In the new dream, she has gone through labor only to be told afterwards that there was no baby. Instead, "it was a sickness, a growth," a symbolic physical embodiment of the madness growing within her, seeking expression. But Ella is aware that she is being lied to. She imagines that Joe and the Doctor Redford are complicit, lying to her because, first, the child is a girl, and second, they are going to kill the baby. In this second dream, Ella's symbolic pregnancy is clearly associated with an attempt to give life to the repressed female creative self within her. She is thwarted in her endeavor by both the doctor and Joe—who in real life insist that giving birth to a second child would allow her to reclaim her lost femininity and find her identity within the home. As in the final scene of the novel, Ella's rebirth is at odds with the birth of an actual child. Her labor is figurative, symbolic of the rebirth of her creative self, of a political and feminist consciousness, and of her own subjectivity. Questioning herself about her dream, Ella asks,

Why am I so terrified that I'm going to lose this baby? I guess it's because I don't want it so much.

Funny.

I meant to write, It's because I want it so much.

I don't want it so much.

I don't want it.

I don't want to have a baby.

I DON'T WANT TO HAVE A BABY!

> The great solution to everything. Get pregnant. Then you don't have to think about anything anymore. You're trapped. Happy trappy. I've seen other women do it so many times. Why didn't I see what I was doing? (Price *EPJ* 190)

As this discovery shows, writing provides Ella with a therapeutic process far superior to Dr. Redford's.

To discover this new self, Ella must free herself from Redford's grip. Passing through madness and nurturing it provides her with a basis to reject his world and be born anew. If Ella's new self is a "sickness, a growth" to the doctors, it is only by embracing this side of herself that she can once again be made whole. This crisis sparked by her pregnancy is the beginning of her recovery, as she rejects the ideology symbolized by Dr. Redford and rediscovers her own desires, needs, and self— a process, notably, that occurs through writing. In a world that is cracking up (as Lessing would have it), only through a Laingian crisis and breakdown can Ella reshape herself anew and return to wholeness. The diary form provides a lens through which Ella can express both her conscious and unconscious desires, piecing together the fragments of her life and allowing her to create a new narrative. Ella's breakdown culminates in a "breakthrough"— her recognition that she does *not* want a baby and, indeed, wants an abortion. This final decision marks the return to sanity and wholeness for Ella Price, despite her doctor's opposition. His refusal to support her decision and aid her in obtaining an abortion prompts her thorough rejection of Freudian psychoanalysis and of the power he wields over her. Where Dr. Redford fails, the feminist movement steps in to provide Ella with the consciousness she desires and the material support she needs.

If, indeed, "all the housewives" are, like Ella, "mad," it is a madness born from oppression, nurtured by alienation within the consumer culture of suburbia, and exacerbated by the medical profession's dedication to upholding oppressive notions of femininity. To free herself from the trap and find her true self, writing, for Ella is the key. Writing allows Ella to create a new narrative for her life, one in which her own liberation is the underlying theme and the ultimate narrative goal.

Writing to Change One's Life: True Tales and the Problem with Form

Writing is central to Ella's political radicalization and feminist consciousness. As such, *Ella Price's Journal* is one of many feminist works, including Plath's *Bell Jar* and Lessing's *Golden Notebook*, that engage in metafiction. The role of the writer and the writing process itself become thematized throughout the work and figure as the crucial vehicle for the political radicalization of the protagonist. Like Lessing, Bryant chooses to use the notebook/journal form to provide a sense of immediacy to the writing and give the reader a lens into the private world of the protagonist. Indeed, as discussed in previous chapters, the first-person fictional narrative was a convention of choice for feminist writers, providing a literary glimpse into the politics of their narrators' personal worlds occupied and a means of making their "personal" dramas public. The diary fiction form is particularly powerful in its ability to make the personal public; as Bernard Duyfhuizen notes, "diaries evoke an immediacy that neither autobiographies nor first-person memoir-novels can approach" (Duyfhuizen 171). Bryant's use of the journal as a means of story telling differs from a traditional diary, as Ella's writing begins as an assignment for class with a clear focus and audience. Nonetheless, as the narrative progresses, and Ella continues writing not on assignment but of her own volition, it becomes increasingly diary-like. Without

Harkan's omnipresent readership, Ella's journal increasingly becomes the private repository for her innermost thoughts and feelings.

Whereas Lessing's use of the diary genre is an attempt to revolutionize form, juxtaposing the five notebooks of Anna Wulf's fragmented selves with the conventional novel *Free Women*, Ella's journal draws on older traditions of diary writing to provide a far more teleological narrative structure. Her five notebooks trace Ella's development from captivity within the domestic sphere to her emergence as a literate, writerly, and feminist subject by the end of the novel. Whereas Lessing draws on the genre to problematize its claim to truth and demonstrate the limits of conventional fiction and artistic forms, Bryant uses it precisely to provide a veneer of "truth" to the fictional experiences of her protagonist. Ella herself comments on the divergence of her own journal and Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*: "It's written as a journal, just like mine, but what a difference!" (Bryant, *EPJ* 88). Bryant's self-reflexive comment places her work in a similar feminist tradition, as does her notable decision to mirror Lessing through constructing the novel in five notebooks. Yet she clearly distances herself from her literary predecessor by choosing a form that rejects Anna Wulf's fragmentation, instead constructing a narrative of progress.

While Lessing's novel was born out of the crisis of the left, Bryant's novel is possible only in the midst of a new political movement that inspires new possibilities for female protagonists and writers. Nonetheless, both Lessing's and Bryant's uses of the genre draw on a long literary tradition for new political purposes. As Duyfhuizen notes about the genre:

> Diary novels have been traditionally seen as descendants of both real diary writing and the epistolary novel, particularly single-writer epistolary fictions. Both forms employ the immediacy of writing within the midst of the experience while the future is always somewhat uncertain, and they are also highly aware of the writing act and its place in constituting the text. (Duyfhuizen 172)

For the consciousness-raising feminist novels of the 1970s, the diary form was an ideal vehicle through which to enact and narrativize a protagonist's political awakening. If social realism and first-person fictional narratives are the ideal forms through which to make women's oppression in the private sphere public and to enact the slogan that "the personal is political," diary novels provide an added sense of immediacy. Unlike in other first-person fictional narratives, the protagonist is denied the benefit of hindsight; the reader gains a voyeuristic entry into the consciousness-raising process, watching her political awakening unfold. The "democratic nature of the form" likewise provides a cathartic sense of identification for the reader—the implication being that the protagonist could be any woman capable of putting pen to paper. As Horn argues, Bryant's novel reflects the concerns of its readers and "in a form they themselves would like to use, if they do not already—the personal notebook" (Horn 250). Nonetheless, as Duyfhuizen argues, diary narratives constantly blur the boundaries between truth and fiction. Their formal claim to truth is constantly threatened by the author's literary construction of a life narrative whose veracity cannot be verified—a boundary that is blurred more profoundly in fictional diaries, where the "true tale" promised by the diary form is always a fictional construct:

> Whenever we come upon a diary—actual or fictional, published or unpublished—we tend to fashion a double response. First there is the feeling of the voyeur, peeping around pages as if they were curtains, searching out the secret thoughts and life recorded on the private page. But then comes the troubling response; suppose this text is contrived, the writer lying to the reader, writing a life as one

> would like it rather than as it is. With admitted fictional diaries this doubleness is compounded by our ideas of narrative logic and by an intolerance for the most mimetic of diary entries. . . . It is not in spite of but rather because of these problematics that diaries are so intriguing; moreover, the diary, like the confidential letter of pre-telephone culture, is a species of writing that is open to anyone literate. . . . Yet despite the democratic nature of the form, few actual diaries are published, and fictional diaries are more generally categorized as novels or short stories before they are sub-categorized according to the formal traits. (Duyfhuizen 171)

Nonetheless, in depicting the protagonist in the process of writing her own life, Abbot argues there is a "unique advantage of fiction in the diary mode," as it has the "capacity to expose [the] ordinarily unnoticed reflexive action by giving the writing itself a role in the plot" (cited in Duyfhuizen 174). It is this modern concern with reflexivity and language, along with the advent of psychoanalysis, that saves the form, according to Duyfhuizen—despite the twentieth century's move away from formal realism. While he looks at the formal experimentation of writers such as Doris Lessing in *The Golden Notebook,* he gives less attention to the political impetus behind this choice of form, and devotes no time to its popularization in the context of the women's liberation movement. The "democratic nature of the form" had a broad appeal for women writers in the 1960s because it reflected a broader attempt to democratize literature and to politically generalize from the personal experiences of individual women. For writers of feminism's second wave, the genre is popular not in spite of but *because* of its realism, along with the inherent reflexivity that makes it ideal as a form for the consciousness-raising novel. It provides an important variation on the first-person realism that dominates early feminist fiction. The form is particularly suited to second-wave feminist fiction because it provides space to reflect on the specific role of the woman writer in a world that relegates her to the sphere of the "personal" and excludes her from the literary canon. As a form in which the "personal" is at its height, the text records the imagined narrator's most private and personal thoughts and inner life—without, we are meant to imagine, an audience to censor her thoughts. It thus provides an imaginative vehicle through which the consciousness-raising process can be enacted and made public to an audience that is implicitly invited to join in and identify with the protagonist's plight and political awakening and to generalize from the reading experience. If identity is the basis for political engagement in second-wave feminism, the diary's claim to authenticity and truth provides a fictional form through which these personal politics, these politics of identity, can be expressed. In this regard, Bryant's choice of the form of the form for her feminist narrative resonates with the wider movement and demonstrates a clear engagement with the personal and political goals of consciousness-raising.

Like other diary, journal or epistolary novels that chart not only the character's growth but her growing acquisition of literacy—for example, later works such as Walker's *The Color Purple* and Sapphire's *Push*—the novel places the protagonist's growth as a reader and a writer at the center of the plot, as the protagonist's language and style evolve throughout the narrative in conjunction with her growing political consciousness. While Anna Wulf begins her notebooks as a writer—an acclaimed one, at that—Ella Price most certainly does not. Nor does Price's journal (or Bryant's novel) engage with the literary revolutions that define Lessing's work. Indeed, Bryant's novel has been critiqued as didactic, banal, and lacking in literary distinction. When Harkan peppers her early notebook entries with the comment "cliché," Ella's complaint in response could well be a response to Bryant's critics: "I'm getting sick of seeing 'cliché' written

in the margin. I'm sorry I've got such a trite little mind that you're not entertained by the way I say things. I'm just an aging Barbie doll, you know" (Bryant, *EPJ* 33).

If Bryant's goal is to capture Ella's voice, it is hard to imagine how she could do so while also writing a work of "literary distinction" that is believable. Ella Price is far removed from Esther Greenwood or Anna Wulf. Ella Price begins the novel as an "aging Barbie doll," a suburban housewife of working-class origin, and her literary, political, and personal development throughout the novel occur in the context of a community college far removed from the elite worlds of Anna's London or Esther's New York. Nonetheless, her development throughout the novel shows the emergence of a thinking and writing subject. As Gelfant argues,

> In comparison with great novels—a comparison forced upon the reader by its references—*Ella Price's Journal* lacks *literary* distinction: its didacticism seems banal, its colloquial language flat, and its characters one-dimensional figures in an allegory that Ella describes as her life. Moreover—if more can be said in criticism without devastating a novel I consider interesting and instructive—Ella remains a naïve reader, unquestioning because she desperately needs the answers she finds. . . . In *Ella Price's Journal*, as in other novels, the heroine not only avoids this fate: she achieves a positive goal. She becomes articulate. She expresses what she feels and she feels herself becoming an integrated whole person. For a woman who could not locate herself, this is not a negligible accomplishment (Gelfant 30).

In this sense, the novel's "lack of literary distinction" and reliance on colloquial language are precisely what constitute its strength. Ella is not an extraordinary character—and yet she is a character with whom the women readers of *Redbook* can readily identify, whether or not they have attended Ivy League universities or won academic achievements or literary acclaim. Ella's failures make her seem very real. While other novels highlight the subjugation and oppression of truly exceptional women, *Ella Price's Journal* demonstrates the far-reaching impact of such subjugation and oppression in the lives of millions of women for whom change was nonetheless possible. As a writer, Ella argues for writing as a process of self-discovery and self-actualization in a way that is accessible to all readers, regardless of their education or literary credentials. As such, *Ella Price's Journal* is perhaps not the most "literary" or innovative work of literature, but its form encourages readers to engage with the work's unswerving commitment to represent the truth of one woman for whom writing is the avenue for personal and political awakening. Thus the form implicitly responds to its critics, reminding us constantly that this is not Bryant's novel: it is Ella Price's journal.

While Ella's diary provides a glimpse into the personal, it is also framed explicitly as a writer's journal, begun under duress with Harkan's audience of one and grading power haunting the first of the five notebooks. The early journals are structured around mandatory assignments; Ella resists writing for herself or expressing any true feeling or thought beyond the public persona she has been trained to inhabit as a suburban housewife. To emphasize its claim to realism and authenticity, the novel begins with Harkan's assignment to the writing class, including instructions which urge Ella not to "worry too much about grammar and spelling but about clarity and honesty" (Bryant, *EPJ* 11). Included in the list of "suggestions for people who need priming" (which at first most certainly describes Ella) are classic writing-class assignments, ranging from an "honest reaction to something that happened in class" to reactions to reading or quotations, new vocabulary, and writing topics such as "a problem you are struggling with" or "a mistake or failure from which you learned something." The list concludes, "When all else fails, a bit of your autobiography" (11–12). The banality of these generic assignments throw into relief

Ella's eventual transformation of the journal into a genuine process of self-discovery, self-creation, and self-emancipation.

Likewise, Ella's initial hostility to writing the journal heightens the work's sense of authenticity, as she questions the validity of the assignment, the relevance of personal experience to academic progress, and the possibility of writing "the personal" in a journal that is both private and in a sense public (through Harkan's omniscient presence in the text). Toward the beginning of the notebook, she writes:

> I kept a diary once. . . . I did it because I wanted to, not because it was required by a professor. And it was secret, nobody read it, not even my best friend, let alone a complete stranger. I don't understand how you're going to grade this. And I don't see what good it will do if we don't pay too much attention to grammar and spelling. You said not to worry. That's easy to say. (12)

Ella initially struggles with the assignment, unwilling to see anything unique or interesting in the banality of her daily life as a suburban housewife. She writes,

> I've been looking at this page for half an hour. I can't think what to write except what I wrote yesterday or the day before. I'm an average person with a nice home, a good husband and a lovely daughter. I lead an average life. I don't see how writing down the things I do every day will help me learn English. I need grammar. (18)

Ella's early reticence corresponds with her unwillingness to relinquish her aspirations to domesticity and the feminine mystique. Simultaneously, it reflects a view of education as a skill-based project rather than a process of personal and intellectual development. This hostility to writing creates a tension in the early part of the novel that highlights the way in which the oppression and subjugation of women in the home is an obstacle to her development as a writer. For a woman who insists that her life is uninteresting and for whom questioning the underpinnings of her suburban life threatens to destroy the life she has known, embarking on the writer's journey through Harkan's journal is a veritable minefield. She treads it gingerly and reluctantly. This tension between the goals of the journal and Ella's hostility to the personal examination and writing it demands provides the narrative with a sense of veracity while at the same time appealing to student readers who may have responded similarly to the ubiquitous writing journals of introductory college writing-composition courses.

When Harkan accuses her of being "covert" and "timid" in her writing, Ella's reaction is defensive:

> I don't have anything to hide, or did you want us to write the intimate details of our lives? Like the bedroom scenes in that novel?
>
> Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I don't live like that and I don't know anyone who does. My life is clean and respectable—what you call middle-class with such a sneer—and I'm not ashamed of it. (Bryant 20)

In defending her "clean and respectable" suburban life, Ella rejects the notion that the intimate private spaces of the home and, particularly, the bedroom are appropriate subjects for writing or literature. As a public space, writing for Ella must steer clear of the private realm; she focuses instead on skills such as grammar that could serve her in the public realm. In this she anticipates critics of feminist literature and rejects the feminist insistence on making public the private lives

of women both in and out of the bedroom. She echoes Lessing's paradoxical insistence that women should "shut up about sexual liberation" and resists Harkan's exhortations to use the journal as a space for exploring the intimate details of her life and her inner thoughts and feelings. Nonetheless, despite her battle with Harkan, by the end of the first notebook, Ella has been transformed by the writing process. She tells him, "I was wrong. . . . I think I've learned a lot. Just writing in the journal has almost changed my life" (55). Indeed, by the second notebook, Ella is no longer writing for Harkan but for herself; her journal has become a crucial part of her life, a "room of her own" through which she can analyze and refashion her life and self. In making the personal public, Ella enacts the consciousness-raising process and forges a new feminist self out of the ashes of the middle-class values and feminine mystique she ultimately rejects. If writing transforms Ella's life, Bryant suggests, writing is indeed a political and a feminist act.

In embracing her new life as a writer, Ella transforms herself as a reader, seeking a political understanding of the role of writing in developing consciousness and creating a political link between author and reader. She seeks models for the process of writing as an act of resistance in the works she reads throughout the novel. Shortly after her revelation that writing has transformed her life, she likewise argues,

> I think I'm beginning to enjoy reading now more than I ever have, because sometimes I find a saying that is something I've always felt but didn't know I felt it until I read it. . . . Is that the difference between a good writer and a bad one?—good writers say your deepest thoughts for you? Are braver and don't hold anything back? (43)

In reframing Ella's understanding of reading as a process through which she can understand her own thoughts and feelings, Bryant, in essence, defines the goals of feminist consciousness-raising literature and redefines notions of literary merit. In this sense, Bryant anticipates her own critics, for whom the literary qualities of her work might be in doubt, by reframing the role of literature as a space for personal and political identification and transformation.

For Bryant, literary value must be judged on new standards that reflect the political goals of the feminist movement. Form is crucial to the political goals of Bryant's writing in that it increases the authenticity and veracity of the work and thus enables greater identification between reader, narrator, and author. Nonetheless, content is likewise crucial; the capacity to promote mutual identification and express the generalized oppression, longings, and feelings of its audience create the power of literature for Ella. Good writing is thus defined not by standards set forth by the academy or the literary elite, but rather by its capacity to express the feelings and thoughts of the ordinary Ellas of the world—and in so doing, raise consciousness and pave the road to their liberation.

In this context, the problem of endings becomes even more crucial for Bryant and for the project of feminist fiction as a whole. As Bryant argues through Ella's reaction to reading in her journal, feminist literature must avoid both trite happy endings that plaster a smile on female subjugation and the despair of rebellion's failure through the death or defeat of the feminist heroine. For Bryant, literature has a responsibility to provide a realistic ending that validates the protagonist's feminist rebellion by providing a model for resistance—or at least imagining the possibility of true liberation. It is not enough for Ella, or Bryant, for literature to provide solely an indictment of society, if such indictments necessitate the defeat of the protagonist. Literature must not "teach despair" but should also indicate a pathway to liberation and provide a model for resistance. Thus Bryant faces a conundrum in constructing her own ending to Ella Price's tale.

On the one hand, Ella's political awakening occurs against a backdrop of women's subjugation and oppression that cannot be solved individually; on the other hand, her own rebellion must not be in vain if she is to provide a model of resistance for female readers. As a result, Bryant avoids a firm "ending" altogether, choosing instead to end with an unfinished sentence which suggests that Ella's political awakening and newfound independence and subjectivity are a beginning to a yet-unfinished narrative that proceeds beyond the bounds of the printed book's pages. Similarly, Jong's Isadora avoids a 19th century ending, certain that she would "survive" and "go on working" but uncertain of her future beyond these assertions and her "refus[al] to kill herself"(Showalter *A Jury* 445). Likewise, after a failed suicide attempt and the death of her mother, Ginny, the protagonist of Alther's *Kinflicks* takes off with "her mother's clock in her faded Sisterhood is Powerful T-shirt (…) to go where she had no idea" (Alther 503). If the personal is political, these political revolutions in the sphere of the personal do not, on their own, translate into mass political transformation that could provide a space for the new feminist consciousness to thrive. Thus this move away from marriage marks the potential of the early feminist movement, but that potential is not yet fully realized.

Ella Price's Journal reflects the limits of what Hogeland calls "soft consciousness-raising." From the beginning, there were conflicts between those who favored the "personal, psychological approach and those who felt that a woman's group should be building a bridge between the personal insight gained by being in a small group and political action with a larger body of women (Koedt, Levine, and Rapone 283, cited in Hogeland *Feminism* 26).

The distinction between hard and soft consciousness-raising (CR) comes from Claudia Dreifus's *Woman's Fate: Raps from a Feminist Consciousness-Raising Group* (1975). According to Hogeland,

> "Soft" CR was so intensely focused on personal experience that the rules for its practice disallowed theorizing, generalizing, and challenging. "Hard" CR, by contrast, called for group members [to] "always test generalizations on women's personal experience," as Brooke Williams describes Redstockings' practice in reviewing Dreifus's book for *off our backs.* "Soft" CR resolved the debates over the purpose of CR by seeing the practice as an end in itself, rather than as a political strategy, a recruitment device, or a resource for feminist theory-building, as "hard" CR was theorized. The conflict Payne identified in her CR group was thus a conflict between "soft" and "hard" CR—between the "personal, psychological" version of it, and the version of it as a "bridge" between personal insight and collective political action. (Dreifus 18, cited in Hogeland *Feminism* 27)

According to Sarachild, who helped to originate the CR method, this process was increasingly coopted by liberal feminism—as voiced by *Ms.* magazine—to emphasize "a change yourself line," which she distinguishes from the Redstockings "pro-woman line" this way:

> The *Ms.* line is the prevailing line in the movement. . . . *Ms.* is telling women to try to get over their hang-ups due to male supremacy. These aren't hang-ups. They are reactions to a reality. The thing to do is analyze the reality. And fight. *Ms.* tells women to fight *individually.* We have a *movement* to fight these forces. (Sarachild 32, cited in Hogeland *Feminism* 27 n. 15)

For Hogeland, "soft" CR, as exemplified by texts like *Ella Price's Journal,* among other realist novels about the political awakening of the American housewife, reflects the liberal middle-class

feminist line and eschews any of radical feminism's alternatives. It runs up against both the political and formal limits of the feminist CR novel.

According to Hogeland, "The mildness of the critique in Bryant's novel may be because Ella does not participate in any organized feminist activities; her consciousness-raising process is almost entirely solitary, 'soft' in both its practice and its politics" (Hogeland *Feminism* 38). In this regard, Hogeland minimizes or ignores Ella Price's increasing forays into the world of collective political action throughout the novel. She does, in fact, with the help of Laura Wilkens, become involved in the feminist movement and participate in protests against the Vietnam War. Nonetheless, like many of her literary counterparts, Ella Price is limited by the formal conventions of realism, which, tied to the limits of the real, make a liberated Ella Price all but impossible to depict. Hogeland deplores some CR novels for "rarely . . . develop[ing] a political edge anything like that in the radical feminist analyses being published at the same time"(*Feminism* 38). In particular, she compares "realist" novels such as *Ella Price's Journal* to "science fiction" and "lesbian novels," which she argues "are far more sweeping in their critiques of marriage motherhood, heterosexuality, and monogamous sexual relationships in general. . . . The mildness of the realist novels' critiques of marriage is entirely in keeping with their tendency to use 'soft' rather than 'hard' CR" (Hogeland *Feminism* 38). Yet the attempt to distinguish differences in politics and genre proves elusive. As long as political movements have failed to dramatically change the material causes and experiences of women's oppression, true liberation is impossible to depict "realistically" within the bounds of the narrative of the politically awakened housewife. Narratives that escape the boundaries of the "real" are thus far more appropriate genres for radically reimagining society as a whole. The science fiction and lesbian novels to which Hogeland refers are examples of both political and literary attempts to go beyond the boundaries imposed by liberal feminism, in terms of politics and genre. Within the realist narratives of the politically awakened American housewives, the protagonists are unable to move beyond the bounds of the personal to enact a revolution that has yet to occur in society at large. The revolution within fails to find resolution without—at least in the present moment. Nonetheless, many of these narratives retain hope in the possibility of collective liberation in the future. This hope, however, remains outside the bounds of the novel itself: a goal to strive for and one that eludes the narrative boundaries imposed by the genre.

The novel's ending reflects the ambiguous success of consciousness-raising as a political tool. In the absence of a more radical transformation of society, sexual relations, and oppressive gender roles, it remains unclear what sort of liberation is possible once the feminist consciousness has been raised. In Bryant's novel, Ella's consciousness is clearly linked to a growing feminist movement and a commitment to political activism within this movement; nevertheless, the novel's trajectory is primarily toward an individual or personal form of liberation that leaves socially gendered norms and oppressive structures intact. If the novel avoids teaching despair, it likewise fails to offer collective solutions. The optimism of the novel's ending in its assertion of Ella as a liberated, thinking, and feeling self demonstrates at once the potential of feminism and its limitations. As a self-identified liberal feminist who steers clear of the radical wing of the feminist movement, Bryant constructs an ending that avoids the pitfalls of conventional novels without ultimately providing a political solution to Ella's personal problems that navigates throughout the novel. In this sense, Bryant's novel is a variation on the feminist bildungsroman which, in tracing the political awakening of the ultimate suburban housewife, must conclude with an open ending to which the reader must supply the conclusion. Like Esther, Ella awaits release from a hospital, unsure whether her newly reshaped self can

survive in a world that demands her subjugation. If Bryant's ending is slightly more optimistic, this is perhaps because her identification with the politics of liberal feminism leads her to believe that individual women's education and politicization are the key to future liberation. Unlike her radical feminist counterparts, Bryant seems to maintain her faith in individual solutions to collective problems. As a prototypical feminist novel, Bryant's *Ella Price's Journal* is inspired by feminism and steeped in liberalism. As such, it epitomizes both the political potential and limitations of consciousness-raising and feminist fiction to enact far-reaching political and social change.

From Ella to Mira: the Failure of Feminism & the Despair of the Feminist Ex-Housewife

Half a decade later, across the country on the East Coast, Mira, Ella's counterpart in French's influential *The Women's Room*, is unable to escape the despair that is the fate of so many rebellious women of Ella's literary education. If Bryant's ending represents the hope of the early feminist movement, French's novel written in 1977 reflects the failures of the movement to fulfill this promise. Like Ella, Mira is a child of the 50s for whom growing up means sacrificing her self at the altar of the feminine mystique. Succumbing to these pressures, she attempts to perform the role of the smiling perfect suburban housewife only to find that the cost is too high and the contradictions impossible to navigate. Like Ella, Mira leaves her family to pursue her own education – albeit, in the far more privileged setting of Harvard University, far removed from the class politics of Ella's working class community college. At Harvard, Mira is introduced to the radical student movements of the 1960s and 70s— in particular, she is introduced to radical feminism, through the character of Val. Ella's and Mira's journeys end in profoundly different places demonstrating both the potential of the feminist movement and its ultimate failure to provide a liberatory ending to the narratives it inspired.

Like Ella, Mira is an older student who functions as a link between the rebelling housewives raised in the ideology of the feminine mystique and the radical student movements of the 60s and 70s. Nonetheless, French uses temporal distance and the third person voice to provide a sense of narrative distance to her protagonist's narrative, which allows for a stronger critique of the captivity to liberation narrative, and invites the reader to share the author's pessimism from the outset. The narrator, we learn in the final pages of the novel, is indeed the protagonist, but she is an older and perhaps more cynical Mira whose hindsight creates temporal distance and narrative dislocation from the character and the events chronicled in the narrative. This narrative distancing technique is in stark opposition to the immediacy of Bryant's diary fiction style, enabling a more complex narrative which points to both the potential and the failures of feminism's radical goals and offers an implicit critique of the teleological simplicity of earlier narratives of the politically awakening housewives.

In the opening pages of the novel, in the scene which gives the novel its title, French introduces us to the heady atmosphere of Harvard University in 1968 and the promises and pitfalls of the radical student movements. In "the ladies' room" of Harvard University, the door of which features a sign in which the word "ladies'" has been scratched out and "women's" written underneath, a thirty-eight-year-old Mira "huddle[s] for safety in a toilet booth"(French 1). She eyes the graffiti that symbolically marks the radical students' political assault on the conformity, tradition, and institutional power of the oldest and most unassailable of America's elite academic institutions. She reads the graffiti on the walls:

'Down with capitalism and the fucking military-industrial complex. KILL ALL THE FASCIST PIGS!'

This had been answered. 'You simplify too much. New ways must be found to kill pigs: out of their death new pigs spring as armed men sprouted from the bulls' teeth planted by that mcp Jason. Pigs batten on pig blood. The way is slow and hard. We must cleanse our minds of all the old shit, we must work in silence, exile and cunning like that mcp Joyce. We must have a revolution of sensibility.'

A third party entered the argument in purple ink:

'Stay in your cocoon. Who needs you? Those who are not with us are against us. Anyone who supports the status quo is part of the problem. THERE IS NO TIME. THE REVOLUTION IS HERE! KILL PIGS!'

Writer No. 2 was apparently fond of this booth and had returned, for the next entry was in her handwriting in the same pen:

'Those who live by the sword die by the sword.'

Wild printing in the purple felt-tip followed this in great sprawling letters:

"FUCKING CHRISTIAN IDIOT! TAKE YOUR MAXIMS AND STUFF THEM! THERE IS ONLY POWER! POWER TO THE PEOPLE! POWER TO THE POOR! WE ARE DYING BY THE SWORD NOW!"

The last outburst ended that symposium, but there were others like it scrawled on side walls. Almost all of them were political. There were pasted-on notices of SDS meetings, meetings of Bread and Roses, and Daughters of Bilitis. Mira withdrew her eyes from a crude drawing of female genitalia with 'Cunt is Beautiful' scratched beneath it. She presumed, at least, that it was a drawing of female genitalia, although it looked remarkably like a wide-petaled flower. She wasn't sure because she had never seen her own, that being part of her anatomy that did not present itself directly to the vision.

She looked at her watch again: she could leave now. She stood and from force of habit flushed the unused toilet. On the wall behind it someone had printed great jagged letters in what looked like nail polish. The red enamel had dripped and each stroke had a thick pearl at its base. It looked as if it had been written in blood. SOME DEATHS TAKE FOREVER, it read. She drew her breath in sharply and left the booth.

It was 1968. (French *The Women's Room* 2).

French's description of the graffiti in the ladies/women's room of Harvard locates the political and temporal moment of the novel firmly in the explosive year of 1968. While the novel spans the decades before and after this pivotal year, 1968 is clearly marked as the temporal and political center of the novel, etched as firmly into the narrative structure as the graffiti on the bathroom walls. And yet, Mira's own distance and fascination with the political debates and slogans on the bathroom walls sets her apart from the revolutionary rhetoric it encompasses. As an older student, she is both enamored of and removed from the revolutionary fervor that surrounds her. In this early passage, French introduces the political poles of debate within the student movements from radical defense of violence and the right to self-determination to pacifism and revolutions within—or from radical feminism to cultural feminism. The walls of the bathroom provide the political landscape to the novel's narrative.

Nonetheless, the liberatory potential of the political moment of 1968 is negated from the outset by Mira's own identification with the last slogan she reads before leaving the stall, "Some deaths take forever, she found herself repeating as she walked into the classroom"(3). This final statement—in stark contrast to the fervor, immediacy and urgency of the earlier "THERE IS NO TIME! THE REVOLUTION IS HERE!"— marks the political trajectory of the text from the totalizing rhetoric of 1960s radicalism to the static and perpetual experience of oppression that Jane Elliot argues characterizes much of the post-60s feminist fictional canon. It reflects the state of mind of the post-60s Mira who narrates the novel rather than the political urgency of 1968. It reflects a continuum of women's oppression that1968 disrupts and challenges but does not end. As Elliot explains:

> If Mira's death takes 'forever,' then she can never die, but death seems to be the only experience referenced on the walls with which she identifies. Mira thus becomes cast in a temporal catch-22 in which death, the ultimate watershed, becomes permanent and static. In light of this vision, Mira's position in the bathroom stall, which she occupies but does not use becomes a vivid metaphor for her situation: killing time is the only option when life feels as changeless as death. (Elliot 5)

French's temporal distance from 1968 leads her to write the subsequent defeat and failure of 1960s revolutionary zeal back in time into Mira's own experience of 1968. If Mira's sense of perpetual death and static time is in part attributable to her formative years in the 1950s as a suburban housewife for whom permanent death of self was a daily reality, the author's (and narrator's) location in a period of post-60s disillusionment equally informs the author's depiction of Harvard in 1968. As Elliot argues:

> The reader of the *The Women's Room* must of necessity view this graffiti from a position of belatedness marked by considerable dramatic irony: that revolution was not in any sense of the word "HERE" in 1968 had become supremely obvious by the time *The Women's Room* was published in 1977. Therefore the graffiti evokes not only the historical urgency of the late 1960s but also the experience of static time I have suggested accompanies the aftermath of the 1960s—a temporality that for many was constituted by disproven expectation, by the static time that followed a revolution that never took place. (Elliot 51)

Mira's temporal dislocation is enhanced by the narrative voice of an older Mira which insistently intrudes into the narrative of 1968 to remind the reader that we must read the passage from a position of hindsight. The narrator writing of her own earlier years with considerable third-person distance, invites the reader to assess Mira in this moment while also encouraging us to read the narrative from the perspective of post-60s static time that Elliot identifies with declension narratives of the 60s. In these narratives, Elliot argues, "the inexorable logic of time and totalization …. serves as a means of registering the seemingly inexorable demise of positive American futurity in ways that greatly undermine the conviction that something might be done about that demise"(Elliot 24). In doing so, it imbues the failures of the movements of the 1960s and 70s with an aura of inevitability. From the vantage point of 1977, the radical impulse of 1968 seems doomed from its inception and any hope to the contrary naïve, bordering on ridiculous. If 1968 was an open door for Mira, as it was for Ella, the world to which it gives entry nonetheless does not guarantee liberation or fulfillment. Addressing the reader directly, the

narrator makes this clear, inviting the reader to view the earlier Mira with the eyes of her older and more disillusioned narrator:

> Perhaps you find Mira a little ridiculous. I do myself. But I also have some sympathy for her, more than you, probably…. I think she was ridiculous for hiding in the toilet…. But I also feel a little sorry for her, at least I did then. Not anymore.
>
> Because in a way it doesn't matter whether you open doors or close them, you still end up in a box. I have failed to ascertain an objective difference between one way of living and another. The only difference I can see is between varying levels of happiness, and I cringe when I say that. If old Schopenhauer is right, happiness is not a human possibility, since it means the absence of pain, which, as an uncle of mine used to say, only occurs when you're dead or dead drunk. There's Mira with all her closed doors, and here's me with all my open ones, and we're both miserable. (French 3-4)

Like Ella, Mira experiences feminism and the introduction to radical student politics "like opening a door" (Price *EPJ* 77). Whereas the women's movement provides Ella with a sense of possibility, Mira still ends up confined in a "box." If consciousness-raising gives birth to a new feminist self, Mira's narrative makes clear that the world has not changed enough to provide the material conditions in which that self can be fulfilled. In this sense, French turns the plot of the politically awakening housewife on its head. If feminism can liberate the suburban housewife, it does so by erecting new prisons in which 'liberated' women are confined by the violence of a world which objectifies their bodies and denies them subjectivity and equality in sexual relations.

Mira's disillusionment by the end of the novel is intrinsically linked to the demise of the novel's archetypal radical feminist: Val. Throughout the novel, Val functions as a symbol of both the promise and the failures of the radical feminist movement. She is a role model for Mira and functions as a teacher and a guide in the world of Harvard's radical student politics. A feminist and an antiwar activist who disavows capitalism and devotes herself to the 'Movement,' she has also lived in communes and raises her daughter outside of the confines of the nuclear family. She is the ultimate symbol of the sexual revolution in the novel. Val's political optimism and revolutionary zeal cannot, however, survive the rape of her daughter. This act of violence symbolically occurs as the New Left increasingly faces the reality of violence and the limits of their political movement's ability to confront state sanctioned violence.

Val's political trajectory in the novel mirrors that of the New Left as a whole as the splits and fragmentation within SDS paved the way to the Weather Underground. Frustrated with the limitations of non-violence as a strategy, infuriated by increasing political repression and state violence, and inspired by national liberation struggles; activists from SDS turned towards a new type of underground guerilla style militancy. To 'bring the war home' meant engaging in a revolutionary outpouring of anger á la 'days of rage.' To do nothing, in the face of state violence, was, for many of radicals like Val, itself a form of violence.

For Val, this political trajectory is also extremely personal. Val learns that her daughter Chris has been raped on the same day as the Kent State shootings. This juxtaposition "create[s] a kind of sleight-of-hand substitution of radical feminist issues for New Left issues at the very moment when the New Left reaches a dead end" (Elliot 61). From this point on, Val devotes herself entirely to the cause of radical feminism and an underground women's movement to

combat violence against women. Not only does she reject the politics of non-violence, she also rejects the possibility of interracial solidarity and political alliances between men and women. The radical possibilities promised by the political movements of the 1960s die with her daughter's rape as Val comes to the conclusion that all men are inherently violent and sexist. The most often cited passage from the novel is Val's political conclusion from this experience, her new "absolute truth": "Whatever they may be in public life, whatever their relations with men, in their relations with women, all men are rapists, and that's all they are" (French 427). Val's political transformation is made all the more dramatic by her discovery that her daughter's rapist was an African-American male, which challenges her earlier anti-racist politics. Despite her initial sympathy with the black men she sees in custody leading up to her daughter's trial and her recognition of the racism of the criminal justice system, she nonetheless concludes that the political dividing line is gender and that all men – no matter their race or the oppression they themselves face—are "the enemy." In "Rape, Racism and the Myth of the Black Rapist," Angela Davis takes Susan Brownmiller to task for a "discussion on rape and race" in *Against Our Wills* which "evinces an unthinking partisanship which borders on racism (199)." She continues by arguing, "Her failure to alert white women about the urgency of combining a fierce challenge to racism with the necessary battle against sexism is an important plus for the forces of racism today (Davis 199)." In *The Women's Room*, French "similarly secures its idea of rape as a metaphor for white women's oppression through its denunciation of sympathy for black men and racial issues" (Horeck 31). This incident and Val's repudiation of her earlier New Left politics in favor of radical feminism mark the ultimate defeat of the revolutionary potential of the political period.

Val's repudiation of her earlier politics enacts the logical conclusion of radical feminist identity politics as she concludes that only those who experience a specific form of oppression can be mobilized to fight against it. Furthermore, she concludes that the ongoing threat of violence against women of necessity means that all men are rapists and oppressors. This totalizing philosophy endemic to the more extreme versions of radical feminist identity politics fails, sadly, to provide any solution to the problems of women's liberation. As Val increasingly devotes herself to women's groups and a militant feminist organization, we are told that she has "dropped out of the world" and joined "the lunatic fringe"(French 428-9). While French is sympathetic to the roots of Val's brand of radicalism, it is nonetheless a politics doomed to failure. Shortly after Val's turn to militant feminism, she attempts to liberate an African-American woman who has been convicted of murder for defending herself against a rapist. In the resulting police melée, Val is murdered (along with the other 5 women who participated in the action) and her body explodes through the force of her own unused grenade. While Val's demise exposes the state sanctioned violence used against sixties radicals who took arms in defense of the oppressed, it is also a testament to the failure of this strategy. We are again brought back to the walls of Mira's bathroom stall, and left unsure as to what conclusions we should draw. If, "those who live by the sword die by the sword," the alternative is Mira's slow perpetual death extending into eternity. Ultimately, while neither alternative is given preference in the text, the failure of both strategies serves as a marker for the ultimate failure of the movements of the 1960s and 1970s to bring about the liberation they seemed to herald in the heady days of 1968.

At the end of the novel, Mira sums up the political trajectory of the period: "Yes. That was what happened: everything opened up, anything seemed possible, and then everything closed up, dilation, constriction. It will get you in the end" (French 455). By the end of the novel, Mira has earned her Ph.D. and teaches in a small college, but continues to be wracked by

nightmares in which she is chased by a rapist and the only protection the police can offer is to lock herself in a room with no way out. As she explains of the dream: "I stand there in terror. If I close the door I will be trapped; if I do not, I may wake up again to face a set of mindless eyes, a vacant unthinking threat"(French 464). Thus, the narrative that begins with Mira hiding in a bathroom stall ends with the feminist heroine trapped again. As Elliot argues about this passage:

> Read as a political parable, this dream presents a shockingly grim picture of the fate of second-wave feminism: when every form of resistance is also a form of domination, there can be no viable avenue for the transformation in women's lives. Moreover, if attempting to shut out oppression means retreating to a space defined solely by its emptiness—that is, shutting out the world entirely—then the appalling corollary is that oppression *is* the world. (…) In the face of these two equally untenable alternatives, there can be no way forward and no way back, leaving the women's liberation movement stilled in its tracks—merely marking time in a world where the possibility of change has been eradicated. (Elliot 3)

This grim vision of feminism places French's narrative in stark contrast to the earlier narratives of the women's movement. If the earlier narratives leave their narrators uncertainly beginning a new life with no guarantees of their success, they nonetheless underscore the potential that the women's liberation movement seemed to offer. For Ella, the opened doors of her mind may not lead to happiness or fulfillment, but the final assertion "I feel…" insists on the potential of fulfillment and liberation for the protagonist. In contrast, the final lines of French's novel concludes with Mira's assertion that:

> I have opened all the doors in my head.
> I have opened all the pores in my body.
> But only the tide rolls in. (French 465)

Like Ella, Mira's political awakening has opened her mind and body to the potential for a liberated human subjectivity and the creation of a new self. Whereas the open ending of *Ella Price's Journal* suggests the possibility that she might survive and thrive; the "But" of French's last line negates that possibility. If feminism can accomplish the revolution within that liberates Ella and Mira from the confines of suburban domesticity, French's final line reminds us there is no space in which such liberatory potential can be fulfilled. Both Ella and Mira have changed; the world has not. The half decade time gap between the publication of both novels has closed off the potential that existed in the open ending of the earlier novel, leaving a new woman who exists in a world where the revolution has failed, liberation movements have been defeated, and the only course left is to remember, for, as Mira reminds us, "Forget: Lēthē" is "the opposite of truth"(465).

As one of the preeminent and most widely read feminist novels, French's *The Women's Room* was both revered and widely criticized across the political spectrum. Her grim picture of men and feminism led to attacks of her work by both male reviewers and radical feminists. Whereas male reviewers argued that the novel's realism was undermined by its unbelievable depiction of men who couldn't possibly be "that bad," radical feminists decried the cynicism of the novel and its depiction of the failure of the feminist movement. Recalling Ella's own observation that novels about women invariably are undermined by the "soap opera"

designation, *Ms.* magazine characterized *The Women's Room* as "soap opera, and low-budget soap opera at that (…) the book has all the complexity of a sentence diagram. Subject-verb-object: he kicks her"(cited in Hogeland *Men* 294). As Hogeland argues, "Whereas Stimpson used Didion to establish a boundary between 'women' and 'feminist' writers in 1973," French is used "to establish a boundary between 'feminist' and 'antimale' writers in 1979" (Hogeland, "Men" 295). At the same time, the book was attacked for its critiques of 'the movement'. In *off our backs* Wendy Stevens agrees with French's depiction of men but decries her depiction of the "'women's movement' [as] something to be passed through like puberty"(cited in Hogeland, "Men" *296*).

These critiques highlight the contradictions at the heart of French's novel and of the project of feminist realist fiction more generally. On the one hand, feminist fiction provides a path into the consciousness-raising process through which women are able to generalize from the personal conditions of their lives to understand their oppression. On the other hand, feminist literature must expose these forms of oppression by unmasking the inequality that lies at the heart of realm of the personal. In doing so, they emphasize individual liberation in a world which has not yet transformed social relations nor eradicated the material roots of women's oppression.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the radicalization of Ella Price and the literary fate of the politically awakened housewife were inextricably linked to the political development of the women's liberation movement beyond the confines of the text. In the early days of the feminist movement, the raised consciousness of the politically awakened housewife contained the possibility of liberation. Bryant's optimistic ending is only possible because of the successful struggle of women's movements for increased reproductive freedom.. By the late 70s, the collapse of the movement itself left few alternatives. Mira's search for 'individual solutions' is largely a reaction to the failure of Val's political struggle. The two events which inspired French to write *The Women's Room* were reading Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, one of the pivotal texts of the women's movement, and the rape of her own daughter, a stark reminder of the failure of this movement to liberate women from systemic objectification and sexual violence.

The image of the "awakening housewife" of feminist fiction had an extremely important but limited power. It represented a break from the ideology of female domesticity. And yet, in its focus on this housewife and her yearnings, it was limited in its scope. Among its weaknesses was its failure to tap into the experiences of the vast majority of women, particularly women of color who were always excluded from the ideology and material reality of the American housewife. As Berlant argues, this contradiction at the heart of the historical ideological construction of gender means that:

> On the one hand, the authors and the audience for the "woman's" text has historically been white and identified with bourgeois values of female domesticity. On the other hand, the manifest ideology of these women's texts—in which the duties of domesticity and motherhood produce pleasure generated by the harnessing of libidinal energy both to heterosexual desire and social and economic ambition— is never explicitly delimited to a body of women among women, but rather addressed to "woman" herself. In this way a particular notion of woman, identified with a race, a class, and a national culture is culturally deployed on all women. At the same time, women whose racial and class

> positions mark differential relations to the Bourgeois Symbolic will have an alienated, half- or just less-articulated relation to its inescapable and universalized popular and mass cultural productions (Berlant 239-40).

Indeed, Toni Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is a stark reminder of the immeasurable gap between Ella and Mira and the young Pecola Breedlove for whom the blue eyed world of Dick and Jane is an unattainable dream which destroys her psyche, encourages self-loathing and serves as an endless reminder of the racist underpinnings of the suburban family ideal which thwarts her existence at every turn. The limited liberation that Mira and Ella attain is unthinkable in the world of the Breedloves where poverty and racism negate any possibility for the liberation of the self. *The Bluest Eye* provides a stark narrative of the brutal oppression of families of color who are systematically denied entrance into the suburban elite, despite working in their homes. At the same time it demonstrates the devastating impact of the ideal of the suburban nuclear family. Writing from the margins of history and society, Morrison engages with her white middle class feminist counterparts in a project of undermining and resisting the ideological construction of the family – while never forgetting that the violence of American domesticity was never equally felt but was always intertwined with race and class divisions.

In *A Strange Stirring*, Stephanie Coontz explores the legacy of The Feminine Mystique, including an important chapter on the book's impact on working class women and women of color who are entirely absent from Friedan's work. Not surprisingly*, The Feminine Mystique* failed to resonate with these women—primarily, because they already worked outside the home by necessity and rarely worked in the types of jobs that provided the fulfillment that Friedan advocates. *The Feminine Mystique* itself is firmly rooted in the experiences and concerns of comparatively privileged white suburban housewives who had greater access to education than most working class women and women of color. In one particularly problematic passage, she argues that hiring housekeepers and nannies would free women up to work—hardly a liberatory prospect to the women who worked domestic jobs. As Angela Davis points out, in 1930 three out of five African-American women working outside of the home were employed as domestic servants. Shifts in labor as a result of World War II opened up many possibilities for women. But by 1960, one-third of working African-American women were still employed in these "traditional occupations" (Davis 238). For many women, the struggle for equality was not bound up in the 'feminine mystique' as Friedan defines it. In fact, working class women and women of color were far less likely to see marriage and family as incompatible with work and political activism. Nonetheless, she argues, "despite its occasional lapses into elitism, *The Feminine Mystique*'s assault on stereotypes about femininity and its defense of women's right to work were certainly in the interest of working women, black and white" (Coontz *A Strange Stirring* 138). As Angela Davis argues, the ideological construction of the 'housewife' serves to diminish the value of domestic labor. She writes, "As long as household workers stand in the shadow of the housewife, they will continue to receive wages which are more closely related to the housewife's "allowance" than to a worker's paycheck. (Davis 238)." While feminist housewife fictions, such as Dorothy Bryant's *Ella Price's Journal,* were firmly rooted in a middle class liberal white feminism and failed to give voice to working class women and women of color, their assault on the ideological ideal of the suburban wife had far broader political resonance.

Dorothy Bryant's *Ella Price's Journal* and other feminist fiction of the period performed a crucial role in dismantling the myth of the Ozzie and Harriet family and aptly demonstrating

the oppressive nature and insidious consequences of this idealization of the family. In this regard, it was a 'visionary' and in fact, revolutionary development. But, as Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* makes clear, the limitations of the movement weighed heavily on survivors for whom liberation proved elusive. Realist feminist fiction proved incapable of posing an alternative. Like Ella Price, the liberated and politically awakened housewife of this period of feminist fiction arose from the pages of these novels with a raised consciousness and nowhere to go. It was left to utopian fiction to provide a world in which such liberated housewives could live out their desires for fulfillment. At the same time, the class and racial bias of such fictions excluded the vast majority of women for whom the suburban housewife ideal was inherently unattainable whether desirable at all. Despite the limitations of the "mad housewife" fiction of the 1960s and 1970s, it nonetheless played a role in opening up space for new narratives, as lesbian feminists and feminists of color wrote back, challenging the heterosexist, race and class biases of the genre along with the liberal leanings of many of its writers. The vast outpouring of feminist fiction of this period, which Bryant's work epitomizes, opened up a space for a democratization of literature in which a plethora of women's voices could emerge. If nothing else, it forever demolished the idea that the personal should remain an area of silence, providing a new space for women to make the personal a concern of the public domain. Despite its critics, it created a new space for women's literature in which women refused to be silent about their subjugation in the personal or private sphere. As Kate Millett explains in her reply to critics who sought to demolish her work and herd her words back into the safe confines of the private or personal spheres:

> I think it's too late for all that. We've started and we're getting up speed. This is what *Flying* said for me as I poured myself into it and several years of my life. With characteristic charity Langer wishes the book "a speedy oblivion." All a mistake, and I a fool who should be ashamed ever to have lived or spoken? Nothing doing. No more silence. Gay or straight, women aren't there any more. We refuse. We refused quite a long while ago and we will not be cowed back into line. The shame is over (cited in Gillett "Self-Disclosure" 71).

The Personal is Historical: Slavery, Black Power, and the Construction of Personal, Family, and National Histories in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*

In 1966 Stokely Carmichael and Martin Luther King Jr. marched through Mississippi, carrying the torch for James Meredith, whose march against fear had been forcibly halted under a barrage of bullets that left him hospitalized. After being arrested on spurious charges in Greenwood, Mississippi, Carmichael spoke to the crowd, invoking for the first time the call to Black Power. Speaking first about his own past work in Greenwood, he said, "This is the twenty-seventh time that I've been arrested. I ain't going to jail no more. The only way we gonna stop them white men from whuppin' us is to take over. What we gonna start sayin' now is Black Power! . . . What do we want?" The crowd responded with an enthusiastic: "Black Power!" (quoted in Joseph 142).

Carmichael's speech marked a shift in the civil rights movement as a new generation of activists grew weary of King's strategies of nonviolent civil disobedience. The call for "Black Power" imbued the movement with a new sense of militancy and urgency, while also opening it up to the politics of cultural nationalism. From its first utterance, the term was hotly debated. As a demand of the civil rights movement, it could encapsulate everything from the power of the vote, to the right to bear arms in self-defense, to the use of Black art and culture as a political tool, to the development of Black capitalism. From its earliest use, however, the political establishment and defenders of the status quo feared the militancy it presaged. The slogan was immediately associated with violence as the media stoked unfounded fears about the threat posed by this new generation of activists. At the same time, it provided a powerful spark to militant groups like the Black Panthers who increasingly turned to revolutionary rhetoric, inspiring millions while also rapidly moving to first place on the newly founded COINTELPRO's list of dangerous organizations to be smashed at any cost.

The slogan "Black Power" had a powerful resonance for activists in the civil rights movement who had been arrested and beaten, watched nonviolent protesters murdered, and risked their lives for small gains as the segregationists' most vicious acts of racism went unpunished. Their movement was kept at bay, given a few crumbs of reforms while told to wait for full equality and justice. The 1968 Democratic National Convention's refusal to seat the Mississippi Freedom Party was a case in point, radicalizing younger activists who determined to take their fight to the streets. By 1968, there was a decisive generational shift in the fight for civil rights. Black Power movement became the expression of the new militancy, marking a decisive break with the older, more conservative strands of the civil rights movement, for whom nonviolence was a principle rather than a tactic and who were more willing to work within the political establishment despite the many betrayals, delays, and denials of justice they had experienced. The symbolic "generation gap" frequently touted by the media in explaining the political differences between King and Carmichael became an abyss as the Black Power movement fundamentally challenged ideas of pacifism, patience, and conciliation, arguing instead for the right to self-defense and a refusal to compromise in the fight against racism.

The spirit of defiance that arose in 1968 found mainstream expression in such diverse figures as Muhammad Ali, Eartha Kitt, and John Carlos as the new militant mood swept the nation. A new Black arts movement, the diverse cultural wing of the Black Power movement, spanned the country, transforming the cultural landscape.[9] At the same time, activists around the

[1] See Smethurst's *The Black Arts Movement* for a full history of this movement.

country demanded that universities create courses in Black studies, transforming the curriculum and antagonizing the defenders of foundational courses in "Western civilization," which became emblematic of the Eurocentrism within academia. As Rushdy argues,

> the Black Power intellectuals and 'paraintellectuals' represented a novel force in American public discourse. They opened up new discussions regarding the relationship of art to society, the meaning of cultural expertise and appropriation in a multicultural country, and the function of a new discourse on slavery in a time of emergent revolutionary black nationalism (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 4).

The genesis of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* can be traced to this political climate, although it would not be published for another decade.

In 1968, a few hundred miles down the coast from the community college where Dorothy Bryant taught, Octavia Butler attended a small community college in Pasadena, where the spark that would become her 1979 novel *Kindred* was ignited**.** Having worked full time to put herself through school, Butler was in her third year of a two-year degree program. The year 1968 was marked, for Butler and a whole generation of students and activists, by turbulence and violence in the wake of the murders of Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy. In the heady days of the growing Black Power movement, only a few years after nearby Watts had exploded in rebellion, Pasadena Community College offered its first-ever course in Black literature. Years later, in an interview, Butler remembered the course and teacher as an inspiring moment in her development as a writer, introducing her to "writers I'd never heard of and to a literature I knew almost nothing about and to words I'd never heard before" (Butler, "Interview" 60).

The course's power for Butler illustrates the growing gains of the civil rights and Black Power movements in their efforts to reinvigorate studies in African American literature, history, and culture. At the same time, the fact that no such classes existed prior to 1968 is poignant testimony to the complete absence of African American writers, artists, and historians in dominant academic and literary discourse prior to this period. Indeed, if Ella Price struggled to find literary models of resistance and feminist precursors in literature—finding only Lessing amidst the many voices of men writing about women's lives—this struggle was all the more Herculean for a new generation of African American women searching for a literary tradition to which they could lay claim. The barbaric history of racism and the oppressive legacy of slavery not only excluded their literary precursors from canonical legitimacy but also made writing a crime punishable by death, silencing the vast majority of its victims.

Butler's 1968 introduction to her literary "ancestors," rescued from the margins of history by civil rights and Black Power advocates within the academy, also brought her into direct contact with the politics of a growing student Black Power movement—an encounter which marks the genesis of *Kindred*. Butler locates the origin of the novel in a student's comment:

> When I got into college, Pasadena City College, the black nationalist movement, the Black Power Movement, was really underway with the young people, and I heard some remarks from a young man who was the same age I was but who had apparently never made the connection with what his parents did to keep him alive. He was still blaming them for their humility and their acceptance of disgusting behavior on the part of employers and other people. He said, "I'd like to kill all these old people who have been holding us back for so long. But I can't because I'd have to start with my own parents." When he said us he meant black people, and when he said old people he meant older black people. That was actually the

> germ of the idea for *Kindred* (1979). I've carried that comment with me for thirty years. He felt so strongly ashamed of what the older generation had to do, without really putting it into the context of being necessary for not only their lives but his as well. (Butler, "Interview" 51)

In this moment, Butler's classroom in Pasadena became a microcosm for the debates playing out on the national stage, as questions of resistance to oppression, violence, and the right to self-defense rose to prominence. A decade later *Kindred* attempted to resolve these "sixties feelings." In it, confronted with the gap between her generation's militancy and the perceived passivity of generations past, Butler investigates the continuities and conflicts between generations through the fictional means of time travel, which allows her 1970s narrator to test her new militancy in the "peculiar institution" of the antebellum South. In so doing, the novel comments on the present as much as the past. The "generation gap" Butler investigates is as much a political as a temporal gap; while pundits used it to explain the political divergence between Carmichael and King, this elides the actual political differences that informed both leaders' strategies and tactics.

Kindred is a response to the political and social conditions of the period—in particular, the continued persistence of systematic, structural racism despite the gains of the civil rights movement. It is also a response to the political discourses that arose from the Black Power movement and to a lesser extent, the New Left. In addition to the generation gap, the novel was written in reaction to a perceived emphasis on purity in the decline of these movements (Rushdy, *Remembering Generations* 100–102). The New Left's turn toward Maoism meant that "tremendous weight was given to ideological purity" (Elbaum 157). Activists repeatedly cited Mao's dictum that "the correctness or incorrectness of the ideological and political line decides everything" (quoted in Elbaum 157). For Rushdy, the notion of "purity" encapsulates the separatist politics of and emphasis on authenticity in some forms of Black nationalism, the New Left's emphasis on ideological purity, and the movement's emphasis on the "purity of youthful idealism," voiced in the famous exhortation not to "trust anyone over 30" (*Remembering Generations* 101). While Rushdy's use of "purity" in this sense is perhaps too broad to be particularly useful, *Kindred* is without a doubt Butler's attempt to resolve some of her own conflicted views on the politics of the period. While she clearly sympathizes with the militancy and radicalism of the 1960s, she also rejects categorical, purist political programs and lines in favor of a more complex and nuanced understanding of power, oppression, and resistance and insists on finding continuities between the resistance of her generation and that of generations past.

The return of the novel's protagonist, Dana, to the antebellum past provides a lens through which to understand issues raised by both the Black Power and feminist movements. In a sense, the novel both justifies and sympathizes with this militancy even while questioning aspects of it. *Kindred* also unearths a long tradition of resistance, particularly among women, which frequently belies the passivity Butler's generation found so inimical to its demands. Many of the women Dana encounters in the antebellum past would earn the ire of the most militant sixties activists, but they have much to teach Dana about resistance, survival and strength.

Though Butler's classmate provided a spark, it is Butler's mother—a woman whose passivity in the face of racism and limited expectations for what was possible confounded her daughter—who provides the heart of the novel. Dana as a writer and an artist ultimately finds little resolution for her "sixties feelings" and struggles with the impossibility of finding the form to tell such a story. Butler herself creates a new form to tell Dana's story. Drawing upon the traditional slave narrative and science fiction, she produces a variation on the form of the neo-

slave narrative[10] to create a "grim fantasy" that hovers between past and present, both reenacting and remembering the traumatic history that "weighs like a nightmare on the present."

The role of text and its ability to convey the horrors of slavery through language is problematized in *Kindred*, which explicitly thematizes writing, narrative, and genre. As writers, both Dana and her husband Kevin are deeply engaged in questions of text and language. Indeed, the novel opens with Dana and Kevin attempting to categorize their books. While Kevin shelves the nonfiction in one bookcase, Dana shelves the fiction separately: "We had so many books, we had to try to keep them in some kind of order" (Butler, *Kindred* 13). It is at this moment, as Dana and Kevin are attempting to separate fiction from nonfiction, fact from fantasy, that Dana's own grim fantasy begins—via a trope of science fiction, she returns to the historical setting of slavery. In this scene, Butler plays with the notion of genre as it relates to her novel as well as to the genre of the slave narrative more generally. She straddles genres, drawing on historical experience while using science fiction as a means of bringing the narrator back and forth in time between the 1970s and the 1800s. Dana's narrative, then, cannot be neatly shelved— the relationship between fiction and nonfiction in the representation of slavery is immediately problematized.

Time travel provides a vehicle through which the narrator can physically "witness" slavery and thereby assert her narrative authority—nonetheless, truth continues to be problematized and contested as the history of slavery seems to elude documentation and historical representation. Indeed, as Long (477–78) points out, "Butler herself, in an interview with Sandra Govan, admits to tempering the 'harshness' of the 'real experiences' because the slave narratives proved such 'grim reading.' *Kindred*, according to Butler, is a 'cleaned-up somewhat gentler version of slavery for there was no entertainment in the real thing.'" Butler's use of time travel allows her protagonist to confront her enslaved ancestors directly, thus illuminating the contradictions and continuities between past and present in a way that no other neo-slave narrative is able to do. Dana, a "free woman" of the 1970s, is thoroughly unprepared for the realities of life under slavery. She is faced with seemingly impossible choices. As an orphan, it is only Dana's never-explained physical return to the past that provides her with a connection to her antebellum ancestors.

Butler uses time travel to symbolically recreate the Middle Passage—this time a temporal rather than a spatial journey. Mitchell argues that a metaphoric Middle Passage must be created to analyze the nature of American freedom, as Haile Gerima does in the 1982 film *Ashes and Embers*. Dana's time travel repeats the involuntary journey: "In her experience of being kidnapped in time and space, Dana recapitulates the dreadful, disorienting, involuntary voyage of her ancestors" (Robert Crossley, cited in Mitchell 43). Her journey to the Weylin plantation is, notably, caused by Rufus's need and initiated against Dana's will, taking her to a new world in which she is disoriented and alienated, her previous knowledge useless, and in which she is deprived of her freedom, identity, and humanity. Dana is pulled back in time through this symbolic Middle Passage each time the master's life is threatened. Meanwhile, fear for her own life and a drive for self-preservation drive her back toward the future—her present—where, despite the limits of modern freedom, her body is at least nominally her own. In reenacting this "Middle Passage," *Kindred* creates a symbolic narrative that moves from personal to national history.

[2] Neo-slave narratives, according to Rushdy, are "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the ante-bellum slave narrative"(Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 1)

In *Kindred*, as in other literary works arising out of the civil rights and feminist movements, Butler uses her writing to reclaim through fictional means this oft-ignored and unrecognized creative and artistic tradition. Like other writers of the period Butler is engaged in a project of rememory,[11] in search of the ways in which African American women have *created* beauty and forms of art even under conditions that seemed impossible. Dana, a writer, is both literally and artistically an orphan—but through her travels back in time to her ancestors' lives under slavery, she discovers that her "tools" are useless and instead learns valuable lessons in strength, beauty, and power despite the trauma that such history inflicts. Her only means of reconstructing her family history and laying claim to the political and artistic traditions of her ancestors is through an unexplained, fantastical form of time travel—thus Dana becomes a fitting symbol of the plight of the new generation of African American women writers in the 1960s and 1970s for whom fiction becomes the primary mechanism of reclaiming, revising, and remembering a history and creative tradition that have too often been silenced.

Dana is also orphaned from a tradition of resistance and is searching for a political tradition of struggle against oppression. Her journey back in time allows her to reconstruct a history of resistance to oppression, placing the movements of her time in a continuum of political struggle that has its roots in the multiple traditions of resistance under even the most brutal conditions of slavery, while at the same time problematizing and questioning the power of the political liberation struggles of her generation. This stems from an attempt to make sense of the relationship between Black Power militants and the less militant forebears who provided the means for their political rebellion.

Butler makes it clear that *Kindred* was, at least in part, inspired by the life of her own mother (also named Octavia Butler):

> She was born in 1914, so she was a child quite a long time ago. Her mother chopped sugar cane, and she also did the family laundry, not just her own family but the white family for whom they worked. She washed clothes in the big iron pots with paddles and all that. That was hard, physical labor. It's no wonder she died at fifty-nine, after having a lot of children and working her life away. This is the kind of life that she had no choice but to live. (Butler, "Interview" 50)

As there was no integrated schooling, Butler's mother (after whom Butler was named) began school late after her parents moved to a city to provide their children with an education.

> My mother was already about seven or eight years old. Because she was big, and obviously not a kindergartner from appearance, they put her in the third grade, which meant that she was suddenly confronted with concepts she knew nothing about. To the end of her life, she felt that she was stupid and couldn't learn, because she was presented with all these concepts that other kids had been taught early on and that she had never been confronted with at all. (50)

The gap between Butler's experience of education and her mother's and their early lives explains the "generation gap" and the different expectations each woman had for her future. Butler's

[3] Toni Morrison uses this term in *Beloved* as Sethe struggles with history that is unspeakable in its horror, frequently undocumented and lost, and traumatic in the present. The use of the term "rememory" emphasizes the repetitive nature of this process of memory, which is constantly being literally re-membered and reconfigured in spatial and corporeal terms in the present.

mother's need to survive and provide for her family necessitated different forms of resistance and precluded overt resistance, which in the absence of mass social movements had little chance of overcoming the immense racism which governed her life. As Butler elucidates,

> Her big dream for me was that I should get a job as a secretary and be able to sit down when I worked. My big dream was never to be a secretary in my life. . . . I was occasionally taken to work with my mother and made to sit in the car all day, because I wasn't really welcome inside, of course. Sometimes, I was able to go inside and hear people talk about or to my mother in ways that were obviously disrespectful. As a child I did not blame them for their disgusting behavior, but I blamed my mother for taking it. I didn't really understand. . . . And as I got older I realized that this is what kept me fed, and this is what kept a roof over my head. This is when I started to pay attention to what my mother and even more my grandmother and my poor great-grandmother, who died as a very young woman giving birth to my grandmother, what they all went through. (51)

Like many of her radicalized generation, Butler initially cannot understand her mother's failure to rebel and openly resist the racism she experiences on a daily basis. Her comments resonate with Alice Walker's attempt to reconstruct and remember the silenced tradition of female creativity, despite the legacy of slavery, segregation, and racism that had denied her foremothers formal artistic training and education. Butler's comments demonstrate both the profound gap separating her own experience from her mother's, but also a political commitment to making her work a tribute to the profound courage and resistance of the mothers who made it possible for their daughters' voices to be heard. Through her fiction, Butler seeks to make visible the multiple forms of courage and resistance that lie beneath the stoic silence of her foremothers' daily struggle to survive and provide for a better future for their daughters. If the early work of white feminist writers is frequently characterized by a rejection of the mother figure and the feminine ideal she represents, the work of Butler and her peers view their mothers in a spirit of resistance and revise history to highlight their struggles.

In reconstructing a silenced family history, Butler thus uses fiction to reclaim a tradition of struggle against oppression, forging a link between past and present. History provides a lens for understanding the present, guiding both political struggles for liberation and highlighting the ongoing legacy of racism, which stultifies the dreams of its victims. *Kindred* engages in a project of historical rememory as a means to interrogate the meaning of liberation in America in its bicentennial year and to expose the backdrop of racism and slavery that continues to inform the present, both politically and in extremely personal ways.

The Personal Is Historical

Butler's return to the slave past to understand the present reflects a broader shift in intellectual and political paradigms, occasioned by the rise of the New Left and Black Power movements. As Rushdy points out, periods of struggle in which new political and social movements are born have often provided the impetus for excursions into the past, as activists and scholars seek histories of resistance to inform the struggles of the present. The 1930s, for example, saw a renewed interest in the history of slavery from the point of view of the oppressed, including the Federal Writers' Project's collection of first-person testimony by living survivors of slavery. Arne Bontemps's *Black Thunder*—one of the most notable of several literary narrativizations of slave revolts—is emblematic of such excursions; its story is told from multiple perspectives to reconstruct a *collective* history of Gabriel Prosser's rebellion. The civil

rights movement likewise sparked new research into the history of slavery by historians such as John Hope Franklin, John W. Blassingame, and Herbert Aptheker that fundamentally altered dominant historical depictions of slave life, resistance, and culture and transformed the field: Franklin's *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (1967) is an excellent example.

Through both historical scholarship and fictional narratives, writers in the 1960s sought to reclaim and revise the history of America's peculiar institution, creating a new paradigm for studies of slavery that were highly relevant to the political, ideological, and literary present. As Stone argues:

> In mining this material, both historians and novelists, white and black, found themselves rethinking the nature of slavery itself and accounting for slave resistance in terms of the energy generated within the slave community and articulated by its leaders. Thus the main shift in historiographical tradition in sixties America was from white-centered explanations of slavery and slave revolt to black slave culture studies, which, overturning the image of the slave as passive deracinated victim, posited a social contexts and psychological "elbow room" within which a Nat Turner could emerge not as an isolated instance of a 'religious fanatic' but as one expression of group resistance. (248–49)

The recovery of a history of resistance informed the struggles of the present. It is in this regard no coincidence that historians like Howard Zinn, also a prominent activist, referred to civil rights activists as "the new abolitionists."

This new understanding of history was mirrored by literary experiments in narrativizing and problematizing history—a phenomenon which became all the more polarized and explosive after the 1968 publication of William Styron's *The Confession of Nat Turner*. This hotly debated, polarizing work of fiction brought national attention to debates about the uses and abuses of the history of slavery. The debate around Styron's work crystallized many of these debates on the relationship between history and fiction, as well as the politics and ideologies such narratives lay bare. As Stone writes:

> Styron's novel is clearly part of a generation long movement in liberal America to recognize and redress some of the crimes and inequities suffered by blacks since slavery. However misguided or misunderstood, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* represent its southern author's attempt, through a fictional/autobiographical narrative, to reimagine slavery and white racism from inside one slave's mind. The shift in perspective from the tradition of Faulkner, Twain, Melville and Stowe is paralleled—and in part caused—by the major shift in historical explanations that occurred during these same years. What Gene Wise might have called a 'paradigm shift' in the historiography of southern and/or black history involved adopting the point of view of slaves (and later of freedmen) and enlarging the sources from which new explanations of slavery and resistance were written. (Stone 249)

Styron's work is notable because of the ideological chasm it revealed between the liberal white publishing elite and a new generation of Black intellectuals, historians and thinkers who rejected Styron's narrative as inherently imbued with a racist logic that had governed previous research into and slave resistance. In a period that would become increasingly dominated by the politics of identity, Styron's choice of the fictional personal narrative as a form to tell Nat Turner's story

is both reflective of and diametrically opposed to the literary logic of the period. Critics, however, pointed out Styron's insistence on Nat Turner's sexual desire for Margaret Whitehead (and the complete absence of any mention of his historical wife) as well the addition of an entirely fictional early homosexual episode, all of which serve to root the violence of Turner's rebellion in his repressed sexual desire. Other critics condemned his depiction as a religious fanatic with little connection to the slave community. Styron's depiction of the slave community, his lack of attention to forms of resistance, and the complete absence of references to other revolts or to the ideological results of the rebellion likewise came under attack. The attempt to locate Turner's rebellion in his personal psyche rather than the social conditions of slavery was seen as an attempt to pathologize Turner and to obscure the political nature of his rebellion. By extension, the rebellions of the 1960s could be attributed to individual trauma or psychology rather than the continued legacy of racism which drove people to fight back.

The plethora of responses to Styron's work brought Nat Turner into the public realm. It also inspired a wide variety of literary responses, both implicit and explicit. In her preface to *Dessa Rose*, a novel whose female slave protagonist leads a minor uprising on a coffle, is imprisoned as a result, and interviewed while in prison by a Thomas Gray-like figure, Sherley Anne Williams explicitly refers to her "outrage" at Styron's book (Williams, "Author's Note" 5). Other works such as *The Chaneysville Incident* implicitly respond to the debate provoked by Styron's work. In all of these works, recovering and narrativizing a history of slave resistance becomes a lens through which to examine political debates in the present. In the aftermath of Watts and other urban rebellions throughout the nation, the murders of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., and the rise of the Black Power movement, each work engages with questions of cross-race alliances, the right to self-defense, the role of violence in resistance, the strategies of the movement, and the political role of history in guiding twentieth-century struggles against racism.

Arne Bontemps *Black Thunder*, notably republished in 1968, makes clear the relevance of such narratives in the late sixties. In his 1968 preface, he writes, "Time is not a river. Time is a pendulum" and argues that his work is perhaps more relevant in 1968 that it was at the time of its original publication. He argues, "Had the frustrations dormant in Watts at that date suddenly exploded in flame and anger, as they were eventually to do, (…) more readers might have then been in the mood to hear a tale of volcanic rumblings among angry blacks—and the end of patience (…) Now that *Black Thunder* is published again, after more than thirty years, I cannot help wondering it its story will be better understood by Americans, both black and white"(Bontemps xxiii-xxix).

The late sixties and seventies provided a fertile ground for such narratives to be recovered, written and widely discussed. As Ellison argued, "…*everybody* reads now. *Everybody* is American whether they call themselves separatists, black separatists, secessionists or what not. And everybody is saying: 'Damn it, tell it like *I* think it is.' [A]nd this is a real problem for the novelist" (cited quoted in Stone 17). It is in this context that Butler's *Kindred* is written, participating in its own way in this larger paradigm shift in —reconstructing a history from the bottom up, but through the lens of a 1970s narrator. Butler is one of several novelists whose fictional narratives mirror the revolution in the historiography of slavery by reexamining that history from the perspective of the political climate of the 1960s and 70s.

Truth Is Stranger than Fiction: From Slave Narrative to Neo-Slave Narrative

The autobiographical slave narrative was a central tool of the abolitionist movement, used to garner support for the emancipation of slaves. These narratives sought to challenge the "objectivity" of the "master" narrative of slavery by recounting the *slaves'* experience of the institution, exposing its brutality and inhumanity as well as those of the people who would uphold and defend it. As Gilroy notes, slave narratives are part of

> a tradition of writing in which autobiography becomes an act of simultaneous self-creation and self-emancipation. . . . What Richard Wright would later identify as the aesthetics of personalism flows from these narratives and shows that in the hands of the slaves the particular can wear the mantle of truth and reason as readily as the universal. (Gilroy 69)

The personal experiences of slaves, in many of these narratives, are recounted as a means of exposing the collective experience of slavery. As McBride argues in discussing *The History of Mary Prince*, many slave narratives "impl[y] the impossibility of telling an individual tale. . . . This is why entire moments of narrative flourish are spent in these texts describing the treatment of slaves other than the narrator. While the other slaves are not the slave who is witnessing in the narrative, they are part of a collective slave body by condition" (McBride 10). The former slave turned activist Frederick Douglass, in his own autobiographical writing, is very conscious of the purpose of his narrative as part of a collective history that has been excluded from dominant historical narratives and as part of the struggle for collective emancipation from slavery. In the conclusion of *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* he writes,

> I have written out my experience here, not in order to exhibit my wounds and bruises and to awaken and attract sympathy to myself personally, but as part of the history of a profoundly interesting period in American life and progress. . . . My part has been to tell the story of the slave. The story of the master never wanted for narrators. The masters, to tell their story, had at call all the talent and genius that wealth and influence could command. They have had their full day in court . . . and, if condemned, they have not been condemned unheard. (Douglass *Life* 912–13)

Douglass challenges the objectivity and authority of the "master's" narrative and posits his own as a means of constructing an alternate and oppositional history that, through the slave's experience and testimony, exposes the truth of slavery and establishes his narrative authority. As the literary tool of the abolitionist movement, the genre invoked the personal in the service of political change.

The development of what Rushdy, Mitchell, and other theorists call "neo-slave narratives" is the literary expression of the political debates and broader radicalization discussed above. The question of "truth" and narrative authority in histories and representations of slavery continues to be problematized in twentieth-century fictional and historical accounts of slavery. In the midst of the debates sparked by the Black Power and feminist movements, questions about "identity" and "authenticity" became all the more important. Unlike the housewife narratives of the feminist movement, the removal of the narrator and/or author from the personal experience of the history of slavery complicates its claim to truth and narrative authority. To solve this problem, many authors turned to family histories that, while "generational," were also extremely personal. If reclaiming the family was particularly important to African American women writers, to whom the right to a family had been historically denied, it was also a crucial medium

through which to provide authenticity to their written narratives. As Long argues, "American history is always family history, according to these novels, in that the degree of one's access to the past is determined by the intensity of one's connection to ancestors" (462). For Rushdy,

> Slavery is the family secret of America. It is secret in the sense that it haunts the national imaginary because it is 'what we think we know, what we can never forget, and what continually seems to elude our understanding'. Slavery is the event we need to rationalize in order to credit the democratic vision of the errand into the wilderness, the institution we need to explain as a central paradox in the creation of American freedom, the social system that thwarted the ideals of the nation's founding statements. (Rushdy 2)

Rushdy argues that the resurgence of study and inquiry into the history of slavery is also marked by a renewed interest in genealogy and the advent of prominent works such as Alex Haley's *Roots*. For Mitchell, this new genre can be defined as a "liberatory narrative" (Mitchell xii). Rushdy views these as "palimpsest narratives," a result of the "bitemporal perspective that shows the continuity and discontinuities from the period of slavery" (Rushdy 5). In these narratives, including Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*, Bradley's *Chaneysville Incident,* and *Kindred*, a 1970s narrator returns physically or metaphorically to "witness" slavery so as to explain the present. While Rushdy discusses neo-slave narratives and palimpsest narratives as distinct genres, they are both inspired by the same political impetus to return to America's slave past as a means to understand the present. They share similar concerns with narrative form as well as a political commitment to writing history (albeit fictional) from below while exploring models of resistance and overcoming the trauma of a history that continues to haunt our collective present.

The neo-slave narrative, as a genre, seeks to create a conscious link between past and present by reconstructing a history which is both fictional and "true," relying frequently on a mixture of oral histories and new historical research of the period. Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966) is one of the earliest incarnations of this new genre. Beaulieu sees *Jubilee* as a transitional text between the nineteenth- and twentieth-century versions of "slave" and "neo-slave" narratives. As neo-slave narratives develop, they become more removed from the "truth" and "authenticity" of the earlier neo-slave narratives. *Jubilee* and *Roots* are fictional works that are actually based on family histories. Later works are more clearly fictional, while maintaining the effect of truth and authenticity that the first-person fictional narrator provides. Nonetheless, these narratives maintain a historical connection through the generational ties of the author to his or her subject.

Ernest J. Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* is an earlier experiment in this genre. Told under the guise of tape-recorded interviews with a woman who, over the course of 110 years, lives through slavery, Reconstruction, the Great Depression, and the early years of the civil rights movement, the novel provides a direct conduit between past and present in the figure of Miss Jane Pittman. Introduced by a student, who convinces Miss Pittman to tell her story in 1962 by arguing that "her life's story can help me explain things to my students" because "Miss Jane's not in [the] books [they] already got" (Gaines v). This introduction, narrated by a fictional transcriber/ghostwriter who is absent from the rest of the narrative, gives Miss Jane's story shape and functions as an authenticating document similar to those frequently included in nineteenth-century slave narratives to ascertain their "truth."

The novel begins with Miss Jane Pittman's renaming by a Union soldier, who helps to liberate her plantation and symbolically takes away her "slave name" and gives her a new one. Covering more than a century of history, the narrative ends with the civil rights movement,

introduced through the character of Jimmy, seen early on as special, "the one"—a messianic figure who represents hope for renewal in the community. In his pursuit of an education, Jimmy is schooled by the civil rights movement, including notable figures such as Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr., before bringing the civil rights movement home. Despite the reticence of the older generation, he leads a fight to desegregate the town. Miss Jane Pittman leads the community to join in the struggle, marching on the courthouse to defend an act of civil disobedience Jimmy has planned. Surprised at the number of people who join her on the march, she is soon told that Jimmy has been shot and to cancel the march. The novel ends with her continuing to lead a march to town, despite many admonitions. Through the character of Miss Jane Pittman, Gaines establishes a link between the struggles of the past and present, creating a continuum of resistance from the Civil War and Reconstruction to the promise of the civil rights movement.

The History of Miss Jane Pittman, along with other early novels such as *Jubilee,* belong to the early civil rights movement in the South, personified by King and Parks and characterized by the strategy of nonviolent civil disobedience. By the late 1970s and 1980s, when *Kindred, The Chaneysville Incident*, and *Dessa Rose* are published*,* the debates sparked by Styron's narrative were much more prominent, thrown into relief by the Black Power movement. Born out of this political moment, *Kindred* engages in a literary project in which past and present become intertwined as they confront each other ideologically, politically, and physically. Arne Bontemps wrote that "time is not a river. Time is a pendulum" (xxiii–xxix). Its easy slippage in the narrative is a literary enactment of this idea, as the pendulum continues to swing and reverberate in the present, as Dana's present depends on her ability to ensure her ancestors' survival in the past.

By choosing to portray her protagonist as a writer, Butler, like other feminist writers of her time, engages in metafiction, exploring the limitations of traditional forms and challenging the ability of dominant historical narratives to capture the truth of America's slave past. As Sherley Anne Williams writes in her preface to *Dessa Rose*,

> Afro-Americans having survived by word of mouth—and made of that process a high art—remain at the mercy of literature and writing; often these have betrayed us. I loved history as a child, until some clear-eyed young Negro pointed out, quite rightly, that there was no place in the American past I could go and be free. I now know that slavery eliminated neither heroism nor love; it provided occasions for their expressions" (Williams 6).

In a similar vein, *Kindred* seeks to recover this type of history and commit it to writing. In the process, fiction becomes a crucial tool for exploring the silenced spaces of history and engaging with contemporary political debates through an imagined journey into the past.

Rushdy takes issue with the classification of *Kindred* as a neo-slave narrative because it moves from past to present in a form he calls a "palimpsest" narrative. Butler's narrative clearly shares many of the features of contemporary neo-slave narratives, however, precisely because it hovers between genres: it is a neo-slave narrative in which a first-person narrator recounts her experience as a slave in the antebellum South, w*hile also being* a narrative of the 1970s in which a contemporary narrator seeks to understand the slave past in such a way as to illuminate the struggles of the present. The use of time travel in what Butler herself calls a "grim fantasy" (rather than science fiction, because there is never any scientific explanation of the time travel) complicates attempts to classify this work. By straddling different genres, Butler constructs an alternative historical narrative that actively engages with the issues of the present while

problematizing the very idea of historical truth. Butler seeks to recover the history of slavery to expose its lasting legacy and impact on modern American society. This task is far from simple and requires not only a return to the past but a form capable of giving expression to that journey.

Kindred's structure clearly draws on many of the conventions of the slave narrative, as outlined in Olney's "Master Plan for Slave Narratives." Even the cover of the 1979 edition of the novel, with the photograph of a woman whom we can only assume is meant to represent Dana (or possibly her ancestor Alice, to whom we are told Dana bears a strong resemblance) is reminiscent of the engraved portraits featured on the covers of many slave narratives in order to ascertain and authenticate the narrator's identity. That both Dana and Kevin are orphans aligns them with the narrators of slave narratives, who were frequently separated from their birth parents, particularly their mothers, at a young age and thus could only provide "a sketchy account of parentage" (Olney 153). For Dana, this likewise serves to explain the dearth of information about her ancestors or family history, forcing her to rely almost entirely on her actual experience. The narrative itself includes many of the conventions of the slave narrative: "a description of a cruel master . . . [and] overseer, details of first observed whipping and numerous subsequent whippings, with women frequently the victims. . . [and a] record of the barriers raised against slave literacy" as Dana attempts to teach slaves on the Weylin plantation to read and write (Olney 153). In addition, the novel describes in detail "the amounts and kinds of food and clothing given to slaves," an "account of a slave auction" as play-acted by children on the plantation, and a "description of patrols, of failed attempt(s) to escape, of pursuit by men and dogs" (Olney 153). While Dana escapes from slavery, the escape is hardly "successful"; the novel ends with Dana still questing for documentation and the truth of her own experience.

Kindred begins and ends by problematizing truth and its representation—or its (in)ability to be told. The novel begins with Dana in the hospital, reflecting on her loss. She begins, "I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm. . . . And I lost about a year of my life and much of the comfort and security I had not valued until it was gone" (Butler 9). When she attempts to explain her injury to the police, she is at a loss for words. This inability to express truth is reflected in fragmented dialogue and language. Language cannot articulate the truth of slavery. The reader is thus warned from the beginning that there will be no full resolution to the problems the narrative poses. As a preface to the novel, this dialogue functions as an apologia. Like Equiano, whose dedication "entreats your [the reader's] pardon for addressing to you a work so wholly devoid of literary merit" (Equiano 17), Butler's opening dialogue highlights the narrator's failure to represent and capture the full depth and meaning of her experience. Indeed, by the end of the novel, Dana and Kevin are no more sure how to tell the truth and prove the reality and veracity of their own experiences. Despite the scars on her body, Dana continues to search for "solid evidence" or textual documentation that would prove the accuracy of her own experiences.

Dana's role as a writer serves to further develop her as the narrator of her own modern slave narrative. Their common interest in writing brings Dana and Kevin together. Dana says, "I was working out of a casual labor agency—we regulars called it the slave market" (Butler 52). When she first meets Kevin, he is about to "escape" from the "slave market"—he has just sold his first book. When asked about her own writing, she says "bitterly, 'What would a writer be doing working out of a slave market?'" (Butler 53). The relationship between writing and slavery is thus explicitly thematized in reference to the present. Slavery, from the antebellum South to modern wage slavery, stifles literacy and writing—yet writing can provide a means of escape from the "institution." Notably, Kevin, not Dana, is the successful writer, while Dana has published a few stories only, creating an unequal power relationship.

As Dana begins to uncover the truth of her own ancestry, she also exposes the nation's "family secret." The temporal span of the novel, from Dana's twenty-sixth birthday to the bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence, reflects the shift from personal narrative to the narrative of a nation still haunted by the trauma of slavery and its legacy of systematic, structural racism. Dana's first trip to the past takes place on her twenty-sixth birthday. This serves to mark her narrative as a personal one, beginning with a day that marks her inception as an individual; on the other hand, it invokes Douglass's narrative by pointing to the political significance of knowing one's birthday at all. It reminds the reader of the political significance of memory. As Mitchell points out, when Douglass claims that he never "met a slave who could tell of his birthday . . . What he is really saying (we suppose) is that slavery is a *prevention* of memory: no slave was allowed to 'remember' his or her birthday either in the sense of knowing when it was or celebrating its annual return" (Mitchell 203). Simultaneously, the fact that Dana *does* know her own birthday points to her temporal distance from slavery. As she comments when Weylin asks her for her age and birth year, "At home, a person who hesitated over his birthdate was probably about to lie. As I spoke though, I realized that here, a person might hesitate over his birthdate simply because he didn't know it. Sarah didn't know hers" (Butler 90).

By locating the novel in 1976, Butler also points to her own distance from the movement that inspired the novel. Although she was writing only eight years after her encounter with the Black Power movement in Pasadena, the political distance between 1968 and 1976 is immense. Butler's often ambivalent relationship to the movement is central to the novel. While she maintains a critical distance from the movement and its rejection or belittlement of the struggles of previous generations, her work is sympathetic to its militancy and refusal to compromise. Butler, like other writers engages with these debates to assess the legacy of the past on the present. Written after the movement's decline and destruction by forces such as COINTELPRO, Butler's work is less optimistic than novels such as *Miss Jane Pittman* and *Jubilee*, focusing instead on the enduring impact of racism and inequality in the post–civil rights United States.

Black Power and the Right to Self-Defense

As soon as the Black Power movement emerged e in the late 1960s, the media vilified its politics as (allegedly) being based on the twin evils of separatism and violence. Of course, the debate around violence had long been a topic of debate—necessitated by the utter brutality and violence of the Jim Crow South. The question of how best to combat the very real threat that the violence of the segregationists posed, tactically and strategically, was crucial to the emergent civil rights movement. In 1955, the debate came to a head. In the aftermath of *Brown vs. Board of Education*, there was an increase in violence against African Americans, including high-profile lynchings such as the murder of Emmett Till, which galvanized the civil rights movement nationally. As Roy Wilkins put it, in Mississippi, African Americans were given the ultimatum to "agree and knuckle under, or flee, or die" (quoted in Bloom 137). At the same time there was a growing sense of rebellion against these increasingly intolerable conditions. "Confrontation was becoming inevitable. The question was where it would be, what form it would take, and what its outcome would be" (Bloom 137).

The Montgomery bus boycott erupted in this moment to become one of the most important struggles of the decade. As it gained national attention, so too did its leader, Martin Luther King Jr. The architect of the civil rights movement's strategy of nonviolent civil disobedience did not, however, enter the struggle in Montgomery with his ideas fully formed. Confronting strategic and tactical questions in Montgomery reminded King of Thoreau's essay

"On Civil Disobedience" and inspired him to grapple with its theoretical and practical implications for the civil rights movement. While their demands were at first moderate and did not fundamentally challenge segregation, the intransigence of the white establishment radicalized King, teaching him that "no one gives up privileges without strong resistance" (quoted in Bloom 140). The theoretical development of King's strategy of nonviolent civil disobedience in this context was based as much on practical as philosophical grounds. As Bloom notes, King was concerned that violent conflict would keep African Americans in a minority and ensure their defeat. In addition, he felt that nonviolence was crucial to broadening the movement, allowing greater participation and thus strengthening the base that could be mobilized for collective mass action (Bloom 141–43).

The events of 1955 ushered in a decade-long debate on the question of violence within the civil rights movement. This growing debate was also reflected in studies into the slave past. Stampp and Elkin, among other historians, focused on "the role of violence in maintaining and destroying the system" (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 24). For James Baldwin, the civil rights movement was, in fact, the "latest slave rebellion" ("On Language, Race and the Black Writer" 115). Citing Malcolm X's comment that "if you are fighting for your civil rights, then that means you are not a citizen" (quoted in Baldwin 115), Baldwin argues that the civil rights movement is an "insurrection," the latest in a history of slave rebellions against codes that continue to subjugate African Americans and deny their personhood (114–17). Writers, activists, and historians mined history for answers to contemporary political questions. Around questions of violence, the right to self-defense, separatism, and nationalism, there was no shortage of material. From John Brown to Frederick Douglass to William Lloyd Garrison, debates in the abolitionist movement were fraught with questions about organization, strategy, and resistance that resonated with the "new abolitionists" of the 1960s.

In *Kindred*, Butler walks a fine line, both rejecting much of the Black nationalist politics she encountered in college and categorically refuting the logic of those politics' most virulent critics. Violence is a recurring motif and a crucial question that Dana must resolve if she is ever to escape the grips of her slave ancestry. At the beginning of the novel, Dana has no awareness of her past. As Beaulieu argues, this can be seen in her "careless reference" to her temp agency as a "slave market" (118)—an attempt to make a connection between oppression and exploitation in the past and present, but one that trivializes the violence and repression of slavery. When she first travels back in time to the Weylin plantation, she exhibits a certain naïveté, believing that she can escape by simply writing herself a pass. While literacy does give her a certain authority, it does not ultimately help her to escape from slavery. In one of her early formative experiences, Dana finds a brutally beaten man hung on a tree whom we later discover is Alice's father (and thus Dana's great-great-great grandfather).

The reality of violence shocks Dana in a way for which the modern world has left her thoroughly unprepared:

> I shut my eyes and tensed my muscles against an urge to vomit.
>
> I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies. I had seen the too-red blood substitute streaked across their backs and heard their well-rehearsed screams. But I hadn't lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves. I was probably less prepared for the reality than the child crying not far from me. (Butler 36)

Butler here makes clear the impossibility of any media simulacrum to communicate the reality of violence and suffering for victims. She was well aware that her novel could not possibly fully convey the horrors and violence of slavery. That Dana immediately infantilizes herself in this scene is a testament to the failure of her modern "liberation" to help her; she finds herself weaker than many of her ancestors—no matter how passive they might appear to some of her more militant seventies counterparts. Shortly thereafter, Dana herself is attacked by a patroller and beaten with a level of violence she has never experienced. At one point, he has his hands near his eyes and Dana realizes her own potential for violence:

> I could stop him, cripple him, in this primitive age, destroy him.
>
> I had only to move my fingers a little and jab them into the soft tissues, gouge away his sight and give him more agony than he was giving me.
>
> But I couldn't do it. The thought sickened me, froze my hands where they were. I had to do it! But I couldn't. . . .
>
> The man knocked my hands from his face and moved back from me—and I cursed myself for my utter stupidity. My chance was gone, and I'd done nothing. My squeamishnesss belonged in another age, but I'd brought it along with me. Now I would be sold into slavery because I didn't have the stomach to defend myself in the most effective way. Slavery! And there was a more immediate threat. (Butler 43)

This crucial moment sheds light on Butler's views on violence and self-defense. Whatever the merits or flaws of nonviolent civil disobedience as a tactic, Butler unequivocally defends the right to self-defense—making it clear that the violence of the slave is in no way equivalent to that of the master. Indeed, self-defense is at times necessary for survival. From this point on, Dana carries a knife and tells Kevin that she would have no qualms using it. This moment echoes Stokely Carmichael's description of his own turning point as he watched police beat protesters: "I knew I could never be hit again without hitting back" (quoted in Joseph 128). Despite Dana's ambiguous politics, from this moment on, there is no question in her mind about whether it is morally or politically right to use violence to defend herself. As she tells Kevin, "Before last night I might not have been sure, but now, yes" (47).

If Butler thus affirms the right of the oppressed to use violence in self-defense, she also questions its efficacy in the face of a system whose brutality and complete denial of humanity to its victims makes resistance more complicated than simply fighting back. Even armed, Dana tells Kevin, "I just can't make myself believe I can survive in that place. Not with a knife, not even with a gun" (Butler 48). While she might be able to defend her life against one patroller, the systemic violence of daily life under slavery is far more difficult to resist. In this world, to survive means enduring a thousand daily violations. As Dana explains, "Oh, they won't kill me. Not unless I'm silly enough to resist the other things they'd rather do—like raping me, throwing me into jail as a runaway, and then selling me to the highest bidder when they see that my owner isn't coming to claim me" (48). For Dana, indeed, rape is a prospect worse than death; the possibility of enduring such a violation for the purpose of her own—or others'—survival seems an impossible sacrifice. Yet in fighting back against the patroller's attempt to rape her, Dana realizes that she could have put both herself and her ancestors in even greater danger. She explains to Kevin that while such an act of violence might be justified, it could also be suicidal:

> Oh, but I'm talking about suicide, Kevin—suicide or worse. For instance, I would have used your knife against that patroller last night if I'd had it. I would have killed him. That would have ended the immediate danger to me and I probably wouldn't have come home. But if that patroller's friends had caught me, they would have killed me. And if they hadn't caught me, they would probably have gone after Alice's mother. They . . . they may have anyway. So either I would have died, or I would have caused another innocent person to die. (Butler 51)

While violence might well be justified, it is not necessarily the most viable form of resistance. Butler also makes clear the limitations and dangers of individual acts of violence in the face of an institution based on *systemic* violence. In the wake of Watts and COINTELPRO, activists had to face the idea that individual acts of violence might unwittingly invite greater repressive violence against the people they were intended to defend. Such an understanding reframes the debate around violence in terms of strategy, not morality. When Kevin argues that if Dana's ancestors could survive, she can too, Dana remarks that she lacks the qualities that kept them alive: "Strength. Endurance. To survive, my ancestors had to put up with more than I ever could. Much more" (Butler 51). As Dana comes to realize, to endure slavery does not mean to be passive. As the novel progresses, this tension between resistance and survival is a constant dilemma as Dana attempts to negotiate the limited options available to her in the antebellum South. The question becomes how much violence she can endure for the purposes of survival—and at what point is survival not worth the degradation and dehumanization it requires? Dana is forced to examine how her own individual actions and decisions affect the collective slave community on the Weylin plantation. Through her investigation of these questions, Butler implicitly intervenes in contemporary debates about violence, self-defense, and resistance. In doing so, she both rescues Nat Turner from Styron and raises bigger questions about the consequences of his revolt.

The House Slave & The Field Slave: Appeasement, Negotiation and Militancy

Dana's role throughout the novel is troubling as she increasingly attempts to mediate between Rufus, the young, white "master" of the plantation (who Dana discovers is also her great-great grandfather), and members of the slave community, particularly Alice. Her ultimately unsuccessful negotiation must be read as a commentary on debates around collaboration and cooptation in the civil rights movement. Dana wavers throughout the novel between overt resistance and a form of collaboration in her attempts to influence Rufus and prevent him from becoming the brutal slaveholder he is destined to be. While at times she believes she exerts some control over Rufus, he ultimately uses her as a tool to enforce his will on Alice. Dana's mistaken belief that she can overcome the master/slave relationship proves futile and destructive. Dana's role in enabling the rape of Alice, her great-great-grandmother, calls into question strategies of cooperation and collaboration with the oppressor and leaves the reader somewhat uneasy with Dana's explanations of her actions.

Read from the political perspective of the late sixties and early seventies, Butler's depiction of slavery and slave resistance—in particular, Dana's role—actively engages with debates about collaboration and resistance that emerged from the post–Black Power split in the civil rights movement. Returning to the history of slavery to debate the strategies and tactics of the present was not solely a literary endeavor, but a common political trope. This is perhaps nowhere more at work than in Malcolm X's famous speech, "Message to the Grassroots" in which he uses "the house Negro and the field Negro" as an allegory for the schism between his

own politics and the more "moderate" politics of nonviolent civil disobedience. Speaking at the Grassroots Leadership Conference in Detroit in 1963, shortly after the national March on Washington, Malcolm X made the case for a revolution that abandoned the tactics of nonviolence and explained the fears of moderate leaders:

> There were two kinds of slaves, the house Negro and the field Negro. The house Negroes—they lived in the house with master, they dressed pretty good, they ate good because they ate his food—what he left. . . . and they loved the master more than the master loved himself. They would give their life to save the master's house—quicker than the master would. If the master said, "We got a good house here," the house Negro would say, "Yeah, we got a good house here." Whenever the master said "we," he said "we." That's how you can tell a house Negro.
> [. . .]
>
> [The] modern house Negro loves his master. . . . And if someone comes to you right now and says, "Let's separate," you say the same thing that the house Negro said on the plantation. "What you mean, separate? From America? This good white man? . . . I ain't left nothing in Africa," that's what you say. Why, you left your mind in Africa.
>
> On that same plantation, there was the field Negro. The field Negroes—those were the masses. There were always more Negroes in the field than there were Negroes in the house. The Negro in the field caught hell. He ate leftovers. In the house they ate high up on the hog. The Negro in the field didn't get anything but what was left of the insides of the hog. . . . The field Negro was beaten from morning to night; he lived in a shack, in a hut; he wore old, castoff clothes. He hated his master. . . . If someone came to the field Negro and said, "Let's separate, let's run," he didn't say "Where we going?" He'd say, "Any place is better than here." You've got field Negroes in America today. I'm a field Negro. The masses are field Negroes. (X 11–12)

The dichotomy Malcolm X creates is emblematic of the heated debates in the movement and the attempt to read the debates of the present back into the slave past. As an allegory it had a powerful effect, illustrating the divisions between sections of the civil rights movement while dismissing those who were willing to compromise and collaborate with those in power as "Uncle Toms" who held the movement back:

> Just as the slavemaster of that day used Tom, the house Negro, to keep the field Negroes in check, the same old slavemaster today has Negroes who are nothing but modern Uncle Toms, twentieth-century Uncle Toms, to keep you and me in check, to keep us under control, keep us passive and peaceful and nonviolent. That's Tom making you nonviolent. . . . The slave master took Tom and dressed him well, fed him well and even gave him a little education—a *little* education; gave him a long coat and a top hat and made all the other slaves look up to him. Then he used Tom to control them. The same strategy that was used in those days is used today, by the same white man. (Malcolm X 12-13)

Here, Malcolm X launches a much sharper, if still slightly veiled, critique of King on the heels of his failure to desegregate Albany, Georgia. In particular, he argues against the many compromises King made in the lead-up to the march, including cutting the more militant

speeches from the program to appease the White House in the hopes of gaining support for the civil rights cause. In evoking the history of slavery for his political message, Malcolm X tapped into the immense frustration and anger of many African Americans, particularly in urban areas, who were tired of hearing "wait" and knowing it meant "never" (King 88). His use of the nickname "Uncle Tom"—based on Harriet Beecher Stowe's iconic character who refuses to fight or defend himself—for the moderates of the movement escalated the debate around strategy and tactics, portraying anyone who rejected the militancy he espoused as being in the service of the white man, consciously working to hold the movement back. These words resounded among younger militants who vociferously rejected the politics of earlier civil rights activists.

For Butler, as for other writers of the period, the truth was much more complicated. While Ishmael Reed, who was very critical of this interpretation of the past, overtly defends the "Uncle Toms" of history, placing them in dialogue with the Nat Turners rather than at cross purposes, Butler embarks on a more complicated investigation into power and resistance through Dana's return to the past. Butler rejects any purist or dogmatic understanding of resistance, arguing instead for a deeper understanding of power structures under slavery and demonstrating that resistance was plenty and varied. Butler's characters struggle with questions of survival, resistance, and the near-daily decision whether to revolt in ways that might be suicidal or to submit to the brutality of slave life so as to live on to fight another day. Despite Dana's "militancy," she feels thoroughly unable to live up to her ancestors under these circumstances. She in a sense becomes the "Uncle Tom" of the novel as a mediator between Rufus and the slaves. Nonetheless, she also engages in acts of resistance and rebellion—some of which come at a considerable cost to herself and the rest of the slave community on the Weylin plantation.

Dana's central paradox is that her existence depends on keeping Rufus, a white slave owner and Dana's great-great-grandfather, alive long enough to fulfill his historic role of raping Alice, her great-great-grandmother (and fictional double), and beginning the ancestral line that will provide Dana. This conundrum defies the militancy of Butler's contemporaries, placing Dana in a world where she must—or believes she must—collaborate and appease so as to ensure her own survival and that of her family. In her analysis of the novel, Angela Mitchell argues, "Dana can be read as a heroic figure [for saving Rufus and family], even though her success is dependent upon the sexual enslavement of her great-great-grandmother" (Mitchell 45). To accept this interpretation, however, is to elide the far more complicated questions about collaboration and resistance at heart of a novel that consistently and purposefully eludes easy readings. While Dana accepts her historical mission without question, her ethical dilemma cannot simply be read as an act of family preservation. It is also a supreme act of self-preservation. To allow Rufus to die, to rebel against Alice's sexual enslavement and to possibly prevent such an act from occurring (which is entirely possible), could mean her own death—or, rather, it could prevent her birth. The assumption that Dana must keep Rufus alive long enough to ensure the birth of Hagar and Joseph remains unquestioned throughout the novel. For Dana, any act of resistance or comparative freedom in the present is predicated upon the rape of her great-great-grandmother. Dana is faced with the actual possibility raised by her classmate: the possibility of killing—or allowing to die—the ancestors who held her back. But to do so, she realizes, would be an act of self-annihilation. Indeed, the militancy that inspired the novel is, we are reminded, only possible among those who survived. The cost of that survival is a central motif in *Kindred*.

In fulfilling her historic role, Dana must walk—and frequently blur—the thin line between collaboration and resistance as she seeks to negotiate a power structure within which her own role is less than certain. In the process, she encounters multiple forms of resistance and

frequently finds herself far less militant than her ancestors. Her relationship with Rufus complicates her understanding of the plantation's hierarchy while opening her up to charges of collaboration and isolating her from many of her fellow slaves. Rufus becomes a perennial blind spot for Dana. She seeks to hold onto the humanity she sees in his childhood self long after the brutality of slavery has transformed him into a slaveowner, a white man for whom Dana and Alice are two sides of the same woman whose sole purpose is to submit to and fulfill his desires.

From her first encounter with the young Rufus, Dana questions her ethical responsibility vis-à-vis the accident prone young boy. For Dana, saving Rufus is necessary to save her family. As she says, "Was that why I was here? Not only to insure the survival of one accident-prone small boy, but to insure my family's survival, my own survival? . . . If I was to live, if others were to live, he must live. I didn't dare test the paradox" (Butler 29). Dana's immediate acceptance of this historical role, despite her clear anxiety, is far from obvious. That history could depend on an unconceived descendent is a time-travel paradox that Butler does not try to solve (nor does she appear to have any interest in doing so). We have no choice but to accept Dana's logic, despite a disquieting sense that perhaps that the truth is far more complicated. Whether "true" or not, Dana perceives her own role in preserving this history as necessary both in terms of her own survival and as a means of preventing even further brutality, such as the separation of families that would be likely to occur should Rufus die. She does make certain attempts to resist this history by influencing Rufus, verbally attempting to "mold him" into a more humane person and to influence his treatment of those under the grip of slavery:

> Someday Rufus would own the plantation. Someday he would be the slaveholder, responsible in his own right for what happened to the people who lived in those half-hidden cabins. . . . I would have all I could do to look after myself. But I would help him as best I could. And I would try to keep friendship with him, maybe plant a few ideas in his mind that would help both me and the people who would be his slaves in the years to come. I might even make things easier for Alice. (Butler 68)

As a child, Rufus gives Dana the illusion that she has some power over him. This delusion leads her to an overblown idea of her own power relative to the institution of slavery and the material conditions of such a society, which ultimately have a far greater impact on his development. Likewise, she asserts her role in history by attempting to teach slaves to read and write. She refuses to accept the logic that all children will blindly follow in their parents' footsteps and sees herself as an unforeseen historical variable that could possibly transform the dynamics of the Weylin plantation (if not slavery itself). She explains to Kevin that "even here, not all children let themselves be molded into what their parents want them to be." Kevin replies, "You're gambling. Hell, you're gambling against history." Dana replies, "What else can I do? I've got to try, Kevin, and if trying means taking small risks and putting up with small humiliations now so I can survive later, I'll do it" (Butler 83). Dana's decision to "gamble" with history lies in stark contrast to her complete unwillingness to imagine the birth of her own family history from somewhere other than this brutal and violent rape. It is this contradiction, as a character both in and apart from the Weylin plantation slave community, both a "slave" and a liberated woman of 1976, both powerless and powerful, that makes Dana an intriguing character through whom to investigate larger issues of power, resistance, appeasement, and freedom.

Kevin provides an important foil to Dana on the Weylin plantation. Sharing more with him than with much of the slave community of which she becomes apart, she is still mired in slavery in ways Kevin is not. As she tells him after watching children play an "auction game":

> "You might be able to go through this whole experience as an observer," I said. "I can understand that because most of the time, I'm still an observer. It's protection. It's nineteen seventy-six shielding and cushioning eighteen nineteen for me. But now and then, like with the kids' game, I can't maintain the distance. I'm drawn all the way into eighteen nineteen, and I don't know what to do. I ought to do something though. I know that. (Butler 101)

Try she does, teaching Nigel to read and attempting to provide support for resistance while protecting Alice and her progeny. Nonetheless, she is disturbed by the ease with which the logic of slavery takes over her sense of self and limits her scope of the "possible," saying, "The ease. Us, the children. . . . I never realized how easily people could be trained to accept slavery" (Butler 101). This both echoes and rejects the logic of her fellow student in 1968, showing how "the man became a slave," as Douglass does, while also pointing to the subjective role of individuals acting to resist the complete dehumanization of slavery. Despite her comments, it becomes increasingly clear that what appears to be an "easy" acceptance of slavery is far from it. Dana's attempt to resist the logic of slavery by teaching Nigel and Carrie to read is quickly put to an end by a beating so violent it sends her back to 1976. Indeed, it is notable that, while Rufus calls Dana back in time, excruciating pain and the fear of death or annihilation are the only mechanisms through which Dana can return to her own world. "Family" might call her back in time, but, when her own survival is threatened, it is the present, far removed from her kin in the antebellum South, that provides her asylum.

Dana's tragic flaw is her frequent overestimation of her influence on Rufus—particularly as he grows older. This is particularly evident in her relationship with Alice. As Rufus grows up, he becomes increasingly violent in his sexual desire for Alice. Dana is called back to save him after Alice's husband Isaac beats him—a turning point in the narrative, as Rufus irrevocably reveals the nature of power and his own attachment to it as a "master." Isaac is tortured and sold south for his actions. The "free" Alice is punished for aiding him by being sold into slavery—purchased, of course, by none other than Rufus himself. Thus Butler exposes beyond any doubt the limits and contradictions of "freedom" under the slaveocracy of the antebellum South. While Dana defends Alice's right to refuse Rufus's ownership of her body, her life, and herself, she unwittingly becomes a conduit for Rufus's destruction of Alice, despite her conscious empathy and identification with Alice.

Indeed, she plays a role in Alice's rape by acting as Rufus's messenger. While Dana tells Alice honestly that she would resist any attempted rape, she nonetheless becomes complicit by acting as the voice of Rufus's threat to Alice. Once Alice is captured and forced into slavery, it is Dana who must convince her to acquiesce to her new life. In the following dialogue, Dana's hypocrisy is exposed as Alice attacks her for intervening to save Rufus and "save" Alice only to condemn her to a life of slavery. Upon learning of her fate, Alice responds:

> "Mama said she'd rather be dead than be a slave," she said.
>
> "Better to stay alive," I said. "At least there's a chance to get free." I thought of the sleeping pills in my bag and wondered just how great a hypocrite I was. It was so easy to advise other people to live with their pain. (Butler 157)

Later in the same conversation, Alice accuses Dana of betrayal:

> "If you had any sense, you would have let [Rufus] die!"

> "If I had, it wouldn't have kept you and Isaac from being caught. It might have gotten you both killed, though, if anyone guessed what Isaac had done."
>
> "Doctor-nigger," she said with contempt. "Think you know so much. Reading-nigger. *White-nigger!* Why didn't you know enough to let me die?" (Butler 157–60)

In this passage, Dana's hypocrisy is laid bare: she insists upon survival at any cost for Alice even though she herself would prefer death to the degrading violence inflicted by slavery. Alice's contempt for Dana as she increasingly becomes Rufus's pawn echoes the Black Power advocates' bitterness toward the politics of appeasement. The climactic moment in Dana's dilemma is when Rufus enlists her to convince Alice not to resist him. Dana responds,

> "I can't stop you from raping the woman, Rufe, but I'm not going to help you do it either."
>
> "You want her to get hurt?"
>
> . . . All I want you to do is fix it so I don't have to beat her. You're no friend of hers if you won't do that much!"
>
> Of hers! He had all the low cunning of his class. No, I couldn't refuse to help the girl—help her avoid at least some pain. But she wouldn't think much of me for helping her this way. I didn't think much of myself. (Butler 163–64)

Despite her guilt and hesitation, Dana rationalizes her decision, which is based on a genuine desire to prevent Alice from suffering even greater pain. However, by Dana's own logic, the rape must occur so as to ensure her own birth. Thus, to resist this part of history, Dana would have to negate her own life—a fact that makes her decision to "help" Alice far less altruistic.

Whatever her motivation, Dana's rationalization is a disturbing example of the dangers of the strategy of appeasement and cooperation with the oppressor; wittingly or not, she becomes a medium through which Rufus exerts his power and oppresses those under his control. This incident *should* convince her once and for all that she exerts no power over Rufus, nor will Rufus ever break from "his class" or do anything but uphold the power of the oppressor over the oppressed. This harsh lesson echoes a plethora of similar "lessons" the civil rights movement learned. For example, SNCC gave in to Kennedy's demands to stop the Freedom Rides in favor of voter registration so as to earn tax exempt status which would help fund its cause. Instead, its members soon found themselves jailed, "forc[ing] SNCC to re-examine and eventually reject its liberalism and reliance on the Democrats" (Shawki 165). Likewise, supporters of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party argued in 1968, after their betrayal by the "moderates" of the Democratic Convention who seated the Dixiecrats in their place, that "things would never be the same. . . . Never again would we be lulled into believing that our task was exposing injustices so that the 'good' people of America would eliminate them" (cited in Shawki 169). As King famously argued in "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," "freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed" (87).

Alice echoes Malcolm X when she accuses Dana of complicity, saying: "That's what you for—to help white folks keep niggers down. That's why he sent you to me" (Butler 167). Despite all evidence to the contrary, Dana continues to underestimate Rufus's power and brutality and chooses to collaborate with him, deluded by the belief that in their personal relationship she can be "equal to Rufus." The impossibility of such equality is made obvious when she trusts Rufus to

keep his end of the deal and send her letters to Kevin. It is Alice, not Dana, who discovers the stolen letters, exposing Dana's naïvete. Her deluded belief that she can influence him is a tragic miscalculation with grave consequences. If as a child Rufus learned anything from Dana about the injustices of slavery, this matters little to him as an adult for whom the material benefits of slavery and its corresponding distortion and destruction of any moral compass make it impossible to view Alice (and, ultimately, Dana) as anything beyond property. No matter how passionately attached Rufus is to both Alice and Dana, the rules that determine these relationships are not personal but the political. Under the rules of the plantation, his passion becomes their pain.

As the novel progresses and Rufus becomes more and more brutal, Dana does begin to question the efficacy of her own forms of resistance, realizing that Rufus "had already found the way to control me—by threatening others. That was safer than threatening me directly, and it worked" (Butler 169). As the failures of her strategy become apparent, she also reevaluates the slave resistance she witnesses on the plantation. This is particularly evident in her description of Sarah as a "mammy" figure. Sarah is one of the few slaves who enjoys the same level of freedom as Dana—an honor that earns them the ire and resentment of other slaves. Unlike Dana, however, Sarah survives by rejecting any possibility for resistance. In the midst of a discussion on running away, for example, Sarah comments, "Nobody ever comes back to tell you about it" (145). Of the books Dana cites as proof of such escapes, Sarah says, with the slaveowners' logic of her day, "Foolishness! . . . Niggers writing books!" (145). Dana's reaction to Sarah reveals much about her political development on the plantation, while also pointing to Butler's own critique of the "militant" movements of the sixties and seventies, which had no place for a Sarah in their midst. Of Sarah, she notes,

> She had done the safe thing—had accepted a life of slavery because she was afraid. She was the kind of woman who might have been called "mammy" in some other household. She was the kind of woman who would be held in contempt during the militant nineteen sixties. The house-nigger, the handkerchief-head, the female Uncle Tom—the frightened powerless woman who had already lost all she could stand to lose, and who knew as little about the freedom of the North as she knew about the hereafter.
>
> I looked down on her myself for a while. Moral superiority. Here was someone less courageous than I was. That comforted me somehow. (Butler 145)

In this passage, Dana's own perception of resistance is called into question. As she becomes disillusioned by her own failure, she reevaluates the survival strategies of those around her. If Butler critiques Dana's misguided cooperation with Rufus, she also implicitly critiques those "militants" of the 1960s who failed to recognize the forms of resistance the likes of Sarah practiced. The voluntarism and emphasis on "purity" that ruled within strands of the New Left and Black Power movements have little relevance in the antebellum South, where survival itself is an act of resistance and the silent and seemingly docile are frequently as militant as the more vociferous opponents of the peculiar institution. As Dana learns, despite all her modern tools and knowledge, she is no more free than Sarah or Alice—and no more capable of resisting the institution of slavery. After an escape attempt, followed by a whipping, she notes:

> What had Weylin said? That educated didn't mean smart. He had a point. Nothing in my education or knowledge of the future had helped me to escape. Yet in a few years an illiterate runaway named Harriet Tubman would make nineteen trips into

this country and lead three hundred fugitives to freedom. What had I done wrong? (Butler 177)

"See how easily slaves are made?" she thinks to herself (177). Even Dana's history book has little value—chronicling a history of resistance that could either get her killed or, in the wrong hands, give slaveowners an edge in crushing resistance (141). In a telling incident, Sam, another slave, questions Dana about her relationship with Rufus. Dana responds that this relationship allows her to provide more help to other slaves. The dialogue continues with Sam saying,

> "Some folks say…."
>
> "Hold on." I was suddenly angry. "I don't want to hear what 'some folks' say. 'Some folks' let Fowler drive them into the fields every day and work them like mules.'
>
> "*Let* him….?"
>
> "Let him! They do it to keep the skin on their backs and breath in their bodies. Well, they're not the only ones who have to do things they don't like to stay alive and whole. Now you tell me why that should be so hard for 'some folks' to understand?" (Butler 238)

This passage is perhaps Butler most direct rebuttal of her 1968 classmate and the 'purity' he represents. The rebel grandchild becomes the "house slave" Dana's generation would revile—and, when accused, turns the tables on the "field slave" of Malcolm X's parable, accusing him too of consenting to his oppression and enslavement. The absurdity of this logic, and the chasm between Dana and Sam the field slave, is all too apparent when Sam is sold away from the plantation for talking to Dana and thus stoking Rufus's jealousy. Dana learns—beyond a doubt—that her strategy of appeasing Rufus to help other slaves is bankrupt. Her attempts to "help" lead to Alice's rape and Sam being sold down the river—both incidents that imply a critique of Dana's strategy. Dana responds by slitting her wrists to return to the present. This act presages Alice's suicide, which brings Dana back for the final time. In these parallel acts, Butler makes clear that violent resistance to the oppressor is not the only way to rebel. For both women, violence against the self is an act of rebellion, albeit one bred from desperation. Self-harm becomes a means of protecting the last threshold of the self from Rufus, refusing to give him power over their will, their psyche, and their morality—even if doing so means risking death.

If there is any possibility of redemption in the novel, it comes from characters such as Nigel and Sarah, who walk the fine line between resistance and survival while maintaining a close connection to the slave community as a whole. Despite Dana's failures, she also does create lasting relationships with Nigel and Sarah, who resist slave codes by learning to read while simultaneously "passing" as acquiescent slaves—at least enough to ensure their own survival. Nigel and Sarah in many ways become the moral center of the novel; their acceptance of Dana goes a long way toward providing her with moral legitimacy on the Weylin plantation. At one point, when Dana is facing strong criticism from other slaves, Carrie rubs her face in a gesture toward Dana that Nigel interprets by saying: "She means it doesn't come off, Dana. . . . The black. She means the devil with people who say you're anything but what you are" (Butler 224). The silent Carrie, here, implicitly rejects the politics of those who would label people they disagree with as "Uncle Toms" and reminds the reader that oppression is never a choice. While Dana's strategy of appeasement is clearly critiqued, she is nonetheless accepted as a victim of an

oppressive system. Carrie implicitly rejects Malcolm X's dichotomy: in the antebellum South, race is not a choice. Both house slave and field slave are victims of the same bigotry, oppression, and violence, despite different manifestations.

Hope comes not through any one political strategy available to the adults of the Weylin plantation, but through a spirit of resistance that imbues the future with greater possibilities. Despite the horror of their origins, Alice's children are clearly symbols of a different future. As Alice says, "In the Bible, people might be slaves for a while, but they didn't have to stay slaves" (Butler 234). For better or for worse, the children provide a sense of the impermanence of slavery and of hope for a true liberation. As Dana remarks, "I kept it all in somehow, and congratulated myself that the Bible wasn't the only place where slaves broke free. Her names were only symbolic, but I had more than symbols to remind me that freedom was possible—probable—and for me, very near" (Butler 234). Whatever the limitations of the "freedom" of Dana's generation, this promise of future liberation sustains the narrative and prevents Dana and the reader from falling into the abyss of hopelessness slavery signifies. *Kindred* echoes the revision of historical narratives in the sixties and seventies by refuting the idea that slaves were psychologically brainwashed "Sambos" incapable of resistance, making it clear that resistance was plenty and varied—but Butler also emphasizes the very real obstacles that limited such acts of resistance, refusing to endorse her 1968 classmate's idea of ancestors holding future generations back. Instead, for Butler, the success of resistance is apparent precisely in the future generations whose existence depends on the survival of their ancestors—an accomplishment that in itself requires heroism, strength, and resistance that cannot be underestimated.[12]

Loving vs. Antebellum Maryland: *Kindred* and the Politics of Interracial Relationships

Although Dana ultimately learns that there is no possibility of an "equal" relationship with Rufus, this conclusion is based not on an essentialized conception of race, but on the slave economy's power structures, in which the few used race as a central division to oppress the majority. Nonetheless, through the character of Kevin, Butler makes it clear that not all white men are to blame and inserts an element of choice into the racist hierarchy which creates Rufus. In doing so, she rejects identity politics that were gaining ground in academic discourses as she wrote the book, as well as the separatist politics associated with Black cultural nationalism in this period. While Dana's relationship with Kevin is far from unproblematic, it provides a means for Butler to explore the possibilities for interracial solidarity.

The prevalence of this theme in *Kindred,* as well as other novels by contemporaries, is somewhat notable, both in the way these novels explore obstacles but also imagine the possibility of such solidarity despite terrific odds. Despite the dismal picture she presents, Butler in *Kindred* echoes her contemporaries (such as Bradley in *The Chaneysville Incident* and Sherley Anne Williams in *Dessa Rose*) by ending the novels with hope emerging from the graveyard of slavery: the possibility of cross-racial alliances that reject the logic of that peculiar institution. Written a decade after *Loving vs. Virginia* and the expulsion of white activists from SNCC, all three of these authors envision the possibility of interracial relationships that defy the logic of their times. For Bradley, the possibility that a white miller named Iiames buried the runaway

[4] In *American Negro Slave Revolts*, Herbert Aptheker includes a chapter on "Individual Acts of Resistance" amidst his discussion of slave revolts, arguing that there was a much broader of culture of resistance under slavery that included sabotage, faking illness, strikes, arson, self-mutilation, and stealing in addition to escape and rebellions. Likewise, John W. Blassingame's *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* discusses various forms of resistance that were part of the independent culture developed by the enslaved.

slaves at the center of the story in a plot next to his family's own makes understanding and empathy in John and Judith's relationship a possibility. In *Dessa Rose,* the unlikely relationship between Ruth and Dessa provides hope for the future. In *Kindred,* Kevin and Dana try to imagine an alternative to the devastation they witness by imagining Margaret Weylin emerging from the fire that burns down the master's house and saving Hagar and Joseph. For Butler, interracial solidarity is only possible after a graveyard of dead bodies; both Kevin and Dana remain scarred by the experience. In all of these relationships, it is clear that history invades the personal and leaves no one whole.

Writing in the decade after *Loving vs. Virginia* established the right to interracial marriages, Butler uses Dana and Kevin's relationship to explore interracial love in a world which has yet to accept it. Indeed, both sides of Dana and Kevin's families reject them as a result of their marriage. This is far from uncomplicated for Butler; Dana discovers on the plantation the very real inequalities upon which her own family's reticence is based. The novel, nonetheless, rejects any notion of 'purity' as a basis for political action; cross-race alliances trump identity politics. Kevin clearly has weaknesses, and in the antebellum South his race gives him power whether he likes it or not. Nonetheless, he has a choice and exercising that choice does make a difference. For Butler, "kindred," as in one's chosen family, ultimately supersedes inherited "kin."

Dana and Kevin are both surprised by their families' lack of support and the hostility they face from both Black and white communities. One of Dana's coworkers, underlining the presence of America's racist past, tells her "with typical slave-market candor that he and I were 'the weirdest-looking couple' she had ever seen" (Butler 57). Kevin is surprised at his sister's racism and "clichéd bigotry" (Butler 111). Carol and her racist husband live in La Canada—a parody of the ignominious white affluent suburbs created by white flight, named ironically after Canada because of its history as a destination for runaway slaves who found both freedom and new forms of discrimination in the communities to which they fled. Dana remarks, "My mother's car broke down in La Canada once. . . . Three people called the police on her while she was waiting for my uncle to come and get her. Suspicious character. Five-three, she was. About a hundred pounds. Real dangerous" (Butler 111). The white liberal elite's professed antiracism comes into conflict with the racist stereotypes and fears fostered by their seclusion—a phenomenon further stressed by Dana's caveat that this occurred in 1966: at the height of the Black Power movement, one year before *Loving,* and on the heels of the Watts rebellion. "Things may have improved by now," she adds, although there is little in the narrative to sustain such a hope (111).

Dana's family likewise rejects her marriage. Her aunt "accepts the idea of my marrying you because any children we have will be light. . . . She doesn't care much for white people, but she prefers light-skinned blacks." Her uncle, on the other hand, takes it as a rejection: "He wants me to marry someone like him—someone who looks like him. A black man" (Butler 111). Through Dana's family, Butler explores the twin poles of racism's legacy in the Black community's approach to interracial relationships: simultaneous hatred and glorification of "whiteness." Racist ideology seeps into the consciousness of the oppressed (a theme Toni Morrison explores in great detail in *The Bluest Eye*). Dana's uncle's disapproval becomes all the more understandable and sympathetic in light of his wife's comments. Because the legacy of slavery and the continued experience of racism limits the possibilities for interracial relationships and alliances, Kevin and Dana must reject their past—and their families—in order to choose their present and each other. Despite *Loving,* Dana and Kevin gain no greater acceptance in 1976

than they do in 1819—when paradoxically, relations (and children) between white slaveowners and Black women were perfectly acceptable as long as they conformed to the laws of slavery, which made dominance and subjugation central to such relationships and denied Black women any control over their bodies, their families, or their children. Rufus's desire for Alice, in this regard, serves as a mirror in which Dana sees challenges to her own sense of self and relationship with Kevin.

The legal significance of *Loving vs. Virginia* is highlighted in one of Dana's early exchanges with Rufus. When Kevin returns to the past with her, Dana feels compelled to tell Rufus the truth—that she and Kevin are married. She wants Rufus to see her as his equal not as his slave. When he replies, "But it's against the law," she firmly tells him, "But it isn't where we come from" (61). While in California anti-miscegenation laws had been held unconstitutional since 1948, it was the *Loving* case in 1967 that made such laws unconstitutional on a federal level—fairly recent history at the time of *Kindred*'s writing. Butler thus highlights the gap between Dana's and Rufus's worlds and the immense changes that have paved the way for the possibility of an equal (or almost-equal) relationship between Dana and Kevin.

Nonetheless, Dana's journeys to the antebellum past trouble her sense of ease within this relationship as she is required to negotiate the contradictory and oppressive interracial relationships in her own family tree. The impossibility of any equal relationship between the races—particularly, between white men and Black women—in the antebellum past poses problems for her own relationship in the present as she is forced to look at it through a new lens. On one of her early returns from the past, as she battles the patroller until the pain and fear of death catapults her back into the present, she momentarily confuses Kevin with the patroller, highlighting his own physical resemblance to her oppressors in the past. This disturbs Kevin as well as Dana. When he questions her about it, asking her if he really looked like him, Dana does not answer. Her silence represents both her awareness and rejection of the idea that Kevin's race makes him a member of the oppressive class in the antebellum past. Nonetheless, throughout the novel there is a level of anxiety around Kevin's role in both past and present; he is frequently confused with the novel's white male oppressors, even as he seeks to distinguish himself from this group by his actions, not only by Dana but also by her cousin, who assumes that Dana's injuries must be Kevin's doing. Dana is once again silent—unable to defend Kevin without having to tell a (hi)story that is "stranger than fiction" and unbelievable to her contemporaries.

Despite these moments of confusion, for Dana, Kevin represents home—a powerful force throughout the novel, grounding her in a present far removed from the world of her ancestors. This does not, however, absolve Dana of anxiety, particularly once Kevin returns to the Weylin plantation and is trapped in the past for a lengthy period of time without her. While Kevin's whiteness provides him with an advantage in physically surviving the atrocities of slavery, Dana is more concerned about the psychological, social, and moral toll that such a life could have on him. Agreeing that he doesn't face the same physical threat, she argues:

> But he'd be in another kind of danger. A place like this would endanger him in a way I didn't want to talk to him about. If he was stranded here for years, some part of this place would rub off on him. No large part, I knew. But if he survived here, it would be because he managed to tolerate the life here. He wouldn't have to take part in it, but he would have to keep quiet about it. Free speech and press hadn't done too well in the antebellum South. Kevin wouldn't do too well either. The place, the time would either kill him outright or mark him somehow. I didn't like either possibility. (Butler 78-9)

After being separated from Kevin for an extensive period of time—a few days for her but years for him, during which time he leaves the Weylin plantation, delaying their reunion further—Dana is once again filled with anxiety at the damage that the antebellum South might have wrought upon his character; she is worried about the brutalizing effect of slavery on his morality. When she is finally reunited with him, she notes:

> There was a jagged scar across his forehead—the remnant of what must have been a bad wound. This place, this time, hadn't been any kinder to him that it had been to me. But what had it made of him? What might he be willing to do now that he would not have done before?" (Butler 185)

And indeed, there is a marked change in Kevin: he becomes less naïve and more melancholy. History has sobered him and introduced him to a world of brutality that leaves an indelible mark on his psyche. This is most evident in his inability to write. Kevin's writer's block reflects larger questions about truth and the ability of words and/or narrative to tell such a story. No words can convey the horror of his experiences—thus his page remains blank.

We also learn that at least some of Dana's fears prove to be unfounded. When she probes Kevin to discover whether he had succumbed or resisted, he informs her that he left the Weylin plantation to help slaves escape through the Underground Railroad and to promote the abolitionist cause. Dana's relief is palpable but silent: she "smile[s] and [says] nothing." When he gets angry and defensive, she consoles him by saying, "I know. It's enough that you did what you did" (Butler 193). For Dana, Kevin's actions dispel her fears that he would be corrupted by the model of whiteness Rufus represents. If he is damaged by the experience, he has not lost his morality, his principles, or his character. Through Kevin's character, Butler introduces the notion of choice into the racially polarized and overdetermined South. There is nothing inherent about whiteness that *must* create the racist, violent slaveholding class. While Rufus cannot be reformed no matter how hard Dana tries, this does not preclude the possibility of resistance. Rufus is a product of his family, his time, and the power structures of the slaveholding South, but Kevin's trajectory makes it clear that Rufus's adult personality is not purely a result of biology or heredity. Butler insists on the importance of choice and action over identity and reminds the reader that, while few and far between, there were white abolitionists, like John Brown, who risked their lives in the fight to abolish slavery. For Rushdy, Butler's "portrayal of two relationships with white men 'raises the question of what 'whiteness' means" (*Remembering Generations* 119). He argues that for Butler, "Whiteness, like family, is a social construction" and that, just as Butler chooses kindred over kin, so too does she emphasize a "politics of intent rather than descent" (*Remembering Generations* 120). In doing so, Butler posits a philosophy that emphasizes choices and acts of resistance as the crucial factor in determining on which side of history one falls.

By Any Means Necessary

While Dana has far fewer options for survival in the Southern slaveocracy than Kevin does, she too has some choice. In her position, choice requires determining the costs of survival and resistance. In a conversation with her husband during one of her returns to the present, she says of Rufus,

> "He has to leave me enough control over my own life to make living look better to me than killing and dying."

> "If your black ancestors had felt that way, you wouldn't be here," said Kevin.
>
> "I told you when all this started that I didn't have their endurance. I still don't. Some of them will go on struggling to survive, no matter what. I'm not like that." (Butler 246)

In this passage, Dana recasts the ancestors who "endure" and "survive" no matter what as heroes rather than appeasers. This conversation presages Alice's own final act of resistance—her suicide through which she frees herself from Rufus's domination. Once Alice is dead, Rufus is no longer willing to honor Dana's limits, seeing her as Alice's double. This is the final blow for Dana, who realizes, "A slave was a slave. Anything could be done to her" (Butler 260). Words will have no effect on Rufus. As Rufus tries to rape Dana, she kills him, thus asserting her own authority over history and returning herself to the present. In the end, violent resistance is the means by which both Alice and Dana assert their subjectivity and free themselves from Rufus's yoke.

For Dana, the cycle cannot end until she ceases to make deals with the slave owner and violently rebels against him, killing him to release his hold over her. That the novel ends with Dana's turn toward violence reflects the novel's larger concern with forms of resistance both in the antebellum past and in the movements of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly as raised by the Black Power movement and the Black Panthers. If Alice and Dana are "two halves of the same woman" (Butler 229) in Rufus's head, their acts of resistance reflect the options available to them: self-defense or nonviolence.

While Dana's violence can be read as justified by the right of the oppressed to act in self-defense and resist the violent legacy of racism, this is not uncomplicated for Butler. While this act of violence frees Dana from Rufus's grasp, the repercussions for the rest of the slave community are far less certain. To cover up for Dana, Nigel sets the entire house on fire. The burning Weylin house, which is Dana's last image of the antebellum past, evokes a similar image used in Malcolm X's discussion of the house and field slave allegory discussed earlier. Malcolm X argues,

> If the master's house caught on fire, the house Negro would fight harder to put the blaze out than the master would. . . . but that field Negro—remember . . . they hated the master. When the house caught on fire, he didn't try to put it out; that field Negro prayed for a wind, for a breeze. When the master got sick, the field Negro prayed that he'd die." (Malcolm X, 10–11).

Ironically, it is Nigel, a house slave, who sets the fire, showing zero loyalty to the master and motivated entirely by a sense of solidarity with Dana, whom he tries to protect. The burning house itself does not automatically liberate any of the slaves, nor would it necessarily be greeted with cheers by the vast majority of field slaves, for whom Rufus's demise and the ruination of the Weylin plantation mean being sold away (from their families, in some cases) and possibly sold "down the river," a prospect that would send chills of terror down the spine of even the most militant field slave. The question for Butler is not whether or not Dana has the *right* to act in self-defense—a right which Butler absolutely grants her protagonist—but whether, in saving herself, Dana saves the others or condemns them to even greater suffering? This question is not resolved; Dana and Kevin are never able to find out the results of her action for the slave community of the Weylin plantation. In this sense, Butler is far more ambivalent than Malcolm X in her depiction of violence and the right to self-defense by any means necessary. This ambivalence and anxiety

is reflected in a conversation between Kevin and Dana in which she somewhat ambivalently justifies her murder of Rufus:

> "Self-defense."
> "Yes," he said.
> "But the cost… Nigel's children, Sarah, all the others…"
> "It's over," he said. "There's nothing you can do to change any of it now." (Butler 264)

There is no way of knowing the full cost of Dana's actions. That Dana has a right to defend herself does not necessarily make doing so the best decision strategically. As an individual act of resistance, it liberates her from her oppressor. But her individual act of resistance does not bring about collective liberation—and its cost for the collective calls into question the morality and efficacy of violence as a form of resistance. If *Kindred* rejects pacifism as the only morally acceptable means of resistance, Butler leaves the question of the "cost" of violent resistance unresolved, engaging with the questions of her day while refusing to stand in judgment or provide the last word. There are no answers, only a graveyard and the names of the survivors on Dana's family Bible.

Butler challenges the reader to understand that survival under slavery entails a continuous series of acts of resistance. In the process, Butler seeks to vindicate the past and establish links between multiple forms of resistance. As Dana travels from present to past, she gains a greater understanding of resistance, power, and the lessons her history provides for the present. Rejecting the idea of a generation gap, Butler portrays a vision of history intimately linked with the present and questions the very idea of the past as an entity separate from the present. *Kindred* posits a view of history in which past and present are inextricably intertwined.

In one of her returns to the present, Dana turns on the radio to figure out how long she has been gone and "tune[s] in right in he middle of a story about the war in Lebanon. The war there was worse. The President was ordering an evacuation of nonofficial Americans" (Butler 196). That the question of violence and resistance has not been resolved in the narrative becomes all the more important when violence and oppression continuously provoke such questions throughout the world. The war in Lebanon provides a direct link between questions of violence and resistance in the past and present. As Dana continues to listen,

> The news switched to a story about South Africa—blacks rioting there and dying wholesale in battles with police over the policies of the white supremacist government.
>
> I turned off the radio and tried to cook the meal in peace. South African whites had always struck me as people who would have been happier living in the nineteenth century, or the eighteenth. In fact, they were living in the past as far as their race relations went. They lived in ease and comfort supported by huge numbers of blacks whom they kept in poverty and held in contempt. Tom Weylin would have felt right at home. (Butler 196)

In drawing this connection between the antebellum South and South Africa, Butler makes clear that despite the abolition of slavery, issues of violence and resistance to oppression continue to be salient in the modern world.

Indeed, Butler's choice to set the story's "present" in 1976 is a conscious attempt to place the novel's narrative within a broader historical narrative of the nation as a whole: as America celebrates its bicentennial, wars, violence, oppression and resistance continue. Dana's final battle with Rufus occurs on July 4, 1976. That her act of liberation coincides with the celebration of the nation's initial Declaration of Independence evokes the hypocrisy of a nation founded on the principle that "all men are created equal" while millions lived in chains. For Butler, to understand the present, one must understand that history is littered with bodies and ruins, scarred by a legacy of violence, oppression, and unimaginable brutality. Thus the bicentennial, as Frederick Douglass famously voiced in his "What to the Slave Is the Fourth ofJuly?" speech, is a day best marked by mourning, perhaps, rather than celebration. At the same time, July 4 marks Dana's personal declaration of independence from Rufus through a violent revolution of one, which places her narrative within the larger context of a national history. In traveling between past and present, Dana relives that history and bears witness to it, while also liberating herself from Rufus and allowing herself to return fully to the present. If, as Jane Tompkins argues, literary texts are "powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself, articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment" (cited in Rushdy 15–16), *Kindred* provides a powerful example of such a text as it returns to the past to illuminate questions of the present.

From Kin to Kindred: Race, Feminism, and the Politics of Family

The legacy of slavery complicates African American feminists' relationship to the family, a complication that is central to Butler's narrative. The publication of the Moynihan report in 1965 brought national attention to the "Negro family" with cataclysmic rhetoric, calling for "national action" to address the large number of female-dominated households that failed to conform to the 1950s ideal of the nuclear family. In language that was widely critiqued for its "blame the victim" rhetoric and for pathologizing African Americans, Moynihan's report crystallized the gap between the "feminine mystique" and the political concerns and priorities of African American feminists.

Few documents extol the virtues of the suburban nuclear family quite as powerfully as the Moynihan report, in which the "basic family unit" is described as the foundation of American democracy and the ultimate socializing force in American life. For Moynihan, the "breakdown" of African American families is to be blamed on the increase in female-centered households, higher rates of divorce, and the welfare system—particularly in the North. To provide a liberal veneer and progressive antiracist credentials for his highly offensive, racist, sexist manifesto, Moynihan cites the work of Elkins and Glazer, comparing American slavery to Brazilian slavery and to Nazi concentration camps to expose the creation of the "Sambo" psyche, which he argues is the root of the matrifocal family under slavery:

> Unquestionably, these events worked against the emergence of a strong father figure. The very essence of the male animal, from the bantam rooster to the four-star general, is to strut. Indeed, in 19th century America, a particular type of exaggerated male boastfulness became almost a national style. Not for the Negro male. The "sassy nigger [sic]" was lynched.

While it is certainly true that the history of racism and inequality of life under reconstruction most certainly denied any sense of equality or manhood to African American men, Moynihan takes this argument a step further, arguing that men are simply slightly more evolved roosters who, without the ability to "strut," lose their essential masculinity. Moynihan's appalling

insistence on innate biological (even animalistic) determinism when it comes to gender undermines any useful analysis of the emasculation of African American men under slavery. Furthermore, this argument serves to blame African American women—particularly in urban areas where female-headed households predominated—for the continuing emasculation of their male counterparts.

Throughout the report, Moynihan simultaneously extols and pathologizes the "creative vitality of the Negro people" and idealizes the "healing powers of the democratic ideal" while decrying the "fearful price for the incredible mistreatment to which it has been subjected over the past three centuries":

> In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is too out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.

Liberalism and racism commingle unquestioned in Moynihan's argument, despite often contradictory impulses and arguments. While decrying the legacy of slavery in the African American community, Moynihan pathologizes African Americans as a community that remains an underclass because of its failure to adhere to the democratic ideals of the nuclear family. In making this argument, he likewise annihilates the aspirations of the emerging feminist movement as inherently destructive to society:

> Ours is a society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs. The arrangements of society facilitate such leadership and reward it. A subculture, such as that of the Negro American, in which this is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct disadvantage.
>
> It was by destroying the Negro family under slavery that white America broke the will of the Negro people. Although that will has reasserted itself in our time, it is a resurgence doomed to frustration unless the viability of the Negro family is restored. (Moynihan)

For Moynihan, racism and oppression can only be countered by strengthening the nuclear family—a formation that requires the subjugation of women to ensure its survival. Not only does he show disdain for women, but also he chooses to ignore and subsume all social ills from poverty and discrimination in education, housing, and employment into the crisis in the family. Rather than ending segregation or fighting for affirmative action, social programs, or integrated, equal public education, Moynihan locates the solution in strengthening the family and, paradoxically, weakening women's role within it to restore what he sees as the innate balance of patriarchal authority. He concludes that should "the Negro family" fail to rehabilitate itself under his watchful eye, the ills perpetuated by slavery will no longer be to blame: it will be the fault of this "group of Americans" itself for failing to seize on the opportunities provided by the ideology of the nuclear family, and African Americans will no longer be part of "this nation's business"—a designation that makes one wonder who "this nation" includes in Moynihan's eyes. For obvious reasons, the Moynihan report had a polarizing effect on liberals, radicals and feminists. Under the guise of liberalism and a professed desire for equality, it reasserted the repressive nuclear family as the only solution to the ills of racism, sexism, poverty, and inequality, reframing racism and oppression as problems that can only be resolved in the domestic realm. Should this solution fail, the problem must be a personal one—since all other political or

economic manifestations of the profound inequalities and institutionalized racism of modern American society had been reduced to a "family problem."

The report elicited a plethora of responses from a wide variety of sources. In literature, its concern with the idea of family was not particularly new. That slavery had "deracinated" the slave and "alienated [him or her] from all rights and claims of birth" (Patterson, cited in Rushdy 74) was a common theme in neo-slave narratives of the sixties and seventies, which reconstructed these family histories. For Rushdy, the family narrative serves to write a national story through which "sons and daughters struggle to generate historical narratives that would produce for them new albeit refracted relations" (*Remembering Generations* 10).

For feminists of the 1970s, the most troubling aspect of the Moynihan report was that it highlighted the gap between African American feminists and their white suburban counterparts. Moynihan's view of female-led households as inherently emasculating posed a challenge to the gender politics of the period. While reproductive freedom was a central demand for women of color as well as for white women, this entailed not only a fight for abortion rights but also against the horrific practice of forced sterilizations. Of the 60,000 Americans who underwent forced sterilizations between 1907 and 1970, women of color and the poor were disproportionately represented[13]. Since most African American women worked, often in the homes of their white suburban counterparts, despite maintaining primary responsibility for domestic work in their own homes, they faced a double burden. As Angela Davis notes, "frequently, the demands of the job in a white woman's home have forced the domestic worker to neglect her own home and even her own children. As paid housekeepers, they have been called upon to be surrogate wives and mothers in millions of white homes" (238). Indeed, on every level, the history of slavery altered African American women's relationship to the institution of the family. If nineteenth-century white women upheld the cult of true womanhood as Woolfian "angels of the house," African American women under the yoke of slavery were denied any right to their families. While slave narratives written by men frequently emphasize the role of literacy and public identity in the quest for freedom, narratives written by female slaves, such as Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (first reprinted in 1973), emphasize the role of family and maternity in the quest for freedom (Beaulieu 13). Jacobs and other women emphasize the "dual oppression of [the] slave woman" who was relegated to the position of "breeder," not mother (Patton xvi). Thus, Morrison argues, "Black women are natally dead" (quoted in Patton xviii).

For Black woman writers of the 1970s, the "rememory" of slavery involves an investigation into the family and women's role within it. Moynihan's disparagement and blaming of the female-centered family was a provocation feminists had to refute. African American feminists sought to reframe the debate while raising larger issues of institutionalized racism and

[5] See Stern, "Sterilized in the Name of Public Health." Stern notes that historical data on the exact number of sterilizations and the demographic trends is difficult to find, nonetheless, according to available data, "African Americans and Mexicans were operated on at rates that exceeded their population. Although in the 1920 census they made up about 4% of the state population, Mexican men and Mexican women, respectively, comprised 7% and 8% of those sterilized…In addition, whereas African Americans constituted just over 1% of California's population, they accounted for 4% of total sterilizations." Stern notes, that Mexican-American feminists organizing against forced sterilizations in Los Angeles in the 1970s "distinguished themselves both from White feminists, whose quest for abortion rights often made them oblivious to reproductive abuse, and Mexican American nationalists, who frequently cast birth control as either superfluous to race and class or, more stridently, as treason against the perpetuation of the ethnic family and nation."

inequality. For many writers, literature served as a rebuke to the logic of the Moynihan report and a means to instead celebrate the role of women. In contrast to their counterparts in the predominately white, middle-class feminist movement, African American feminists saw motherhood more often as something to be reclaimed, rather than rejected—all the while creating characters who stretch the limits of such roles. As Patton argues in her analysis of works such as *Beloved, Dessa Rose,* and *Corregidora*, "These writers at once assert that their characters are capable of mothering while also arguing that women are more than mothers" (Patton 147). In making this personal and/or "family" history public, African American feminists challenged the racism and sexism of the Moynihan report. They also challenged the popular notion of universal sisterhood, while simultaneously seeking common political spaces in which to fight and form alliances for future political struggles.

In *Kindred*, Butler's exploration of the relationship between Dana and Alice becomes even more important as a lens through which to explore Butler's conception of gender, maternity, and femininity. In many ways, Alice represents the epitome of the slave mother, robbed of the maternal role she seeks to play for her children and forced to submit to Rufus's power in the hopes that her children will gain freedom in the future. Ultimately, however, her suicide exemplifies a refusal to continue in the role history has assigned her. In contrast, Dana represents the woman of the feminist era, who rejects traditional emblems of femininity and is not only childless but also motherless. Indeed, Butler goes to great lengths to separate Dana from motherhood. Their divergent histories, choices, and roles put Dana and Alice at odds, despite their shared friendship and resistance, as "each woman feels the other's choices as a critique of her own; each sees, in the distorting mirror of the other, her own potential fate" (Kubitschek cited in Mitchell 46). Childless and motherless, Dana's only real connection to her kin is the family Bible in which Hagar's name is inscribed—at least until she is forcibly brought back in time to save Rufus and keep him alive long enough to ensure Hagar's birth. It is notable that Alice takes her own life only at the point in which Rufus commits the final offense—selling her children (or claiming to have done so). By robbing Alice of motherhood Rufus finally pushes her past the point of no return—killing her. For Dana, on the other hand, it is when Rufus tries to rape her that she is willing to risk all and finally sever the bonds of kinship that have kept him alive up to now. If, for Alice, family pushes her to sever her bonds to Rufus, Dana's severance is a more personal and individual declaration of independence.

Despite Dana's separation from conventional notions of family and motherhood, critics such as Mitchell and Beaulieu seek to reclaim a maternal role for her. Mitchell argues that Dana takes on the role of "ancestral mother" by nursing Alice back to health after her escape. In doing so, Mitchell argues, "Dana heroically succeeds in protecting and perpetuating her immediate family"(59). Yet she does so by facilitating Alice's rape, protecting the slave owner, and ultimately killing him, leading to the possible separation of the entire community and "family" she finds at the Weylin plantation. As a "maternal" figure, this makes Dana far more complicated and disturbing. Beaulieu also argues that Dana serves as a "mother figure" to Alice despite her role in "abetting the sexual slavery" she experiences at Rufus's hands. In doing this, she argues, Butler puts Dana in the position of "experiencing [the] powerlessness of [the] slave mother," as she is incapable of protecting Alice from Rufus. While it is indeed true that Dana undergoes a lesson in powerlessness through her relationship with Alice, the problem with seeing her as a maternal figure in this regard is the assumption that she has no choice but to facilitate Alice's sexual slavery and protect Rufus's life. This ignores the many hints within the narrative that Dana may have gotten her historic task wrong. That she refuses to submit to Rufus, that she is

willing to risk the fate of Hagar and Joseph and the entire slave community rather than become his sexual slave, makes her earlier decision all the more questionable. The possibility of refusing to save Rufus or to act as liaison between him and Alice is never explored in these analyses. It is precisely this type of elision which is necessary to mold Dana's character into a maternal figure of any kind. It is worth remembering that her very existence is at stake. Dana's actions—whatever her justification—are as much about her own survival as they are about a maternal instinct to protect her family. If anything, as an orphaned and childless woman writer of the 1970s, often seen as gender-neutral and mistaken for a man, Dana is more associated with the literacy impetus associated with male slaves' narratives than with the maternal drive to reclaim one's family that is so prevalent in many of the narratives written by women. [14]

For Beaulieu, Dana is nonetheless a mother figure not only to Alice but also to Rufus. She argues that Dana must facilitate Rufus's "birth" and, by consequence, her own: "Dana functions as surrogate mother to Rufus, a role that ultimately allows her to give birth to herself and more specifically to the whole person she has become as a result of her experiences in antebellum Maryland" (Beaulieu 121). But Dana returns from the antebellum South far from whole. In fact, she loses an arm and comes back with that permanent loss of wholeness marked on her body. Furthermore, the idea of Dana as a "surrogate mother" to Rufus is extremely problematic because, by "mothering" him, she enables his abuse and rape, loses her arm, and almost dies in the process. In fact, it is by killing him, not mothering him, that she frees herself. Beaulieu does seem to recognize Dana's failure, arguing that, by the end of the novel, she "learns . . . how difficult it is to be a mother, to watch a child deviate from what she has tried to teach" (126). In fact, I believe it is not her "maternal" role that is revealed in Dana's murder of Rufus, but the fact that despite any illusions to the contrary, Dana is his slave, not his mother—a fact that even Beaulieu must recognize, noting that Dana no longer sees Rufus as a child but a "cruel slaveholding man" (127). Economic and social relationships trump any bonds of kinship as Dana is treated as sexual property. In this final encounter with Rufus, any illusion that she can have a different role as a friend, mother, or sister is crushed. Her relationship with Rufus is ultimately, about power, race, and class—not family.

Indeed, Butler has a complicated vision of family and motherhood. In her science fiction, she explores themes of family, genetics, race, and motherhood in ways that raise as many questions as answers. In the Patternist series, Doro and Anyanwu both work together and battle in the creation of a new race or species of men and women. Much of the conflict between the two ancestral near-immortals in the early works centers on their conflicting "parenting" approaches toward the new race to which they give birth, as well as the extent to which Anyanwu will allow herself and others to be treated as "breeders" in the creation of a new species. In the short story "Blood Child," Butler explores the possibility of male pregnancy, among other questions of birth and parenting. Maternity becomes a terrifying, parasitic process in which the host body becomes slave to the creature that depends on its flesh to give birth to it while at the same time living in a symbiotic relationship with the being which is both oppressor and parent. In all of these works, Butler demonstrates a concern with issues of power and sacrifice in concepts of motherhood and reproduction. Many of her works feature characters that are not determined by biology but take

[6] In "Power and Repetition: Philosophies of (Literary) History in Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred*, Christine Levecq argues that Dana's "experience, knowledge and insights suggest unmistakable parallels with Frederick Douglass" (543). The novel's geography, plot and emphasis on literacy, she argues, is reminiscent of Douglass's narrative and has more in common with slave narratives written by men, than female authored narratives.

the biological reins in their own hands to create families of their own choosing, exploring the possibilities of these bonds of kinship. Mothering, for Butler, is far from a "natural" process, but frequently a result of complex negotiations of power, violence, and love.

In *Kindred,* the doubling of Alice/Dana is a key technique to explore the bonds of kinship, whether through a maternal relationship or the much-contested "sisterhood" of the early feminist movement. Like Dana and Alice's ill-fated friendship, feminist sisterhood would not survive the multiple splits and conflicts that arose from the movement's inability to deal adequately with questions of race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation. Dana's relationship with Alice raises important questions about the bonds of sisterhood. Interestingly, the novel is far more focused on Dana's relationships with the men in her life—Rufus and Kevin—than with her relationships with women. In Dana's present, the only woman we meet is the cousin she calls when she returns home severely injured, without Kevin, and needing help. Although her cousin assumes Kevin has abused her, Dana knows that "she would be silent. She and I had grown up keeping each other's secrets." But her cousin makes her disappointment in Dana clear, saying, "'I never thought you'd be fool enough to let a man beat you." This moment highlights both continuity with the past as well as the immense temporal gap between Dana's present and the plantation. Dana's comment that "'I never thought I would either,' . . . whispered when she was gone" (Butler 116) likewise heightens these parallels and Dana's guilt at not standing up to Rufus in defense of Alice—or in defense of herself—until much later. Sisterhood, it would seem, is not powerful enough to overcome the violence and abuse of women in the antebellum South.

Ultimately Dana chooses Kevin, not Rufus or Alice. Far from being a maternal figure, Dana acts to separate herself from a family history of violence and pain by choosing a white male as her "kindred," a chosen family as far removed from her "roots" as she can find. That both Kevin and Dana are orphans and rejected by their living kin highlights this move away from kin and toward a new understanding of "kindred." Far from the "purity" of the New Left and the identity politics of the Black Power movement or the feminist movements, the only alliance that seems to survive the horrors of history is that between Dana and Kevin—orphans of history nonetheless joined by a common project, a common experience, and a common craft. As Mitchell argues, "to alleviate the pain of our common history: they each confront the past"(60). If there is any hope that survives the graveyard of broken bodies they leave behind, it is that their relationship points the way forward to a future in which all are free to choose their own "kindred" without limitations.

The Trauma of History

History in *Kindred* is traumatic. Like Sherley Ann Williams, Butler depicts slavery "as a wound that has not healed" (cited in Mitchell 66). The novel's structure suggests that the history of slavery is a traumatic event that can not be fully relegated to the past. As Cathy Caruth, whose innovative work on trauma is particularly useful in understanding *Kindred*, argues, "Trauma . . . is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in the individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it's precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (cited in Mitchell 147, emphasis in original). On a collective level, theorists such as Mitchell and Long argue that in works such as *Kindred*, slavery is presented as a national trauma from which we have yet to recover. As Mitchell argues, "One could argue that slavery's 'unassimilated' nature—the fact that our nation has never come to terms with its past—continues to haunt not only the literary imaginations of contemporary Black women writers but the national memory as well" (Mitchell 147). The return to the past in neo-

slave narratives is an attempt to understand the present and liberate it from the grasp of a history of oppression and violence that continues to haunt us.

According to Caruth, trauma is caused by the inability to process the traumatic event as a memory, preventing it from ever being fully known. Time does not move on, nor can healing occur. Trauma is not therefore simply a return to the past from a position in the present. It is an inability to turn the painful experience into a memory that can be firmly relegated to the past. Instead, the subject constantly relives the traumatic event in the present. This explanation of trauma is useful as a way of understanding the problem of representing slavery. In *Kindred*, the trauma of slavery is not actually "past" and continues to haunt Dana (and Kevin) in the present. The fluidity between past and present which characterizes trauma is conveyed metaphorically in *Kindred* through the vehicle of time travel. Dana's first trip to the past is viewed in spatial rather than temporal terms. It is only on her second trip that she discovers that she is traveling through time as well as space. Time and space become less distinct throughout the novel, as Dana begins to feel that the past is in some ways more "real" and more of a "home" to her than the present. That Dana at times confuses Kevin in the present with Rufus and/or the white patroller in the past is symptomatic of the continuity between past and present and the slippage between the two, which allows the trauma of history to be constantly relived as present.

Within the novel itself, the trauma of slavery is explicitly illustrated through the Alice, who suffers from complete amnesia after her attempted escape fails and she witnesses Isaac's torture. She reverts to a childlike state and is incapable of remembering anything of the traumatic event. Ironically, it is Dana—herself living in a past of which she knows very little—who plays the role of Alice's memory. When Alice questions her about the traumatic event, Dana is hesitant to "remind" her; the memory is too traumatic to be processed as a memory. When Dana's prompting leads Alice to begin to "remember" the event, she must, in a sense, relive it before she can fully remember it:

> "They beat me," she whispered. "I remember. The dogs, the rope…They tied me behind a horse and I had to run, but I couldn't…Then they beat me…But…but…"
>
> I walked over to her, stood in front of her, but she seemed to look through me. She had that same look of pain and confusion she'd had when Rufus brought her from town.
>
> "Alice?"
>
> She seemed not to hear me. "Isaac?" she whispered. But it was more of a soundless moving of her lips than a whisper. Then,
>
> "Isaac!" An explosion of sound. She bolted for the door. I let her take about three steps before I grabbed her.
>
> "Let go of me! Isaac! *Isaac!*" . . .
>
> "They cut him! They cut off his ears!" (Butler 158)

In this scene Alice travels through time, reliving the traumatic event, her face reflecting the same expression she wore at the time of the original event. The ellipses signal the movement through time and her inability to capture the horrors of the event itself. It is only once she has re-experienced and re-membered the event that she can begin to recover and put the event in the past.

While Dana is, in this scene, the voice of memory, she too is stuck in a temporal continuum of trauma where the past is continuously relived as present. Each time Rufus's life is

in danger, Dana is pulled back in to save him. In contrast, when she undergoes experiences of great pain or fear, the present beckons and she returns to her world. Time travel becomes the mechanism through which the trauma of history is relived as Dana is pulled back and shuttled forward in time. Her return to the past does not provide any healing in the present; indeed, with each trip to the past, the present becomes less and less real. After one of her trips to the past, Dana says of the present,

> I felt as though I were losing my place here in my own time. Rufus's time was a sharper, stronger reality. The work was harder, the smells and tastes were stronger, the danger was greater, the pain was worse. . . . Rufus's time demanded things of me that had never been demanded before, and it could easily kill me if I did not meet its demands. That was a stark, powerful reality that the gentle conveniences and luxuries of this house, of *now*, could not touch. (Butler 191)

Far from providing further clarity or recovery in the present, Dana's journeys through time lead to a further mystification of the present. As long as Rufus is alive, Dana literally cannot bury the past. She cannot turn the past into memory because it keeps encroaching on her present and threatening to pull her back. Each time she saves Rufus, she also keeps alive the world he represents. She has no control over the past—it controls her, refusing to recede into the world of memory and making the present ephemeral and unstable. Only on the last trip, when she is pulled back in time not by Rufus but by Alice's death, is the pattern interrupted. Alice's suicide ends the cycle of abuse in which Rufus has trapped her. Similarly, Dana continues to reenact the pattern of trauma until she "literally kills her past" (Long 470). It is only by killing Rufus, rather than saving him, that she can return to the present for good—but not without the scar, the physical memory of trauma.

Despite Dana's search for words to record her experience, the trauma of history is primarily written on the body. Many critics argue, as previously noted, that the female slave narrative shifted the central focus from the quest for literacy to family and the corresponding independence of the female body; both motifs are present in *Kindred.* Dana, a writer, continuously seeks textual evidence to corroborate her experiences despite the fact that each return to the present brings a new pain or scar that physically marks her body with the evidence of trauma. As Levecq argues,

> The surreal component of the events especially comes forward during moments of insight in the twentieth century. Those moments are characterized by her and her husband's frantic attempts at textual control over history through verification of events in history books, books about slavery, atlases and encyclopedias. In fact, history has become a mere text. . . . Throughout the novel, in the form of her six trips to the past and back to the present, Dana has physically lived out the swing between reality and concept and still ends up needing some "solid evidence that those people existed." (528)

However, for Dana, there are no authenticating documents or appendices to attest to her narrative authority. There are only Hagar's Bible and a few newspaper clippings. Slavery, here as in many of the nineteenth-century slave narratives, is written on the body. As Long argues, "Dana . . . finds her scarred body a contemporary attestation to the realities of slavery" (460). Each return from the past provokes pain, which establishes Dana's narrative authority and the reality of her experiences. As Elaine Scarry writes, pain is "at once something that cannot be denied and something that cannot be confirmed . . . to have pain is to have *certainty*; to hear about pain is to

have *doubt*" (quoted in Long 461). If Dana's pain provides her with certainty of the reality of her own experiences, her scars do not inspire the same certainty in others.

The emphasis on the body as a record of the abuses of slavery recalls many women's slave narratives. Their emphasis on sexual abuse and corporeal punishment meant that the slavery was in a sense written on the body of the female slave; its marks provided evidence of their credibility and authenticity. This is most apparent in *The History of Mary Prince,* in which Prince argues for the abolition of slavery in part as a means of protecting the virtue of the female slave. Significantly, Prince's body and the physical and sexual abuse she suffered were central to her credibility and to her petition to Parliament for her formal manumission to enable her to return to Antigua as a free woman. Her credibility and integrity were attacked by her owner, Mr. Wood. In attesting to the truth of Prince's narrative, Pringle and Strickland offer Prince's body as evidence in support of her claims of physical abuse. While Pringle authenticated her text in his appendix to the narrative, Strickland, with other women abolitionists, authenticated her body, examining her scars and testifying to the truth of her claims of flogging. In her trial, Ferguson thus argues, Prince "claim[s] a silent subjectivity, by presenting her body as text of the 'truth' of her history; this body could not lie" (Ferguson 294).

In the world of the 1970s, the bodily evidence of Dana's experience is constantly misread by others. At the very beginning of the novel, the police question Kevin, assuming he is in fact the perpetrator of her wounds. Likewise, Dana's cousin assumes that her "bruises were [Kevin's] work" and Dana swears her to silence (116). Thus, the visible bodily signs of Dana's enslavement are read as evidence of domestic abuse at the hands of her white husband rather than as proof of her experience as a slave under the domination of her white great-great-grandfather. The violence of slavery is thus displaced onto the domestic realm of the 1970s. There are no words, however, to correct her cousin or the police. When Kevin tells Dana that he has told the police "the truth" about what happened, she responds, "If you told those deputies the truth . . . you'd still be locked up—in a mental hospital" (Butler 11). The truth, in this instance, will not set him free. Instead, the 'truth' has the potential to rob both characters of the "sanity" they hold onto in the present. The madness of the past, its trauma, and its lingering effects in the present are beyond rational or textual explanation and possess the potential to submerge Dana in a nightmare from which she almost does not awaken.

After her final return to the present, Dana embarks upon one final journey—this time only through space, not time—to Maryland to search for any record of those she left behind. In the following discussion with Kevin, Dana tries to accept the impossibility of ever knowing the rest of the history she has left behind or authenticating her experiences:

> You've looked," he said. "And you've found no records. You'll probably never know."
>
> I touched the scar Tom Weylin's boot had left on my face, touched my empty sleeve. "I know," I repeated. "Why did I even want to come here? You'd think I would have had enough of the past."
>
> "You probably needed to come for the same reason I did." He shrugged. "To try to understand. To touch solid evidence that those people existed. To reassure yourself that you're sane."
>
> I looked back at the brick building of the Historical Society, itself a converted early mansion. "If we told anyone else about this, anyone at all, they wouldn't think we were so sane."

> "We are," he said. "And now that the boy is dead, we have some chance of staying that way." (Butler 264).

Like in *Corregidora*, all other documents have been burned and the evidence has been destroyed. At the end of the novel the sole evidence is given through absence: her missing arm. Like Ursa's missing womb in *Corregidora*, Dana's missing left arm is both the physical mark and physical absence to provide the "proof" she seeks. Dana's "I know" as she touches the empty sleeve is an assertion of the authenticity of her experiences, of her firsthand experience as a witness to a history too awful to record. At the same time, it is also an acceptance of her inability to find out the truth through the official historical records. That the Historical Society is a "converted early mansion" makes clear that "history" is the repository of the wealthy and powerful. The owners of mansions might leave records or "history"; their slaves do not. Because she is a writer, Dana's arm is also symbolic as an instrument for writing. Its loss, then, represents her inability to assert textual control over history. Nonetheless, because it is a physical wound rather than a psychic one, healing is at least a possibility. The trauma of history may have left a permanent mark on Dana but, by killing Rufus, she is able to end a cycle of trauma and emerge alive, if not unscathed. The novel itself, as a written record of Dana's experiences told from her own perspective, is likewise a means of remembering, placing the story firmly in the past, burying Rufus once and for all. As Margaret Mitchell argues, "Butler's project in *Kindred* is to free her readers from a history that has been, as Dana concludes, unusable" (Mitchell 43). Mitchell's interpretation implies more certainty and closure than are perhaps warranted, but the narrative itself does enact a process of "rememory" that allows its writer to emerge from the traumatic cycle of history while giving voice to that history in the present.

Throughout the novel, both Kevin and Dana attempt to record their own experiences in writing but fail—they simply cannot record the horrors of their experience. Indeed, Dana tells us, "Once, I sat down at my typewriter and tried to write about what had happened, made six attempts, before I gave up and threw them all away. Someday when this was over, if it was ever over, maybe I would be able to write about it" (Butler 116). Dana's six attempts at writing reflect her six trips back in time and her six attempts to thus grasp the history of slavery and translate it into narrative form. Only once it is over can Dana begin to write her own narrative. However, hers is a narrative without resolution; she is incapable of translating the truth of her experience into language. While we are never told that she writes her story, we can assume that the novel itself is meant to represent Dana's narrative, a narrative that remains fragmented and unresolved and ends with a return to the spatial location of her ancestral past, where she continues to search for the evidence that eludes her.

As Caruth argues, having a witness is crucial to healing from trauma. It is for this reason that in novels such as *Kindred*, *The Chaneysville Incident*, and *Corregidora* there is such emphasis on "leaving evidence." Remembering and narrating one's story become a crucial means by which the wounds of history can begin to be healed. Without a listener, a reader, or an audience, the survivor and/or narrator of the traumatic experience remains under the control of the traumatic event, in the grips of history, condemned to repeat the original trauma and even pass it on from one generation to the next. Citing Laub, Mitchell writes that survivors "also [need] to tell their story in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell* and thus come to *know* one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past, against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one's buried truth in order to live one's life" (cited in Mitchell 148).

Writing itself thus becomes a means of bearing witness. Without the textual evidence and historical records that Dana so urgently seeks, such "truths" can perhaps be told and witnessed only through fiction. It is for this reason that Mitchell calls such narratives "liberatory" (Mitchell 149). *Kindred* acts as testimony in more than one regard. As a narrative of Dana's experience of America's slave past, it recuperates a history that had been silenced while also tracing Dana's symbolic declaration of freedom. As a narrative of the late 1960s, it is for Butler a way of giving expression to and "mak[ing] sense" of the "sixties feelings" that inspired the novel.

As the novel moves in time from Dana's birthday to the figurative birthday of the nation, it moves from a personal history to a national history. For Dana, like her feminist counterparts, the personal is inherently political. In accentuating this, Butler's novel shares a common project with other feminist writers despite the vast chasm that separates Dana's experiences from those of Ella Price. Likewise, Butler shares with other writers of the period a concern with the politics of madness, as the trauma of history continues to encroach on the present, stultifying human potential. Dana's own historical narrative in *Kindred* thus serves to reveal the truth behind the lie of the Declaration of Independence's promise of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The temporal span of the novel reflects the move from personal narrative to political critique. Butler's references throughout the novel to the Holocaust and apartheid South Africa reinforce the idea that the atrocities of history are not relegated to the past but continue in the present. The optimism of Ella Price is not possible for Dana at the end of the novel, standing as she does at the end of the 1970s, in the graveyard of social movements, bearing the scars of both women's oppression and the brutal history of American slavery and racism. For Butler, writing after the demise of the movements that inspired the novel, the only hope for Dana is to remember and bear witness.

Nonetheless, Butler includes a note of hope through the characters of Joe and Hagar. Like John in *The Chaneysville Incident,* Dana imagines a history that provides some resolution, imagining that Margaret Weylin might have raised Hagar and Joe, finally accepting them as her own. Likewise, the possibility that Hagar would live to see the Fourteenth Amendment provides some hope. That the ruins of the Weylin plantation could exist side by side with a "Burger King and Holiday Inn and Texaco and schools with black kids and white kids together and older people who looked at Kevin and me, then looked again" is both a reminder of corporate America's unbridled thirst for profit and of the immense social changes brought about by the civil rights movement. It is a testament to the unstoppable march of history, a history of struggle that is at once a nightmare and our only hope.

Conclusion:
Feminism and the Fear of Failing: from Isadora Wing to Bridget Jones

"The Political is Personal"
-- Gloria Steinem

"And that was it. Right there. Right there, that was the moment. I suddenly realized that unless something changed soon I was going to live a life where my major relationship was with a bottle of wine... and I'd finally die, fat and alone, and be found three weeks later half-eaten by alsatians. Or I was about to turn into Glenn Close in Fatal Attraction."
-- Bridget Jones

From A Woman's Right to Choose to "A Woman's Right to Shoes"

In an episode of *Sex and the City* titled "A Woman's Right to Shoes," a friend's baby shower forces the protagonist, Carrie Bradshaw to grapple with feminism's legacy. Having left her expensive Manolo Blahnik heels at the door, per her host's request, Carrie returns at the end of the shower to discover her highly prized (and highly priced) shoes missing. Balking at the cost, Kyra, the host of the baby shower, refuses to reimburse her, chastising her instead for her misplaced values. This scenario provides the impetus for a long musing on the right of single women to reject motherhood – while at the same time indulging in designer footwear. "When did we stop being free to be you and me?" Carrie asks as she ponders feminism's failures. Nonetheless, Carrie reasserts her feminist rights by the end of the episode, establishing her own 'baby registry' of sorts – registering for a pair of replacement Manolo Blahniks. Despite her disdain for Carrie's values, Kyra buys the replacement shoes, succumbing to the pressure of an unwritten code of New York registry etiquette. Thus, by the end of the episode, Kyra must stand in Carrie's shoes (and shoe store), forced to spend money to laud her friend's personal choices despite her obvious lack of respect for Carrie's lifestyle. In terms of both the politics and narrative form of feminist fictions, Carrie's right to shoes has supplanted Ella Price's right to choose as a symbol of women's liberation.

In the same episode, Samantha, the female Don Juan of the 1990s, rebels against the double standard by which loud children in a restaurant are deemed acceptable while loud cell phone conversations are sanctionable. After being berated for breaching the restaurant's cell phone etiquette, she confronts a screaming child in the restaurant, who promptly responds by throwing a plate of food at her. At the same time, Miranda, a new single mother, struggles to care for a sick child by herself until she is saved by an attractive doctor who moves into her building just in time to provide both her and her child with the medicine they need. Focused on what 'choice' means at the turn of the millennium, the episode clearly serves as a postscript to the feminist movement. It is a tribute to both how much and how little has changed since the housewives of the 1970s burst out of their prisons in search of a life beyond the nuclear family. This is the future that Ella Price dreamed of when climbing onto the doctor's table for an abortion at the end of her narrative—and yet, we discover, it is not as liberating as it might seem. While all four women are testaments to the greater choices available to women in the 1990s, they are also emblematic of the limitations of the world of post-feminism.

Post-feminism ushers in new era of personal politics. In this concluding chapter, I examine the advent of post-feminism as an often contradictory and paradoxical ideology which, born out of the demise of second wave feminism, is both a continuation and a repudiation of the politics which dominated the earlier movement. I argue that it reflects a move towards a primarily personal or individualist understanding of liberation, rooted in middle and upper class experience, in which too often aspects of sexism rejected by the earlier movement are reaffirmed under the banner of 'choice.' What were once symbols of women's oppression and objectification, like Carrie's high heels, become symbols of a new feminist: one who can embrace the ideals advocated by the women's liberation movement, while also embracing models of femininity promoted by consumer capitalism. These are the women Jennifer Baumgardner discusses in "The Number One Question about Feminism," who consider themselves "hard-core feminist" while asking "is it okay that I wear thong underwear?"(448). For Baumgardner, the "thong" becomes symbolic of young people's relationship to feminism: meaning that the relationship is often personal, invisible and uncomfortable" (448). The label of feminism is likewise uncomfortable for women such as Marissa Mayer, who gained publicity as president of Yahoo in 2013 for banning her employees from working remotely— a policy which disproportionately affects women with children—after building a private nursery at her office for her own child. Despite being celebrated as a role model for women of the post-feminist generation, Mayer has been quick to distance herself from the term feminism because she does not have "the militant drive and sort of the chip on the shoulder that sometimes comes with that." Thus, she argues, "feminism" has become "a negative word" (*The Makers*). Meanwhile debates surrounding the "Mommy Wars" or the "opt out generation" have reframed the decision of some women to leave the workplace to return to the home as a post-feminist choice rather than an economic necessity– i.e. a result of having more choices, not less. Because these 'choices' imply a certain amount of financial independence, the politics of post-feminism is firmly ensconced ideologically in middle or upper class America.

Ultimately, as far as these modern "feminists" veer from their sisters of the second wave, the roots of lifestyle politics or the politics of personal empowerment can be traced to the contradictions inherent in second wave feminism. In literature, Chick Lit is the post-feminist descendant of the liberatory narratives of second wave feminism. Even the fiftieth anniversary of *The Bell Jar* included a redesigned cover geared toward a "chick lit" audience, featuring a woman with a compact and lipstick applying makeup (Topping). For a novel about the devastating impact of women's commodification, the irony is stunning. Nonetheless, it reflects a broader trend. In this chapter, I look at the development of these post-feminist heroines like Carrie Bradshaw, Ally McBeal and Bridget Jones – all of whom struggle to build an independent career and find meaning in their lives while searching for a husband and maintaining conventions of femininity once repudiated by the women's liberation movement. In particular, I analyze *Bridget Jones' Diary* as exemplary of post-feminism. At the same time, I argue, the roots of Bridget Jones' dilemma can be traced to her second wave feminist predecessors.

If Bridget Jones is the postfeminist heroine par excellence, she is but one generation removed from her most obvious and notable predecessor in feminist fiction of the 1970s: Isadora Duncan, the protagonist of Erica Jong's 1973 *Fear of Flying*. Perhaps no work better exemplifies the tensions that exist within the tales of the politically awakened housewife than Jong's bestseller which defined feminist fiction for many readers and brought feminism into the mainstream. Erica Jong's narrative exemplifies both the multilayered meanings of the idea that "the personal is political" while also paving the way out of political activism and into a world in

which the personal is privileged as such. Published the same year as Bryant's *Ella Price*, it follows a parallel and yet opposing trajectory. If Ella moves from the personal to the political, Isadora moves from the political to the personal.

Fear of Flying is in many ways emblematic of the feminist fiction that emerged in the 1970s. It employs all the tropes of the genre, and is an explicitly referential experiment with metafiction, replete with myriad references to feminist fiction while also borrowing from nineteenth century literature to comment on the limitations of the conventional novel for female protagonists and writers. The narrative explores the possibility of women's sexual liberation, through its unforgettable quest for the "zipless fuck" a term coined by Jong to stand in for a liberated female sexuality devoid of personal, emotional or material entanglement and/or dependence. In this sense, it is an explicitly "feminist" narrative which uses the picaresque to recount Isadora Duncan's travels, sexual adventures and adventures in psychotherapy. In doing so, it is a narrative which privileges the personal to the extreme, paving the way for a feminism in which lifestyle choices are substitutes for political activism, struggle, or even political awareness. Ultimately, Jong's critique of marriage, the nuclear family and women's subordination translates into a choice of men, and, a choice of psychiatrists. Since Isadora's lovers are also her psychiatrists, the choice is ultimately one and the same. By the sequel, Jong's move from political and/or sexual revolution to personal revolution is complete. In *How to Save your own Life*, as the title itself indicates, feminism has become entirely individualized while the collective has been left behind.

Erica Jong's trajectory clearly mirrors that of the movement as a whole; nonetheless, even in her early work, we can see the seeds of feminism's demise and sense the birth pangs of post-feminism. While *Fear of Flying* is one of the earlier feminist novels of the genre, politically it represents the decline of the movement. Notably, Greene also argues that to discuss the "progression from the simpler narratives of Erica Jong and Gail Godwin to the more complex and subversive narrative strategies of Doris Lessing and Margaret Drabble," one must understand that "this [is not] a chronological progression, since the most complex of these novels are the earliest…." ("Feminist Fiction, Feminist Form" 83). Greene argues,

> Jong (…) aim[s] to write feminist novels, but (…) base[s] [her] narratives on love stories, a choice that in itself reaffirms what Godwin's Jane Clifford calls "the old, old story"(65). They may critique the romance plot, but they use it, and their critiques are directed somewhat narrowly to gender ideology rather than to the culture of which this ideology is a part. (Greene "Feminist Fiction, Feminist Form" 84)

If Lessing and other writers recall nineteenth-century literature so as to reject the conventions which hinder and limit women's liberation, Jong borrows from Lessing and D.H. Lawrence, straddling the conventions of the nineteenth-century novel and the feminist novel and its experiments with form, never quite making up her mind, much like her protagonist who, at the end of the novel, waits at a door, undecided—à la Henry James. In this regard, Jong shares more with Helen Fielding and the "confessional" chicklit writers of the 90s than she does with Lessing and Plath, despite her (almost desperate) attempts to appropriate them in the service of her picaresque quest for the "zipless" sexual act. Ultimately, Erica Jong's most notable accomplishment was to bring the feminist novel into the mainstream, giving the movement, arguably its first bestseller. In doing so, it paved the way from Plath to Bridget Jones, from Lessing to Carrie Bradshaw, and from Betty Friedan to Ally McBeal.

The Making of a Feminist Bestseller: Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*

Published in 1973, *Fear of Flying,* would fast become bestseller, propelling its author into fame and notoriety as the most infamous writer of the sexual revolution. Ultimately, it sold fifteen million copies world wide, six and a half million in the United States alone and has been translated into twenty-seven different languages. The novel's barely disguised autobiographical nature has led many critics to focus on the author, identifying her completely with the protagonist, Isadora Wing. That the sequels to the novel closely mirror Jong's life has made such identification hard to resist, with only mild fictionalization and a few name changes. As a writer, for example, Isadora, like Jong prior to the publication of *Fear of Flying*, has published a collection of poems but struggles with her next project. By the second novel, Isadora has published a wildly successful novel, *Candida Confesses*, a not so subtle reference to *Fear of Flying*, and, in addition to her ongoing dilemmas in her relationships with men, struggles with the privilege and burden of fame.

The heavy handed allusions to other literary texts and the epigraphs to each chapter, taken from Plath, Lessing, D.H. Lawrence and Freud among others are explicit attempts to situate the novel within a larger canon. Indeed, should there be any doubt about the author's desire to explore the perils and pitfalls that face the woman writer, the protagonist is named Isadora Zelda – named after both Isadora Duncan and Zelda Fitzgerald – by her mother who tells her, "'Women cannot possibly do both,' she said. 'You've got to choose. Either be an artist or have children.'" As Isadora makes clear, "With a name like Isadora Zelda it was clear to me what I was supposed to choose." Isadora's married last name, Wing, is, a similarly hard to miss reminder of the novel's title, and her fear of flying, a symbol of all the fears she has internalized which limit her as a woman, a sexual being, a feminist, and a writer. While the role of the woman writer and the limits of literary convention are important motifs throughout the novel, it is Jong's exploration of sexuality—specifically female heterosexual repression and liberation—which is the central concern of the novel and which is the basis for both the novel's widespread appeal and its notoriety.

To tell the tale of Isadora's quest for sexual liberation, Jong employs what is often seen as a "male picaresque" form, made unconventional by the choice of a female protagonist. The novel follows Isadora as she travels through Europe in search of a "zipless" sexual experience, which ultimately proves an impossible goal. By the end of the novel, the fantasy loses its appeal as fear of rape and violence replace the anticipated pleasure of anonymous sex. Sexual liberation, as Isadora imagines it, is simply not possible in a world in which female sexuality is objectified and constantly subject to the threat of force. In fact, despite the fact that most reviews of the novel focused on its "bawdiness," its sexual explicitness and its "celebration" of female sexuality; the novel emphasizes the limits placed on female sexuality and the impossibility of any real sexual liberation in a world rife with sexism. At the same time, the novel makes female sexuality—even, if it remains unfulfilled—the central focus and, this becomes the feature upon which reviewers and popular audiences seize. Despite the novel's immense popular success, it is mostly ignored by academic critics and left out of canonical feminist studies. In part, this is because the novel presents a view of women's liberation which can only be conceived of in sexualized terms. In this regard, the novel never actually breaks out of the boundaries and limitations of sexism. Furthermore, the mass marketing of the novel to popular audiences serves to elide the complexity of the novel and downplay its insistence on the impossibility of true female sexual emancipation or liberation.

The class bias of the novel has also raised the ire of critics. Indeed, the novel is firmly rooted in upper class conceptions of women and women's liberation. It portrays an entirely personal struggle for liberation in which oppression is figured almost entirely in sexual terms while other aspects of women's oppression are notably absent. While Jong discusses at length the double standard of female sexuality and societal, psychoanalytical and literary limitations placed on women, these are depicted almost entirely as personal and internal struggles that border on the narcissistic. Feminism, in the novel, becomes a barometer by which Jong measures Isadora's own psychological struggle. Women's liberation is not about changing the world so much as it is a state of mind to aspire to which reinforces guilt, insecurity and fears of failure. In so doing, Jong projects an image of women, or, at least Isadora, that is decidedly unrevolutionary. Isadora is frequently confronted with her own fear of failure as a feminist. At one point, after leaving Bennet for Adrian, the latter challenges her 'feminist' credentials, to which Isadora replies:

> Oh I talk a good game and I even *think* I believe it, but secretly, I'm like the girl in *Story of O*. I want to submit to some big brute. "Every woman adores a fascist" as Sylvia Plath says, I feel guilty for *everything*. You don't have to beat a woman if you can make her feel guilty. That's Isadora Wing's first principle of the war between the sexes. Women are their own worst enemies. And guilt is the main weapon of self-torture. (131)

Without any connection to the women's liberation movement itself, and, protected from many of the material manifestations of women's oppression by her class position, Isadora's understanding of feminism is distorted having more in common with the feminism of Bridget Jones than that of Kate Millet, Doris Lessing or Betty Friedan. Her awareness of and distance from the feminist movement is highlighted when she first arrives in Paris and sees graffiti: "FEMMES! LIBERONS NOUS!" (261). Faced with this collective call for action, Isadora once again translates the political into the personal, making a decision to leave Adrian. Throughout the novel, Isadora's romantic and sexual choices, particularly her ambivalence in deciding between Adrian and Bennett, stand in for political action. The narcissism of the narrative seeps through the page in the chapter after leaving Adrian, dramatically entitled, "Seduced & Abandoned," in which she interrogates her decision, and questions her ability to be independent, personally or politically. The militancy of the epigraph—Edna O'Brien's comment that "[t]he vote…means nothing to women. We should be armed"— is in stark contrast to her own dilemma which centers on her sense of loneliness and dependence on men. In a passage rife with meta-fictional references to the icons of feminist fiction, Isadora writes herself into the feminist literary canon, while decrying both her own and her role models' failures:

> ME: Why is being alone so terrible?
> ME: Because if no man loves me I have no identity (….)
> ME: Think of Simone de Beauvoir
> ME: I love her endurance, but her books are full of Sartre, Sartre, Sartre.
> ME: Think of Doris Lessing!
> ME: Anna Wulf can't come unless she's in love…what more is there to say?
> ME: Think of Sylvia Plath!
> ME: Dead. Who wants a life or death like hers even if you become a saint?
> ME: Wouldn't you die for a cause?
> ME: At twenty, yes, but not at thirty. I don't believe in dying for poetry. Once I worshipped Keats for dying young. Now I think it's braver to die old.

ME: Well – think of Colette.
ME: A good example. But she's one of the very few.
ME: Well, why not try to be like her?
ME: I'm trying (277-8).

Jong both cites and belittles her feminist literary predecessors, standing on their shoulders while simultaneously spitting on them. In doing so, she elevates her own internal dilemmas (and writing) despite pointing to her own failures. The passage's narcissistic approach to these writers, interprets them entirely through the lens of Isadora's personal struggles within her romantic and sexual relationships, with no sense of the collective movement and struggle of which they are symbols. Lessing's own ire with Jong's generation of feminists seems, perhaps, less astonishing when reading this passage. For all Jong's attempts to show off her literary credentials and place her own writing within a larger continuum of feminist fiction, *Fear of Flying* ultimately paves the way out of feminism and towards post-feminist life style politics. For Jong, the political is sexual and intensely individualist.

Firmly rooted in the 1960s, *Fear of Flying* traces feminism's trajectory from the personal to the political and back again. The social and political upheavals of the mid to late sixties correspond in Isadora's narrative with formative events in her own life such as the collapse of her first marriage and the hospitalization of her first husband who suffers a nervous breakdown and believes he's Jesus. While the larger events of the 1960s clearly have some impact in terms of radicalizing her and introducing her to the ideas of Laing and feminism, it is primarily through the lens of her personal narrative—indeed, almost as a backdrop to her own life story that Isadora conceives of history and the realm of the political. Brian's Jesus delusions, rants about Hell, and subsequent hospitalization (ironically at Mt. Sinai), are the expression for Isadora of the larger political and social upheavals of the period. As she says,

> Hell couldn't have been much worse than that summer anyway. The Diem regime had just fallen and Buddhists kept immolating themselves in a funny little country whose name was growing more and more familiar – Vietnam. Barry Goldwater was running for President on the platform of sawing off the entire Eastern seaboard and floating it out to sea. John F. Kennedy was not yet one year dead. Lyndon Johnson was the nation's one hope for defeating Goldwater and preserving peace. Two young white men named Goodman and Schwerner went south to Mississippi to work for voter registration and teamed up with a young black man named Chaney, and all three of them ended up in a ghastly common grave. Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant erupted in the first of many long, hot summers. Brian, meanwhile, was in the hospital raving about how he was going to save mankind. Certainly mankind had never needed it more. (206)

The madness of history becomes for Isadora, the backdrop to the madness of her personal life. Unlike the radicalizing effect that these events have on Ella and Mira, for Isadora, the political landscape of the sixties remains a backdrop to her own story, a crucial plot device in which the tumultuous national (and world) history she witnessed coincides at crucial moments with the twists and turns of her own narrative. In particular, the Vietnam War plays a crucial role in Isadora's personal and political development, not because it radicalizes her as it does Ella or Mira, but because it is the reason she moves to Germany with Bennet, a formative experience in her personal and political development. As Isadora explains,

> Given the perspective of history, it's clear that Bennett and I owed our being in Heidelberg (and in fact our marriage) to the hoodwinking of the American public by the government which was later revealed in the Pentagon Papers. In other words, we got married as a direct result of Bennett's being drafted – and he was drafted as a direct result of the Vietnam troop build up of 1965-66, which was a direct result of the hoodwinking of the American public by the government. But who knew that at the time? We suspected it, but we had no proof. We had ironic headlines promising that the building up was to "end the war and bring a lasting peace." We had good one-liners like: "It was necessary to destroy the village in order to save it…." We had activists as articulate as any who came along later. But we had no proof in black and white on the front page of *The Times*. (55)

Aside from an offhand reference to 'activists' who despite their eloquence seem to have little impact, there is no sense of a national anti-war movement or the radicalization sweeping campuses and cities throughout the United States. The 'We' Isadora cites seems to still hang onto rationalizations of war in which villages are collateral damage in a mostly humanitarian mission (despite all evidence to the contrary). Like millions of other writers and activists of the period the war abroad was also a war at home which had a profound impact on the personal; nonetheless, there is no sense that the personal impact of the war provided the seed of radicalization which might have led Bennet and Isadora to reject the logic of war, to actively turn their doubt into action. Instead, far away in Germany, the Vietnam War seems to figure primarily as a plot device, an intellectual conundrum that challenges Isadora's understanding of the truth and paves the way for larger concerns about writing, history, and truth.

While in Germany, Isadora develops an obsession with Nazism and embarks on a historical quest for truth in history as she attempts to fill in the gaps and silences of a history whose brutality eludes easy narrativization. Walking amidst the ghosts of history in the ruins of Nazism, Isadora discovers, "the solidest ghost of all—a Nazi amphitheater nestled in the hills above Heidelberg. Going there became an obsession with me. Nobody in Heidelberg seemed to recognize the existence of this place and this denial gave the amphitheater an added appeal. Perhaps it didn't even exist except in my own mind. I went back again and again" (63). This discovery becomes pivotal in Isadora's political development and her development as a writer as it brings her face to face with the silences and censorship of those aspects of history which are deemed too troubling or dangerous to remember. She decides to write about the amphitheater and, in the process, finds a guidebook from 1937 which is covered with squares of Oak tag beneath which she finds censored passages about the amphitheater. In response, Isadora goes into

> …a frenzy of outrage and moral indignation. I sat down at my desk and scrawled a furious column about honesty, dishonesty, and almighty History. I asked for truth above beauty, History above beauty, and honesty above all…Nothing human was worth denying. Even if it was unspeakably ugly, we could learn from it, couldn't we? I never questioned that at all. The truth – I was certain – would make us free. (65-6)

This early idealism and commitment to the liberatory power of truth is quickly challenged by her editor who responds by telling her she doesn't "understand the Germans" who "loved Hitler" and who, thus, censored the truth to avoid confronting their own pasts, because, as he argues, "most people are not heroes and most people are not honest" (67). For Isadora, who herself seems

hesitant to actively oppose the war in Vietnam for lack of facts in "black and white," this comment hits a bit too close to home. The atrocities of National Socialism that lie in the silences and gaps of History provoke Isadora to think about her own life, her own morals, and her own heroism, or lack thereof:

> I had no answer to that and Horst knew it. I began to wonder then if I too was like most people. Would I have been more heroic than he? (…) Even without fascism, I was dishonest. Even without fascism, I censored myself. I refused to let myself write about what really moved me: my violent feelings about Germany, the unhappiness in my marriage, my sexual fantasies, my childhood, my negative feelings about my parents. Even without fascism, honesty was damned hard to come by. Even without fascism, I had pasted imaginary oak-tag patches over certain areas of my life and steadfastly refused to look at them. I decided then that I was not going to be self-righteous with Horst until I had learned to be honest with myself. Perhaps our sins of omission were not equal, but the impulse in both cases were the same. Unless I could produce some proof of my own honesty in writing, what right had I to rage at his dishonesty?"(67)

Characteristically, the horrors of world history are, in this passage, easily conflated with Isadora's own personal trauma. Ultimately, in *Fear of Flying*, the political is telescoped through the lens of the personal. Despite the caveat that "our sins of omission were not equal," it is an easy jump for Isadora from World War II to her marriage and from fascism to her search for the "zipless" sexual experience of her fantasies. The chapter concludes with the publication of her article as she wrote it which, despite all anticipation to the contrary, produces little response. She notes, "I felt I was blowing history wide open, but nobody even blinked. All that *Sturm und Drang* came down to silence. It was almost like publishing poetry" (67). Wielding the sword of investigative journalism in defense of the truth, Isadora fails to find an audience. Out of this defeat is born her future career as a writer. Having torn the oak tags off of the history of fascism to little effect, Isadora turns her pen to her own life, tearing off the oak tags which mark her own personal narrative and mining her life for literary material—first for the volume of poetry which would introduce her name to the literary world and, later, to the autobiographical novel which would guarantee both Isadora's and Jong's fame. While feminism initially turned its attention to the personal as a realm in which to understand, analyze and become conscious of the political, in Jong's narrative the personal is a way out of the political. As Linda Kauffman argues, "Writing about yourself does not liberate you, it just shows how ingrained the ideology of freedom through self-expression is in our thinking" (Kauffman "The Long Goodbye" 1164). Rather than building on personal experience to draw conclusions about the systemic oppression of women, or, to deepen one's political analysis of the world more generally, Jong focuses on personal experience instead of broader political analysis. Thus, she retreats into an understanding of change entirely focused on personal and/or individual realm.

Given this focus on the personal or individual, it is not surprising that, like her literary predecessors and contemporaries, Jong places psychiatry and psychoanalysis at the center of her novel. Indeed, the novel begins at a conference of psychoanalysts, Jong's husband is a Freudian psychoanalyst, and Adrian, the object of her desire is a Laingian psychoanalyst. Thus, Isadora's personal affairs also represent a movement from Freud to Laing (and possibly back again). Psychiatry and anti-psychiatry from Freud to Laing, and its treatment of women, become the key frameworks for examining relationships, female desire and sexuality. Jong echoes other writers in her critique of psychiatry's inability to understand female subjectivity and sexuality. At the

same time, the novel is a narrative of bondage and freedom in psychological, literary and sexual terms.

The tension between Freud and Laing roots the novel in the 1960s. While Laing emphasizes what deKoven calls "the politics of the self" or "subject politics," he infuses his understanding of psychology with references to Marcuse and Fanon, as well as the broader political context of the Vietnam war and third world liberation struggles in his analysis of humanity's alienation from its "authentic possibilities"(DeKoven 200-9). Given the intensely personal and individual ways in which Jong telescopes all the larger debates of her time period, it is hardly surprising that the shift from Freud to Laing is for Isadora embodied in a choice between men. Indeed, for Jong, political and theoretical frameworks are represented by a choice of men—despite her simultaneous critique of envisioning the world in this way. Of her dilemma between Laingian and Freudian lovers, Isadora says:

> Maybe it wasn't just a question of choosing between them but just escaping both entirely. Released to my own custody. Stop this nonsense of running from one man to the next. Stand on my own two feet for once. Why was that so terrifying? The other options were worse weren't they? A lifetime of Freudian interpretations or a lifetime of Laingian interpretations! What a choice! I might as well join forces with a religious fanatic, a Scientology freak, or a doctrinaire Marxist. Any system was a straitjacket if you insisted on adhering to it so totally and humorlessly. I didn't believe in systems."(128)

In this passage, Jong reflects what DeKoven and Evans (among other historians) call the anarchic tendencies of the 1970s, particularly among feminist groups. At the same time, it is notable that for Isadora each theoretical or philosophical tendency is figured in a persona rather than a philosophy. For Isadora, to reject "systems" means rejecting people who believe in systems. As she rejects theoretical frameworks through which to interpret the world, Isadora gains no greater understanding, but, is ultimately left alone in Bennet's room with nowhere to go. At best, she has her writing, and the promise of personal expression and liberation it represents. In contrast to feminists such as Hanisch and Chesler who critiqued psychiatry on the grounds that there was no individual solution to collective problems, Isadora rejects psychiatry on the grounds that the personal solutions each represents prove unsatisfactory. Writing, however, is no more capable of providing a collective solution—even if it does provide an intensely personal and individual opportunity for independence and, ultimately for Jong, wealth and fame. If feminist fiction as a whole follows a trajectory from Freud to Laing to the Self-Help library of Bridget Jones, Jong plays a notable role in paving the way.

As a novel about fiction, the role of the woman writer is a central concern. In particular, Jong's literary training surfaces through discussions of narrative form and the limitations of the conventional novel for the female protagonist. Despite these formal limitations, however, writing ultimately becomes an act of understanding for Jong in the novel, and a step toward some form of independence. If Isadora feels powerless over her life, she can nonetheless take control over her narrative and push beyond the conventional nineteenth century ending of marriage or death for the female protagonist. Jong makes her authorial intention abundantly clear in playing with the form of the genre and women's role within it. Apart from her multiple references to and epigraphs from women writers such as Lessing and Plath, D.H. Lawrence is particularly prominent in the narrative because his explicit depiction of female sexuality, makes him an important literary predecessor against whom Jong sees herself writing:

> Until women started writing books, there was only only one side of the story. Throughout all of history, books were written with sperm, not menstrual blood. Until I was twenty-one, I measured my orgasms against Lady Chatterley's and wondered what was *wrong* with me. Did it ever occur to me that Lady Chatterley was really a man? That she was really D.H. Lawrence? (24).

Indeed, the novel's tendency to interpret the world through the lens of sexuality is apparent in this passage, as bodily fluids become the ink through which male and female writers can be distinguished. Through Isadora, Jong echoes many of the frustrations of other women writers of her time who struggle with an all male literary cannon which silences women writers. In discussing her early forays into writing, Isadora tells us:

> I began two novels in Heidelberg. Both of them had male narrators. I just assumed that nobody would be interested in a woman's point of view. Besides, I didn't want to risk being called all the things women writers (even good women writers) are called: "clever, witty, bright, touching but lacks scope." I wanted to write *War and Peace*—or nothing. No "lady writer" subjects for me. I was going to have battles and bullfights and jungle safaris. Only I didn't know a damn thing about battles and bullfights and jungle safaris (and neither do most men). I languished in utter frustration, thinking that the subjects I knew about were "trivial" and "feminine"—while the subjects I knew nothing of were 'profound' and "masculine." No matter what I did, I felt I was bound to fail. Either I would fail by writing or fail by not writing. I was paralyzed. (118)

Clearly, Isadora's struggle mirrors that of Jong herself, and Jong makes no secret of her own project to write a narrative which breaks the boundaries of the conventional novel, and mixes fact and fiction, borrowing from both the traditions of autobiography and novels to create a more feminist literary form. Ultimately, writing is the only way in which Isadora can find any potential liberation. Isadora's first book of poetry arises out of the ashes of her first marriage and the subsequent depression with which she is wrought. Writing for Isadora is a way out of depression and out of the catastrophe of her first marriage. As she explains, "If I had learned how to write, might I also learn how to live?" (118). Writing ultimately becomes a way out of the confines of marriage and women's oppression. This becomes abundantly clear in a dream she has about graduating from college in which she is handed a fellowship which allows her to have three husbands. Recalling the MRS degrees of Friedan's suburban housewives, Isadora, at first chooses to give up everything else for this. Later, she has another dream in which Colette is handing out diplomas and tells her:

> "There is only one way to graduate," she said, "and it has nothing to do with the number of husbands."
>
> "What do I have to do?" I asked desperately, feeling I'd do anything.
>
> She handed me a book with my name on the cover. "That was only a very shaky beginning," she said, "but at least you *made* a beginning."
>
> I took this to mean I still had years to go. (290)

In this symbolic induction into the female literary canon, Jong emphasizes the liberatory potential of writing, a constant theme throughout the novel. For Jong, however, this is intertwined with her pursuit for sexual liberation. Jong describes writing in sexual terms, in this

dream sequence—which notably begins with an epigraph from Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook.* Isadora becomes aroused and comes to realize that making love to Colette (in public) is the "real graduation" (290). Once again, sexuality becomes the lens through which all else is seen. Writing itself is almost a sexual act, as Isadora's literary arousal replaces her quest for the "zipless" sexual experience.

In the last chapter, Chapter 19, not uncoincidentally titled "A 19th-Century Ending" with an epigraph by D.H. Lawrence, Isadora returns to Bennett's hotel room but she remains unclear whether she will actually go back to him:

> It was not clear how it would end. In nineteenth-century novels, they get married. In twentieth-century novels, they get divorced. Can you have an ending in which they do neither? I laughed at myself for being so literary. "Life has no plot," is one of my favorite lines. At least it has no plot while you're still living. And after you die, the plot is not your concern.
>
> But whatever happened, I knew I would survive it. I knew above all, that I'd go on working. Surviving meant being born over and over. It wasn't easy, and it was always painful. But there wasn't any other choice except death. (311)

The novel ends a couple of lines later with "Bennett walked in." There is no further discussion of what happens. The open ending allows reader to imagine possibilities. Nonetheless, the confines of the novel's narrative space cannot provide an ending or any closure, and, despite Jong's literary pretensions, her ending is no more liberatory than Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady*. Furthermore, while Isadora insists that life has no plot, Jong's predilection for mining her life for literary plots means the open-ended narrative remains so, only until the sequel, when the narrative picks up where Jong left off. Unable to resist the temptation to serialize her own life, Jong ultimately applies fairly traditional narrative conventions to her life story, which are predictable, if not staid. If Jong attempts to experiment with new literary conventions in *Fear of Flying,* its sequels increasingly become about Jong herself, with fewer and fewer pretensions at literary distance or experiments with form.

Ultimately, for all Jong's revolutionary discussion of sexuality, the novel reflects a move away from radicalism, and away from any notion of the possibility of political change, focusing instead on the politics of personal choice in a way that fundamentally depoliticizes feminist fiction, paving the way to the chick lit of the turn of the millennium. Thus, Erica Jong's *The Fear of Flying* gives way, in the era of neoliberalism, to Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones' Diary* and the politics of post-feminism.

From Feminism to Post-Feminism

The term "post-feminism" is itself hotly contested and used for a wide range of theories which are critical of second wave feminism. Deborah Siegel, author of *Sisterhood Interrupted: From Radical Women to GRRLS Gone Wild,* argues, that the term itself

> is itself rife with paradox. Resurfacing in the early 1990s to describe the belief that feminism was dead because it was no longer needed, the word was also used to describe the new coterie of media-anointed spokeswomen who identified in some way with feminism but made their reputations attacking it. Small in numbers but high in visibility, they positioned themselves as not only after but in some ways against core principles of the second wave. They were, in effect, postfeminism's feminists."(104)

Indeed, post-feminism shared much with other notions of "feminism" in the post-seventies new world order. One of the earlier uses of the term was a 1982 article by Susan Bolotin published in *New York Times Magazine*, "Voices of the Post-Feminist Generation," which featured the voices of women who, despite agreeing with many of the goals of feminism, did not identify as feminists – a testament to the success of the backlash at making the label "feminist" something to be disavowed. It reflects a commonsense response to feminism by many women raised in the "post-feminist" era – a response best expressed by the ubiquitous, "I'm not a feminist, but…" Many of the theorists of this generation have bought into an image of their feminist forbearers as hairy, bra-burning, man-hating, feminazis who are anti-sex puritans and have absolutely no sense of humor. This view became increasingly pervasive not only in general public, but within third wave feminism itself.

"Power feminism," for example, a term coined by Naomi Wolf, author of *The Beauty Myth*—a pivotal text of third wave of feminism—was a philosophy that gained increasing ideological dominance as neoliberalism triumphed in the 1990s. Wolf is perhaps the best and most explicit theorist of the paradigm shift among feminists in this period. Wolf argues that second wave feminism was "victim feminism." The new feminism for which she advocates is "power feminism," a philosophy whose class base is underscored by Wolf's contention that "enough money buys a woman out of a lot of sex oppression" (Wolf 249). As Siegel notes, the "power feminists," unlike many of their more radical forbearers, were often "…women who had grown up empowered and identified, many of them, with people in power"(102). In explaining the philosophy of "power feminism," in her 1994 book *Fire With Fire*, Wolf argues for an end to "old habits left over from the revolutionary left of the 1960s--such as reflexive anticapitalism, an insider-outsider mentality, and an aversion to the system" (xxvi). Instead, Wolf believes, that women should embrace capitalism and get as much money and power for themselves as they can: "pending the revolution,' women are better off with the means of production in their own hands. Women's businesses can be the power cells of the twenty-first century" (Wolf 304). Thus, one must "practice tolerance rather than self-righteousness," (Wolf 53) because, "If we stay hunkered down, defensive and angry, we waste our energies" (Wolf 52). Summarizing Wolf's conclusions, Smith explains:

> Women are held back today, Wolf argues, not primarily because of discrimination within society, but by themselves. She says that women hold themselves back because of the "fear of having too much." In the late twentieth century, women are not hampered by economic or political obstacles in the way of equality, but

> quite simply by their own psychological negativity. "The question to ask," she writes, "is not whether society is ready to yield to women their rightful places, but whether women themselves are ready to take possession of them"[15]. If only women would stop seeing themselves as victims, her logic goes, they would stop being victimized. If only women would embrace capitalism, they would stop being oppressed by it. If only women would stop being angry, they would be happy. (Smith "Whatever Happened to Feminism? 31)

Or, as Karen Lehrman, author of *The Lipstick Proviso: Women, Sex and Power in the Real World,* argues: "Under real feminism (…) women had ultimate responsibility for their problems, happiness and lives." The logical conclusion from this is, as Lehrman argues: "The personal is no longer political" (5). This seismic shift in consciousness from the 1970s reflects an increasing turn to a politics of identity, a politics based on lifestyle, and a politics based on wealth and consumerism. For feminists like Wolf, and the fictional protagonists of *Sex and the City,* women's liberation means having the financial independence to buy expensive high heeled shoes.

Sex and the City, which began in 1998, is a direct descendant of the women's liberation movement. It purposefully evokes Helen Gurley Brown's 1962 *Sex and the Single Girl*. Calling Carrie "the first female thinker in pop culture," akin to Lessing's Anna, Naomi Wolf argues that despite not being "a brass-knuckled political figure, a Birkenstock-wearing Amazon or a breaker of corporate glass ceilings," Carrie "is an icon and did as much to shift the culture around certain women's issues as real-life feminist groundbreakers" (Wolf "Carrie Bradshaw: Icons of the Decade"). For Wolf, both Carrie and Samantha's characters constitute "a revolution." Notably, the characters are all born in the mid-sixties, having grown up in the world of "post-feminism" the meaning of which was as contentious and hotly debated as the movement was itself. Lionized by writers such as Wolf as the new face of feminism, *Sex and the City* perhaps says as much if not more about the movement's demise.

In *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women,* Susan Faludi argues that the backlash against the feminist movement began almost immediately following the movement's key victory, Roe v. Wade. The defeat of the ERA and the passing of the Hyde amendment imposed limits on women's reproductive and economic freedom almost as soon as it began. In the 1980s, Reagan's America provided a fertile ground on which the backlash flourished. But, it is really in the nineties that leaders and thinkers of the women's movement began embracing the backlash under the guise of "post-feminism," "power feminism" or other ideologies which used the language of feminism to destroy many of the principles for which the women's liberation movement had once stood. Katie Roiphe's *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism on Campus* published in 1993 is emblematic of this trend. A daughter of the feminist movement, Roiphe excoriates feminists, for acting as new Victorians and promoting a politics of victimhood which, under the guise of fighting for sexual liberation, created a new prison for women in which Take Back the Night marches and the fight against date rape became tools to restrict and confine female sexuality.

While Roiphe was, for the most part, rejected by the feminist movement, she nonetheless presages a paradigm shift in the language and logic of feminism. With Clinton in office, liberal feminists increasingly turned away from their former radicalism, compromising the principles on which the feminist movement was founded, under the guise of pragmatism. The Paula Jones trial provided a stunning opportunity to bury the dream of "sisterhood" once and for all. As the class antagonisms within the feminist movement were increasingly laid bare, former feminists who

had most benefited from the movement's attack on the glass ceiling increasingly turned against Paula Jones, a working-class woman state employee from Arkansas who sued Clinton for sexual harassment who was derided by James Carville as "trailer park trash" (Kurtz). NOW refused to submit a brief on her behalf after polling its chapters. Gloria Steinem argued that feminists must continue to support Clinton so as to preserve women's reproductive freedom, even if he was a good candidate for "sex addiction therapy" ("Why Feminists Support Clinton"). Susan Faludi famously dismissed Jones' case, saying, "I think we can safely conclude that Paula Jones will not expire from whatever a brief brush with Clinton might have entailed all those years ago; so far, she seems in the pink of health" ("Sex and the Times"). Faludi went on to argue that it was women who needed to change if they wanted real power in the workplaces as "one hallmark of having true power is not having to be reflexive in your responses. Because, along with the other powers comes the power to forgive men--to see one's grievance in proportion and not in the garish caricatures of Gothic romance" ("Sex and the Times").

In this context, it is not hard to understand why *Time* magazine would ask, on its cover, "Is Feminism Dead?" The corresponding article, "Feminism: It's All about Me!" proceeds to argue that feminists of the late 1990s were out of touch with the real issues of inequality facing women (Bellafante). It is hard to imagine what would happen to the Danas, Ellas, and Miras of the 1970s in the post-feminist void of the 1990s. In this regard, *Time*'s cover was telling. Against a black background, the disembodied black and white floating heads of Susan B. Anthony, Betty Friedan, and Gloria Steinem lead up to the new incarnation of the feminist of the 1990s: a color photograph of Ally McBeal. Far from the collective struggle which raised the slogan, "the personal is political," Ally McBeal succinctly expresses the new personal politics of post-feminism. Asked why her problems seem so much more important than anyone else's, she replies, "they're mine" ("The Ex-Files"). This new 'me-first' political impulse in feminism is both the antithesis and the logical conclusion of the personal politics which dominated the earlier women's liberation movement. Floating side by side with the ghosts of feminism past, Ally McBeal (like Carrie Bradshaw and Bridget Jones) becomes the ultimate heroine of post-feminism.

To add more confusion to the new feminist politics of the 1990s, the very same icons of post-feminism are frequently claimed by third wave feminism as icons of their own. As Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards explain in *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future:*

> Rather than an activist hoisting a picket sign, or a suburban woman joining NOW, today a typical young feminist might resemble Bridget Jones, the charmingly slaggy character created by British author Helen Fielding. Bridget's modern conflict goes something like this: "Is it hypocritical of me to be a feminist and still be concerned about my weight, to have credit-card debt from excessive shopping, and an overarching desire to become a 'smug married'?" Bridget, not unlike her televised American doppelganger, Ally McBeal, wears an armor of egalitarian ideals pierced by pre-feminist concerns. These women are fictional, of course, but given the success of *Bridget Jones's Diary* (…) and the number of people who tuned in weekly to *Ally McBeal,* many women relate to the desires and foibles of these (young, heterosexual, white, unmarried, urban, professional) women." (37)

That Baumgardner and Richards cite both Bridget and Ally as fictional representations of the new feminist says much about the politics of third wave feminism and its close resemblance to

the logic of post-feminism. In the political and ideological morass of the 1990s, third wave feminism and post-feminism have more in common than they would like to admit—despite their surface antagonism. As Siegel notes, the battle of the post-feminists and third wave feminists represents "an interesting culture clash within U.S. feminism" with Roiphe on one side and, on the other, a new "phalanx of self-declared third-wave feminists (…) recording their awakenings with a fervor reminiscent of yesterday's proto-radicals" (130). Third wave feminists, unlike post-feminists, agree with the need for feminism, and, argue that the war for women's liberation is far from won. For third wave feminists such as Baumgardner and Richards, it is still crucial to assert that "the personal is political," but this version of feminism increasingly becomes steeped in a philosophy of individualism that differs little from the self-proclaimed post-feminists. Thus, for example, they argue, "…whether casting spells or *Bitch*ing, it's a sign of the times that feminists today are more likely to be individuals quietly (or not so quietly) living self-determined lives than radicals on the ramparts"(36). Explaining the impetus behind *Manifesta*, they write: "As two young women who believe in the importance of a political vision and have faith in our peers, we want to begin to articulate why a generation leading revolutionary lives is best known for saying, 'I'm not a feminist but…' Third wave feminists have been seen as nonfeminist when they are actually living feminist lives"(48). Political activism for Baumgardner & Richards is, ultimately, a lifestyle. In this world view, every congregation of women becomes a political event, and both men and women can engage in revolutionary acts on a daily basis because, as they argue, "Doing the dishes can be a revolutionary act, as can picking up one's own socks" (Baumgardner & Richards 29). For third wave feminists, just living a 'liberated life' is revolutionary. Personal solutions to collective problems are, thus, not only possible but revolutionary acts.

If nothing else, both third wave and post-feminists share an antagonism for second-wave feminists. As Siegel argues,

> If postfeminists thought of older feminists as victim-mongerers, third wavers thought of them as identity police. Blaming their bosses and professors for mandating "politically correct" behavior, for scripting feminist identity, for hoarding power and legislating personal life in ways that seemed overly rigid and suffocating to the young, third wavers joined the postfeminists in creating a bogey: the Second-Wave Feminist. She was rigid, uninviting, dowdy, and, again, plain old no fun—a close cousin of conservative commentator Rush Limbaugh's "feminazi," and equally unappealing. As in the postfeminists' version, Second-Wave Feminism was asexual, or worse: antisex. (140-1)

Indeed, this tension between generations of feminists (among both post and third wave feminists) is evident within Siegel's thought provoking history itself. The foreword of the book is written by Jennifer Baumgardner, co-author of *Manifesta* and co-producer of the documentary, *I Had an Abortion,* one of the most compelling modern arguments for free abortion on demand. Baumgardner, in many ways, exemplifies the post-feminist feminist when she begins the foreword with a narrative about a trip to L.A. that involves both a book reading and a bikini wax. Baumgardner's main point is to argue against the lifestyle politics that emerged from some of the radical feminist groups of the 70s in which one's personal grooming (and sexual) choices were held up as a litmus test for one's commitment to feminism. But, in *Manifesta*, cited above, she argues that the heart of third-wave feminism is living a liberated, feminist life. As it turns out, it is not lifestyle politics with which she disagrees; rather, it is the type of lifestyle which one

advocates which differentiates the generations. She is different from the second-wave feminists, we learn, because she gets a bikini wax. Personal choice is still at the heart of the argument. Today's feminists, apparently, are distinctive, precisely because they can do both bikini waxes and politics.

Increasingly divorced from a politics based in struggle, feminism in the 1990s and 2000s becomes dominated by a "politics of ambiguity."[15] In Siegel's words, this means:

> …holding opposing ideas in tension—and living comfortably with paradox. It was no longer about being part of the problem or part of the solution, being with 'us' or 'them.' (…) In the third-wave paradigm, you could be a feminist aerobics instructor, a feminist exhibitionist, or a feminist supermodel (...) In other words, third wave feminism meant that you could be a champion of the downtrodden, a critic of oppression, a dominatrix, and a wearer of hot pink lip gloss all at once" (Siegel 143).

The movement to 'reclaim' the language of sexism for liberatory purposes increasingly became a part of this new feminist politics. That 'feminist' magazines titled "Bust," "Bitch," and "Cunt" emerged from this movement says much about the politics that informed it.

Implicit in all these arguments, including those by feminists such as Baumgardner, is the idea that feminist critics like Roiphe had a point. Feminism went too far and, women of today need to both embrace their sexualization in the media and beauty industry, while also defending our right to choose. Just as it was for Carrie, feminism is framed as a consumer question as much as it is a political question. Even more than its predecessor, the feminist movement of the 1990s and beyond is one which moves towards a purely personal understanding of liberation and as such is inherently rooted in a middle and/or upper class milieu in which, to paraphrase Wolf, buying one's self out of oppression is an option. In this new feminist politics, elements of sexism that were once rejected by the feminist movement are bought back under the banner of 'choice'. In rejecting the lifestyle politics of the 1970s, the new feminists thus unwittingly bring it back in the extreme. To be a modern-day feminist, one must be able to negotiate fighting for women's rights, while buying expensive shoes and getting your bikini line waxed.

The Making of a Post-Feminist Heroine: *Bridget Jones's Diary*

Perhaps no work epitomizes this type of modern day feminist more than Bridget Jones, who struggles to both be an independent woman and to get a man. It reflects the concern that Mona Charen expressed in "The Feminist Mistake" published in the *National Review* in 1984: "while women's liberation had given her generation 'high incomes, our own cigarette, the option of single parenthood, rape crisis centers, personal lines of credit, free love, and female gynocologists,' it had in return 'effectively robbed us of one thing upon which the happiness of most women rests—men'" (cited in Siegel 105).

The protagonist of Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* in many ways helped to launch the genre of "chicklit," the ultimate post-feminist genre. These works are in no way a

[15] Siegel refers particularly to the politics expressed by Rebecca Walker in the introduction of *to be real,* in which she argues: "For us the lines between Us and Them are often blurred, and as a result we find ourselves seeking to create identities that accommodate ambiguity and our multiple positionalities: including more than excluding, exploring more than defining, searching more than arriving … I hope that in accepting contradiction and ambiguity, in using *and* much more than *either/or,* these voices can help us continue to shape a political force more concerned with cultivating freedom than policing morality." (xxxiiii-xxxv).

return to the narratives of the feminist movement past. Instead, they occupy a contradictory status as the antagonistic adolescent children of the feminist movement who are as indebted to it, as much as they reject it. Angela McRobbie describes the ambivalence that characterizes narratives such as *Bridget Jones's Diary*:

> Feminism is invoked, in order to be relegated to the past. But this is not simply a return to the past, there are, of course, quite dramatic differences between the various female characters of current popular culture from Bridget Jones to the girls in *Sex and the City* and to Ally McBeal, and those found in girls' and women's magazines from a pre-feminist era. These new young women are confident enough to declare their anxieties about possible failure in regard to finding a husband, they avoid any aggressive or overtly traditional men, and they brazenly enjoy their sexuality, without fear of the sexual double standard. In addition they are more than capable of earning their own living, and the degree of suffering or shame they anticipate in the absence of finding a husband is countered by sexual self confidence. (McRobbie 20-21)

What *Time* magazine deplores, McRobbie here celebrates. As Wolf makes a (post) feminist heroine of Carrie Bradshaw, so does McRobbie make of Bridget a model of the new feminist:

> *Bridget Jones's Diary* speaks then to female desire, and in a wholly commercialised way, to the desire for some kind of gender justice, or fairness, in the world of sex and relationships. Here too the ghost of feminism is hovering. Bridget deserves to get what she wants. The audience are wholly on her side. She ought to be able to find the right man, for the reason that she has negotiated that tricky path which requires being independent, earning her own living, standing up for herself against demeaning comments, remaining funny and good humoured throughout, without being angry or too critical of men, without foregoing her femininity, her desires for love and mother-hood, her sense of humour and her appealing vulnerability.' (McRobbie 22)

To summarize, for McRobbie, Bridget is a feminist who is feminine, has a job, and -- crucially for third wave and/or post-feminism -- has a sense of humor (something sorely lacking among their second wave foremothers, according to latter day feminists). Of course, this is a vision of feminism which has entirely internalized the middle and upper class biases that had informed its trajectory from the beginning. It is a vision of feminism in which politics in any meaningful sense has been thrown to the wayside, in favor of a purely personal understanding of liberation. The collective has disappeared entirely in favor of a purely personal form of liberation that is inherently individualistic and based on class privilege. It is by its very nature out of reach from the vast majority of women for whom this new kind of independence is simply not financially feasible, and for whom 'choice' is severely limited by material conditions. Even feminism's greatest achievement, the right to abortion without apology, increasingly becomes a choice only available to a minority of middle and upper class women as 87% of counties in the United States have no abortion provider at all.

If Hanisch's original argument that "the personal is political" was based on the idea that there were no personal solutions to political problems, the new feminists "were arguing that

feminism should no longer be about communal solutions to communal problems but individual solutions to individual problems" (Siegel 123). Siegel continues, arguing that:

> And herein lies one of the most profound ironies of contemporary feminism: At the century's end, the very women who rhetorically mimicked Betty Friedan's earlier oppositional stance in effect reversed the once revolutionary premise of the New Left, the radicals, and the *Feminine Mystique*. Social problems were not social anymore. They were, to many, personal once again. Whereas the New Left logic of participatory democracy and the civil rights era legacy of beloved community had infused second-wave feminism with a utopian vision of transformed social order based on the power of sisterhood, postfeminist feminism in the 1990s was permeated by a conservative zeitgeist that celebrated personal success and strength. For conservatives it was pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps. For the postfeminists, it was propelling oneself forward in stiletto heels. (Siegel 123-4)

In Baumgardner and Richards' *Manifesta*, for example, they argue, "One can be an activist with one's voice, money, vote, creativity, privilege, or the fearlessness that comes from having nothing left to lose"(281). This extremely loose definition of activism mirrors the "politics of ambiguity" that increasingly characterizes third wave feminism. It ignores the question of what actually produces political, social and economic change. Rooted in middle class liberalism, there is little sense of urgency and no discussion of whether such activism can bring about the desired results. Participation in activism becomes an end in and of itself, a moral rather than a political question – in other words, it is a question of personal investment and/or expression rather than political goals or strategy. The material conditions that limit, confine, and at times destroy women's lives are not dealt with in any serious way. There is, as a result, a total lack of urgency despite a clear commitment to, and eloquent expressions of many important battles on feminism's horizon.

Far from celebrating the advent of a new feminism or a 'post-feminist' era, the appeal of chick lit lies in its ability to give expression to the failures of feminism. If anything, Bridget Jones is the embodiment of the movement's failure. As a heroine, it is her failure to live up to the contradictory ideals imposed on women in the wake of the anti-feminist backlash that endears her to a mass audience. Fielding consciously promotes her narrative as a modern day Jane Austen novel, using names and plot devices from *Pride and Prejudice* to consciously place her narrative within a history of women's literature. Like writers of the earlier feminist movement, Fielding appropriates aspects of a female literary history. Indeed, it is notable that, like their second-wave feminist counterparts, both Bridget Jones and Carrie Bradshaw are writers, and, their writing provides the structural form of their narratives. For Bridget Jones, it is her diary that tells her story, although her news reports also serve as a means of bringing the modern world of literature and media into the narrative. In *Sex and the City*, Carrie Bradshaw's role as a writer of regular columns on love and relationships provide the dramatic structure through which each episode expresses its central theme and/or concern. In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Fielding returns to Austen and the courtship plot, not Lessing or Plath, in a significant shift away from the feminist fiction of the second wave. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Lessing responded to Fielding's notable lack of reverence for her feminist foremothers with a literary snub of her own. In response to Bridget Jones, Lessing deplores "these helpless girls, drunken, worrying about their weights and so on"(qted in Guenther 90) evoking in many ways a "…decades-old claim[s] that

women writing about their private lives are narcissistic, solipsistic, vain" (Guenther 90). Indeed, Lessing's critique echoes those often levied at her own work. While *Bridget Jones' Diary* maintains some continuity with the second wave feminist movement it is also a literary backlash—returning to the nineteenth century to find the plots and characters with which to write the stories of the modern woman. But, Fielding wields this form with a difference. Bridget's dilemma is unthinkable prior to the women's liberation movement. "Whereas Austen's heroines bemoan their limited options," Guenther argues, "Fielding's lament is having too many"(Guenther 86). Bridget is both a product of the women's liberation movement and the backlash against it.

While Fielding uses the diary genre much as earlier feminist writers did, she reverses the plot structure of the 1970s feminist housewife narrative. In contrast to the diary fiction of the 1970s, *Bridget Jones's Diary* begins with the modern incarnation of the 'problem with no name' —now primarily an affliction of *single* women—and tracks Bridget's liberation from this extremely contradictory state towards coupledom, an equally contradictory state that nonetheless provides a seemingly happy ending.

Bridget's dilemma and the novel's formal structure are indebted to the self-help genre which proliferated in the aftermath of second wave feminism's demise. Each entry in Bridget Jones' diary begins, notably, with her weight, and the amount of cigarettes and alcohol units consumed during the day. These are indicators not only of her emotional state throughout the novel but also the degree to which she has made 'progress' toward her goals for self-improvement. As such, they are also stark daily reminders of social pressures which encroach upon the most private of spaces in women's daily experience and distort their sense of self. As Guenther points out, the novel begins with the words "I will not" which "highlight[s] not only the idea of self-improvement but also the ever present spectre of failure that accompanies such an intent"(Guenther 85). For Guenther, Bridget's reliance on the omnipresent self-help industry to measure herself and her progress is not an uncritical stance. As Bridget herself remarks, "Wise people will say Daniel should like me just as I am, but I am a child of *Cosmopolitan* culture and have been traumatized by supermodels and too many quizzes and know that neither my personality nor my body is up to it if left to its own devices" (Fielding 52). In passages such as these, Fielding makes clear that Bridget is all too aware of the negative impact of popular culture —and particularly the self-help industry—which preys on women, encouraging them to see social problems as personal, sexism as a conflict between Venus and Mars, and oppression as personal failure. The industry depends on promoting insecurity and self-loathing so as to provide a constant market for the genre, urging women to live in a constant state of self-improvement which can never bring fulfillment. As Guenther argues, "the self-help genre was radical in its ability to open up dialogue on previously unmentionable or embarrassing topics, the publications also tended to depoliticize women's plights, forcing women to treat the symptoms of social problems rather than the problems themselves"(Guenther 86). In a similar fashion, television hits like *Sex and the City* whose protagonist writes what is essentially a self-help column on sex and relationships, won over their audience by talking about sexual, social, and personal topics that had never before been aired on public television. In the face of sexism, the self-help genre encourage women to investigate themselves. If the world cannot be changed, as it seemed to many in the aftermath of feminism, the solution lay within one's self.

Guenther's analysis of *Bridget Jones's Diary* is most interesting and insightful when she examines and assesses Bridget's relationship to feminism. As she argues, "…Bridget's quest for self-definition in the novel surfaces through her struggle to understand her place within feminism

as a whole" (Guenther 91). Indeed, despite her critics, Bridget is hyper aware of feminism, and equally aware and frequently unhappy about her own failure to live up to what she imagines are ideals of the women's liberation movement. Thus, she responds with pride when she is described as "a radical feminist and [has] an incredibly glamorous life"(cited in Guenther 91). At the same time, when her mother leaves her father, Bridget spends a great deal of time soul searching, unable to see in her mother's actions the feminist impetus she looks for in her own life. Despite being of the generation which brought us second wave feminism, Bridget's mother reads Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* and Greer's *The Female Eunuch* much later in life, when she decides to pursue her own liberation outside of her family and marriage. Bridget's critique of Friedan and Greer helps to distance her from politics of feminism past. But, her uneasiness with her mother's decision points to more than a temporal distance; it mirrors her frequent ambivalence and uncertainty vis-à-vis feminism overall. Her mother finds not freedom or happiness in her quest for liberation, but ultimately becomes ensnared in dead-end, exploitative relationship with a con artist who threatens not only her emotional well being but her financial and physical security, landing her in jail as she unwittingly becomes an accomplice to his illegal activities. The dreariness of her marriage seems far more appealing to her mother after this brush with the law. In this sense, *Bridget Jones's Diary* bears more similarities to the cautionary tales of the nineteenth century than the liberatory ones of the twentieth.

Within the text, Bridget's friend Shazzer most embodies the modern feminist ideal. In the following passage, she drunkenly expounds on her own feminist vision for the future:

> There won't be any men leaving their families and post-menopausal wives (…) or trying to have sex with women without any niceness or commitment, because the young mistresses and women will just turn around and tell them to sod off and men won't get any sex or any women unless they learn how to behave properly instead of cluttering up the sea-bed of women with their SHITTY, SMUG, SELF-INDULGENT BEHAVIOUR! (Fielding 109).

While Shazzer provides Bridget a voice with which to reject and combat the negative images of femininity and relationships with which she is bombarded, she also elicits a sense of failure in Bridget who feels unable to live up to feminist ideals. If Bridget fails at losing weight, she also fails at being the feminist heroine she envisages. In part, Bridget's sense of failure stems from an extremely individualized notion of feminism. Shazzer's feminist vision means standing up to individual men, not necessarily fighting for equality on a larger societal level. Despite her awareness of women's oppression and her admirable vocal and vociferous denunciations of sexism, it is ultimately an understanding of women's liberation rooted in individualism and personal politics.

This becomes increasingly clear in a longer version of the fight between Bridget and Shazzer published in one of Fielding's columns in *The Daily Telegraph*. After Shazzer accuses Bridget of abandoning feminism, Bridget is hurt, and reassures herself, "… Am feminist definitely. Believe in equality, give money to third-world women's charity, have own job, independent life and home… So what was Shazzie's point?"(cited in Guenther 92). The satire in Fielding's portrayal of Bridget's feminism highlights the personal (and consumer) politics and class bias of feminism in the post-feminist era. As the debate continues, Jude, another friend, jumps in to give the clearest verbalization of the "feminist dilemma" for the Bridgets of the world: "What you mean, Shaz," she says, "… is that your feminist ideals do not encompass the need to be loved. And Bridget is prey to the influence of whatever society and media deem lovable" (cited in Guenther 92). Fielding here echoes the third wave critique of the second wave

feminists who (in addition to being hairy and lacking humor) are destined to be alone, unhappy and incapable of a healthy and fulfilling relationship. While Bridget aspires to feminist ideals, she is saturated with mixed messages from the media that insist she be independent and conform to sexist ideals so as to find a mate. In this world, Bridget must be liberated and thin, subject to a whirlwind of contradictory impulses and directives. It is hardly surprising that Bridget "could not help, as walked home, feeling failure, not only for failing to live up to feminist ideals, but having wrong feminist ideals in the first place" (cited in Guenther 92).

While Bridget in many ways embodies the post-feminist dilemma, the contradictions she struggles with have their roots in the identity politics of the women's liberation movement. Her failure is an expression of the movement as a whole. The personal politics she embodies are a reflection of the failure of post-feminist attempts to individualize the struggle against oppression. Bridget's character is a stark reminder that even if one can buy one's self out of a lot of oppression, as Wolf argues, one remains enmeshed in a culture fueled by a drive for profit, invested in selling women on the need to be loved, married, and desired. Women are bombarded with false images of beauty, the body and the self to create an insatiable market for the self-improvement industry. The legacy of feminism leaves contradictory images. While the smiling housewife of *Ozzie and Harriet* and *Leave it to Beaver* are no more, the new feminine ideal is hardly liberatory. Women are expected to work outside of the home *and* do most of the work in the home, while being sexually desirable at all times. Bridget's frequent failures at cooking, and her many missteps on the job are humorous depictions of the impossibility of living up to this ideal. She fails at all of these models, precisely because they are impossible in the first place.

For Leah Guenther, Bridget Jones represents third wave feminism and its willingness to "embrace" contradictions. The third wave feminist in this conception can both decry the beauty myth and strive to achieve it. The novel thus appeals, in particular, to the "I'm not a feminist, but…" generation while quickly earning the ire of the supposed humorless feminists of the past. Citing the work of Jenny Colgan, Guenther argues that feminists of the past—Doris Lessing being the most notable example—are incapable of understanding a new generation of women who "have grown up with education as a right; with financial independence; with living on our own, with having far too many choices.." (Colgan "We Know the Difference") while still objectified in the mass media (Guenther 94). Guenther and Colgan's own comments, however, reflect an unquestioned class bias of third wave feminism which it inherited from its predecessors and magnified a hundred fold. Indeed, it is worth noting that Lessing had no less ire for the feminists of the 1970s. Nonetheless, while the earlier feminist movement was forced to at least acknowledge differences of race, class and sexuality in women's experience of oppression, the feminist movement of the 1990s has no significant militant radical edge pushing it question its own economic, cultural and racial biases. The increasing disconnect between the primarily white feminist movement and women of color was made abundantly clear by Alice Walker's decision to remove her name from the *Ms.* Masthead in protest of its racial bias and lack of diversity. This bias was likewise evident to Michele Wallace, author of *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman,* when she was asked to take out her braids for her photograph on the magazine's cover (Siegel 108).

Colgan's (and Guenther's) assumption that the modern woman is financially independent, and has too many choices, bears absolutely no relation to the experience of the vast majority of women who earn less than men, are more likely to live in poverty, and for whom 'choice' is simply not economically feasible, if it is available at all. The women who make the shoes that Carrie Bradshaw buys with gusto, or work in the salons where Jennifer Baumgardner

gets her bikini line waxed, would undoubtedly have much to quibble about with this depiction of the modern woman's dilemma. The assumptions made by Colgan and other third wave feminists about the world of women today belong to a feminism that is entirely a discourse of the middle to upper middle class. It telescopes all the political and economic forms of oppression and exploitation which women face into a matter of personal choice—the product of having too much choice, rather than not enough. Despite its best intentions, this type of post-feminist or third wave feminist interpretation of the dilemmas facing women plays a regressive political role inviting one to blame the victims of sexism for failing to take advantage of the choices that are before them. If financial independence is a choice available to all women, then, the logic follows, the lack thereof must also be a choice. Not only do the political and philosophical underpinnings of this brand of feminism exclude the vast majority of women, but it ultimately props up the consumer culture and structures of power it seeks to critique.

This class bias is reflected in many post-feminist heroines from Carrie Bradshaw and her four hundred dollar shoes to Ally McBeal a highly paid and respected lawyer despite having to fight for her right to wear short skirts in the court room. To some extent, Bridget Jones shares their class bias as a financially independent woman. Nonetheless, she is clearly not part of the world of the wealthy that *Sex and the City* celebrates. Like Austen's Elizabeth Bennet, her literary inspiration, Bridget proves herself to be unversed in the ways of the wealthy despite seeking admission into the D'Arcys' world. Indeed, part of her appeal to readers (and later film goers) is that she repeatedly fails at living up to the ideals of her icons. She may want to be Carrie Bradshaw, but she decidedly is not. She is no great fashion maven, has no expensive shoes, weighs thirty pounds more than she would like to, and repeatedly falls short of the glamorous feminist lifestyle to which she aspires. Indeed, it is this failure that is at the heart of the comedy in the novel and movie and which explains the appeal of Bridget Jones to many women.

As comedy, *Bridget Jones Diary* provides a lens through which personal failure can be transformed into a humorous social commentary which mocks the ideal and the contradictory demands placed on women in modern society—despite offering no alternative. In a response to critics published in *The Daily Telegraph*, in language that mirrors Bridget's diary shorthand, Fielding explains her vision of Bridget's feminism:

> Point is not that women are retrograde ditzes, but feel that they have to be so perfect in every area that become incredibly hard on selves: trying to live life of non-independent and independent woman at same time, haunted by media images of anorexic teenage models running from gym to board meeting to nuclear family and cooking elaborate dinner parties for twelve. Vision of someone else—Bridget—trying so hard and spectacularly failing, ending up when guests arrive in underwear with wet hair and one foot in pan of mashed potato is comic release from pressures of overreaching role models. If women really are equal, surely allowed to laugh at selves, mark of confidence, etc. (cited in Guenther 96).

Fielding is remarkably shrewd in explaining the appeal of Bridget's 'spectacular failures' to women caught between the contradictory ideals of the 'independent' and 'dependent' woman. It is this comedy of spectacular failure that explains the appeal of the post-feminist comic heroine. At the same time, Fielding herself seems caught in the contradictions of postfeminist logic when she argues that 'If women really are equal, surely allowed to laugh at selves, mark of failure, etc." To laugh at Bridget Jones is hardly a mark of confidence or a recognition of the equality women have achieved; it is a recognition of the impossibility of living up to a distorted ideal

which is anything but empowering. It turns a personal failure into a collective failure. The comedy is cathartic precisely because it reminds us that our failures are not solely our own, but a social failure -- the failure of society to provide the material basis for women's full equality and fulfillment in the personal and public spheres. It is a comedy that points to the failures of the feminist movement which, while liberating the housewife, failed to rid women of the double burden they face in the workplace and at home. In the absence of collective struggle to fundamentally transform society, feminism becomes a personal and/or even a moral question. Thus, critics ask whether or not Bridget Jones is enough of a feminist (or a feminist at all). The real question is whether or not social, cultural, or political institutions have changed enough to allow women to be fully independent, equal and fulfilled—a question which the novel answers with a resounding 'no.'

For Guenther, many of Bridget's critics "have failed to see the ways in which feminism's longer history played out on the pages of the novel." Moving outside of the narrative itself to make her case, she notes that "Fielding's dedication of her second novel 'to the other Bridgets' acknowledges this community as well as the new writers and characters spawned, or 'spored,' by this 'confessional gender'"(Guenther 97).[16] While this is an important point, it is also worth pointing out the limitations of this 'community' and those who are implicitly excluded. While the class bias of Guenther's argument (and *Bridget Jones's Diary* itself) has already been noted, the cultural bias is also a limiting feature of the narrative. Ironically, it is the sequel Fielding dedicates to "the other Bridgets"—in which Bridget goes to Thailand, finds herself in a jail with Thai women happy to barter cigarettes for her bra in a sequence which is dripping in orientalism and racist stereotypes (notably, the sub-title itself, *The Edge of Reason* could be taken from a nineteenth-century colonialist narrative). Interestingly, the sequel of the *Sex and the City* movie also felt the need to send its protagonists to a Thai jail (as does the sequel of *The Hangover*). It seems that, in sequels with nowhere to go, a brief trip to a Thai prison does wonders for female (and even male) bonding. All of these narratives participate in a long history of orientalism in which "the other" becomes a foil to the development of identity in the Western protagonist, reminding the reader that despite all criticism, Western civilization isn't so bad. After all, while sexism may be rampant in American and British culture, we still have bras that are the envy of women internationally, as Fielding would have it. These incidents within the narrative are important reminders of the biases within the women's movement that make 'sisterhood' so hard to achieve.

If Bridget's relationship to the feminist movement is fraught, there is a great deal of continuity between the form of her narrative and the first-person confessional genre that became the hallmark of earlier feminist fiction. The diary form, in particular, provides a sense of immediacy and tears down the barriers between reader and character that fictional narratives can at times impose. Whether fictional or not, the genre provides the reader with a feeling of reading an unmediated, and therefore, 'true' version of events. The diary form gives us the sense of catching a privileged glimpse into the private writings of the character. Nonetheless, the "I" of these narratives has been claimed as a distinctive feature of third wave feminism by critics such as Guenther, despite the prevalence of this genre in the feminist literary canon. As Guenther argues:

[16] Bridget means to write 'genre' but instead writes 'gender.' Guenther makes much of these misspellings in Bridget's diary as which she argues are significant in understanding the genre.

> Third wave writing has developed, in large part, in reaction to this classification (that of second wave feminists being out of touch with lives of women of the third wave), offering personal accounts of personal experiences as a way to explain, first-hand, women's new realities (Guenther 94)

In "The Legacy of the Personal," Deborah Siegel, notes that, "the excessive personalizing of feminist discourse can potentially obscure instead of unveil systemic problems and power structures" (67). Citing critics such as Linda Kauffman, Susan Bernstein and Joan Scott, she explains: "Some argue that the proliferation of the personal narrative in feminist theory displaces women with a few writerly I's (Siegel "The Legacy of the Personal" 68). Linda Kauffman asks, "Is it even possible to write against the grain of individualism?" In examining the role of personal testimony in feminist theory, she argues:

> One can obviously use the personal voice without forgetting history, society, politics. More difficult to resist is the temptation to view the personal as inherently paradigmatic, the individual life story as coherent, unified, orally inspiring. It makes us see similarity where in fact there are only differences—irresolvable, irreconcilable differences at that. Invocations to personal experience are appealing because they imply that one can surmount injustice and triumph over adversity (Kauffman "The Long Goodbye" 1159).

The use of personal testimony in writing is firmly rooted in the tradition of the feminist movement against which modern feminists apparently want to rebel; but, the debate about its usefulness to the feminist cause also has a long history. The "excessive personalization" that Siegel and others decry in third wave feminism is in many ways the heir of 1970s consciousness-raising. Debates about the personalization of feminist theory and discourse reenact debates about the relationship between the personal and political. The "I" of third wave feminism inherits the contradictions of the earlier movement in that it can either be mobilized to forge a collective consciousness or to privilege the personal to the detriment of collective action. Likewise, the tendency to collapse the author and the protagonist of these works is a continued feature in the chick lit of today. The diary or personal narrative form gives "credibility" to the protagonist, but, the strong sense of immediacy, makes the author's role as a writer of fiction, rather than a diarist, easier to denigrate or forget.

The use of the "I" in these narratives certainly hearkens back to the CR groups of the feminist movement in which, "the isolated 'I' could, by means of identification, collapse into a collective, rescuing 'we'" (Siegel "The Legacy of the Personal" 68). Nonetheless, as Siegel argues, "if the Third Wave can return to the personal and the return to the personal enacts a return to CR, the result is CR with a difference" (Siegel "The Legacy of the Personal" 68). In this new 'CR with a difference' the process is, however, depoliticized to the extreme. Thus, for Baumgardner and Richards, the female "dinner party" is a CR group. As they write in *Manifesta*, "For women of the Third Wave—that is, women who were reared in the wake of the women's liberation movement of the seventies—a good dinner party (or any gathering of women) is just as likely to be a place to see politics at work as is a rally … this honest communicating among women is a revolutionary act, and the best preface to activism"(15). By extension, Bridget Jones' dinners with Shazzer and Jude are CR sessions, revolutionary acts even, entirely divorced from the political goals that once imbued such consciousness-raising with its power.

For third wave feminists such as Baumgardner and Richards, personal testimony continues to play a crucial role in the development of a feminist consciousness. As they write,

"testimony is where feminism starts. Historically, women's personal stories have been the evidence of where the movement needs to go politically and furthermore, that there is a need to move forward…Third wave anthologies…are the foundation upon which a political women's movement will be built" (Baumgardner & Richards 20). Nonetheless, as Guenther argues, despite the similarities in form with earlier feminist texts, post or third wave feminist narratives, "are not confessional memoirs that call for the social revolutions of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, the sexual revolution of Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*, or the political revolutions of Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*" (95). Indeed, what third wave feminism inherits and retains from its second wave predecessors is the political form without its content. This is highlighted in Baumgardner & Richards' narrative of the revolutionary dinner party: "And, as with many feminist conversations we have witnessed, all threads eventually led back to food, sex, and hair" (Baumgardner & Richards 25). Personal testimony is hardly revolutionary in and of itself. The use of this form by earlier feminists appealed to a generation of women radicalized by the women's liberation movement, not only because it was personal, but because it was political.

Born of the demise of the feminist movement, the new CR is a retreat from the political struggle into the personal. No longer is the personal a site of political radicalization and/or struggle. Instead, it is the only space left in which change seems possible. The turn inwards is a reflection of the failure to achieve real liberation, and thus the struggle to come up with a personal solution to a political problem. If Bridget turns to self-help and diets in her pursuit of the new feminist ideal, she is not oblivious to the larger political questions, as evident in the letters she drafts to Blair in *The Edge of Reason* telling him to "stop touting family values" unless they "teach all boy children that sharing the housework does not mean twiddling one fork under the lap'" (Fielding *Edge of Reason* 197-8). But, these unsent letters are a far cry from the feminist movement of yore. They are stark reminders of the backlash against feminism which has everything to do with Bridget's dilemma – both personal and political. Bridget's narrative – and chick lit as a whole—is forged out of feminism's demise. Where these narratives fall short of their feminist predecessors, they enact the failure of the movement as a whole.

The Political is Personal

As a post-feminist heroine, Bridget Jones is as much a product of the feminist movement as Ella Price. The politics of post-feminist and/or third wave feminist narratives from *Bridget Jones* to *Sex and the City* are already contained in the tensions that characterized feminist fiction in the 1960s and 70s. The radical idea that "the personal is political," was both an argument for political and even revolutionary struggles, and the basis for lifestyle politics. Over the course of the 1960s and 1970s the radicalization that swept the country, bringing thousands of women into the movement through CR groups, radical feminist groups, abortion rights struggles, the civil rights movement or anti war struggles, increasingly gave way to a politics of pragmatism and, ultimately, a retreat from radicalism altogether. As we have seen, the early feminist movement seized upon the slogan 'the personal is political' as a means of politicizing women's private lives, raising awareness about women's oppression, and radicalizing women with the purpose of activating them and bringing them into collective struggle. Nonetheless, by the 1970s and 80s, the "personal is political'" increasingly referred to a politics in which personal experiences, actions and lifestyle choices substituted for collective political struggle. By the 1990s, with the feminist movement all but dead, the idea that the "personal is political" had been distorted beyond recognition living on in Power feminism and other incarnations which relied increasingly on self-help tropes and the accumulation of wealth as one's means of liberation. This shift is

perhaps nowhere more obvious than in Gloria Steinem's preface to *Revolution from Within: A Book of Self-Esteem,* whose title alone gives expression to the profound retreat from the radical politics which had characterized the earlier political movements in which she was involved. In the preface, Steinem argues, that it is time "turn the feminist adage around," from "*The personal is political*" to "*The political is personal*" (Steinem *Revolution Within* 16-17, emphasis in original).

Not all writers and theorists of the women's liberation movement drew the same conclusions, however, despite the political retreat of the movement as a whole from the 1960s to the 1990s. Veterans of the women's liberation and civil rights movements such as Alice Walker, Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich maintained life long commitments to social and political justice as activists and writers. Nonetheless, all had to grapple with the demise of the women's liberation movement and the other radical movements which provided the impetus for their work. The trajectory of Marge Piercy—a prolific writer and an activist in SDS who joined the women's movement out of the failure of the New Left to adequately prioritize women's issues—provides a useful counterpoint to the power feminists as she continues to grapple with questions of struggle and political and social justice in her writing. Piercy's first novel, *Small* Changes, was attacked for its failure to depict the revolutionary potential and political mission of the women's movement. Writing about *Small Changes*, one reviewer notes that "changes in lifestyle are political in themselves …. [but the book] almost completely ignores the more overtly political aspects of the women's movement"(cited in Hogeland, "Men" 297). And yet, Piercy does not actually ignore the overtly political aspects of the women's movement. In *Small Changes* and later works, Piercy repeatedly returns to the movements of the 60s and 70s to chronicle both their potential and their ultimate demise. *Small Changes* itself, while focused on the search for personal solutions to the political problem of women's oppression, is notable for its insistence on the failure of these individual solutions to end the systemic oppression of women.

Writing in the genre of realism proves to be an impossible task for Piercy to imagine a world rid of female subjugation. In *Woman on the Edge of Time,* Piercy, like Lessing, turns to utopian fiction, to imagine a future in which female subjugation has been defeated. Piercy revisits the movements of the 60s —both their potential and failures— in *Vida*, a novel which perhaps most definitively captures the despair at the failure of the radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s to enact the change they sought. In *Vida*, the title character lives underground, still dedicated to the remnants of radical movements of the 1960s, yet trapped in an increasingly anachronistic lifestyle to avoid criminal prosecution for her actions as a member of Piercy's fictionalized depiction of the Weather Underground. Unable to relive the vibrant days of the radical left, she is also incapable of reentering a present in which those movements have been demolished. Her own political commitment to an unfulfilled vision of revolutionary change requires her to live the life of a constant fugitive. At the end of the novel, Vida has not given up hope, vowing to continue the fight, but the sense of despair likewise seeps through the words of her final statement:

> I am at the mercy of history (…) but I can push it too a bit. One thing I know is that nothing remains the same. No great problems in this society have been solved, no wounds healed, no promises kept except that the rich shall inherit. What swept through us and cast us forward is a force that will gather and rise again. Two steps forward and a step and half back. I will waste none of my life (Piercy *Vida* 477).

While Piercy maintains some hope for a future renewal of the revolutionary fervor of her generation, in *Vida*, she provides a stark depiction of the cost of failure for individual revolutionaries who devoted themselves to a revolutionary perspective that failed to be realized.

In later novels, Piercy continues to reflect on the political legacy of feminism, never abandoning its goals completely, despite an often grim reality in the present. In *Three Women*, she tells the story of three generations of women: Beverly, an activist and union organizer, symbol of the struggles of women in the 1930s, her daughter Suzanne, an activist lawyer and symbol of the women's liberation movement, and her daughter, Elena, who as a symbol of the post-feminist generation, seems lost for most of the novel. At the end, she may go back to school, but her future is uncertain—as is, notably, the future of feminism. Suzanne, however, like Piercy, keeps up the fight and vows to "go on teaching and seeking justice, no matter how flawed and partial" (Piercy *Three Women* 309).

The feminist movement's emphasis on the personal and its commitment to the creation of a new system of sexual relations made it particularly prone to the defeatism that engulfed radicals in the wake of a period in which everything seemed possible and revolution was on the agenda. Writing in the 1980s, Todd Gitlin describes his own experience:

> From the mid- to late Eighties, the sweet and wild dreams of the Sixties seem as remote as nightmares. The counterrevolution seems to have outorganized the revolution. (…) Anyone who went to sleep in 1968, with Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* leading the bestseller list and *The Graduate* first at the box office, and woke up in 1985 to behold Iacocca and *Rambo* , and Cleaver as an apostle of the fire-breathing anti-Communist Unification Church, would be entitled to some astonishment. (Gitlin 434-435)

That the literary realism of the feminist movement in fiction could not overcome this sense of despair is not a failure of the genre itself, but rather a reflection of the profound disillusionment of feminists who found themselves in a period of reaction. As one writer explains in an aptly titled essay, "The Demoralization Paper; Or, Janet Mandelbaum, Jane Clifford, Anna Giardino, Zelda Campbell, Mira Ward, and Myself: The Fate of Six English Teachers,":

> ….I [am not] looking back to the 60s and 70s and calling for women to leave this male-made institution (burn it down like [Bryant's] Anna Giardino wants to do) and to set up alternative structures. I want and need and mostly like my job; I have fought for it. I support the struggles of each and every woman to get tenure, to rise up in the system, to force elite institutions to open their doors to women. Yet I am profoundly awakened—again—by the reading of these novels and essays, by the writing of this paper, to the limitations of such struggles. And I am realizing that burnout, stress, and demoralization come not merely from discrimination, or from the overwork of the English teacher, but from a system that demands *death* to a whole range of values that women are symbolized as holding. (Maglin "The Demoralization Paper" 582)

The failure of feminist fiction to create liberating "endings" that avoid the twin perils of subjugation or death, are not, as this article makes clear, a failure of form. It is a political failure

that opened up doors for women on a mass scale and yet, failed to provide rooms of their own in which fulfillment or liberation was possible. Despite its many gains, the women's movement failed to deliver on the emancipatory vision it had promised. While its gains were invaluable, its defeats live on in the profound demoralization that characterizes later works of the period.

In a 2013 *New Yorker* article written after the death of Shulasmith Firestone—the radical feminist activist and author of *The Dialectic of Sex: the Case for Feminist Revolution*—Susan Faludi eloquently describes the devastating toll of the backlash of the 80s and 90s on activists of the radical women's movement. By the time Firestone's body was found in the studio apartment on a fifth-floor tenement walkup in the East Village, she had been dead for several days. She was sixty-seven years old, living on public assistance, and had spent decades battling schizophrenia. Faludi describes her funeral as a radical-feminist revival. She describes Kate Millett reading from Firestone's *Airless Spaces* (1998) in which Firestone wrote of herself in the third person: "She could not read. She could not write… She sometimes recognized on the faces of others joy and ambition and other emotions she could recall having had once, long ago. But her life was ruined, and she had no salvage plan" (cited in Faludi "Death of a Revolutionary"). Faludi notes:

> Clearly, something terrible had happened to Firestone, but it was not her despair alone that led Millett to choose this passage. When she finished reading she said, "I think we should remember Shulie, because we are in the same place now." It was hard too say which moment the mourners were there to mark: the passing of Firestone or that of a whole generation of feminists who had been unable to thrive in he world they had done so much to create. (Faludi "Death of a Revolutionary")

The demise of the women's liberation movement, like the decline of the New Left more generally, cannot be attributed to any single factor. Born as the anti-war and New Left movements were on the decline, subject to internal splits and divisions, and, facing a vociferous backlash which was only to increase throughout the 1970s, feminism's failures had both internal and external causes. Despite its limitations, the feminist movement had significant victories. The women's movement fundamentally altered the landscape of gender roles in the United States providing hitherto unknown access to reproductive health facilities, employment opportunities, and changes in social and cultural assumptions about gender. While the movement accomplished a great deal, ultimately, not all women benefited equally. A small minority of women *did* forever leave the feminine mystique behind, enter the workforce while shattering the glass ceilings that had previously limited them, and force the mad men world of the political and business elite to give them a piece of the pie. The Ally McBeals and Carrie Bradshaws of the postfeminist era emerge from this small minority—as does Bridget Jones, despite her decidedly lesser status in the economic and social pecking order. It is to this minority that power feminism would be most likely to appeal. To the vast majority of working women who continue to suffer under the double burden of work in the public and private sphere, these modern day feminists, not surprisingly, seem out of touch. While this class polarization vis-à-vis feminist politics has been exacerbated by the gains made by a minority of women in the past decade, the roots of this economic divide were present from the beginning of the women's movement and were reflected in the early debates surrounding the formation of NOW and the fight for reproductive freedom, gay and lesbian rights, and civil rights.

Generation X in the Bell Jar: From *Fear of Flying* to *Bridget Jones*

Both *Fear of Flying* and *Bridget Jones's Diary* are novels which—despite all the aspersions cast on "chick lit"—define their generations. The Isadora of the 1970s becomes the Bridget of the 1990s. Both appeal to a generation of women readers because they encapsulate the struggles, successes and failures of the women's movement in their eras. Both are likewise examples of the mass-market best seller that more often than not creates only surface etchings of the movements they represent. Unlike the Marge Piercys, Dorothy Bryants, Octavia Butlers, Doris Lessings and Sylvia Plaths of their generation, they are both further removed from the political and literary movements which gave birth to the genre. Nonetheless, they are imbued by the same political and literary impulses which defined their generation of women writers. Jong's only-barely-political Isadora is cognizant of the Vietnam War and aware of the women's movement engulfing France (among other places) while Bridget struggles with believably asking a date, "What do you think of the situation in Chechnya?" so as to appear to have a political consciousness. Nonetheless, the gap in political consciousness between the two says more about the political periods which give rise to each genre than the politics of the authors. Both have political and literary roots in the feminist fictions that inspired the movement of the 1970s from Plath to Lessing, despite their enormous political and literary distance.

The development of feminist fiction—from Plath to Jong— provided a space in which to articulate the movement's concerns and questions. It functioned as a testimonial to the personal roots of the movement's politics, while also giving voice to the search for collective solutions which went beyond the scope of the personal narrative. Feminism's greatest success, was, perhaps to make generations of women abundantly aware, that the "personal" was always "political." It was only by making public the myriad personal manifestations of women's oppression in their lives, that the 'personal' could become a site of struggle and political change on a mass level. Unfortunately, the personal politics upon which the movement was based also paved the way to its demise, as the idea that the "personal is political" became increasingly an excuse for imbuing the most trivial of individual actions with personal power, rather than a political theory which declared individual liberation impossible as long as women were collectively oppressed by the social and political structures in which they lived. The triumph of post-feminism trivialized or even negated the revolutionary impulses which drove early women to read *The Bell Jar* and *The Golden Notebook* and ultimately produce a canon of their own. Nonetheless, Bridget Jones lives on to tell the story of feminism's failures.

At the same time, the democratizing impulse of 1960s and 1970s feminist narratives survives in contemporary fiction. Sapphire's *Push* is a notable example. Published in 1997, the novel is written in the form of a first person fictional narrative by an illiterate African-American high school student in Harlem. Sapphire uses many of the conventions of feminist first person narratives to trace the symbolic journey of Precious, who is expelled from school after she becomes pregnant with her second child conceived as the result of being raped by her father. Later diagnosed with AIDS, Precious is a powerful symbol for the failures of the civil rights and women's liberation movements and the success of the backlash in the post-welfare reform era of the 1990s. At the same time, if there is any hope in the narrative, it is embodied in the figure of Ms. Rain, a teacher in an alternative G.E.D. program who is strongly identified with the movements of the 1960s and 70s, and a tradition of progressive education reminiscent of citizenship and freedom schools. Much of the novel is narrated in the form of a writing journal, á la Ella Price, as "Miz Rain," guides Precious toward literacy and a sense of self. She, likewise, introduces Precious to Harriet Tubman, Langston Hughes, Malcolm X, Lucille Clifton and most

notably Alice Walker as *The Color Purple* is a required text for the class. Precious's identification with Walker's narrative is both a testament to the continued legacy of racism, sexism, poverty and violence in the 1990s, but also, to the important legacy of feminist literature for young women of today. Like Walker's Celie, Precious moves from illiteracy to literacy and the construction of her own narrative as Ms. Rain's class project requires all students to "write our life stories and put it all in one book" (Sapphire 94). The novel tellingly closes with the class's "Life Stories" book—including four narratives from the narrator and other members of her class. In each story, writing figures as an act of self-emancipation. A generation removed from the 1960s it nonetheless actively engages with earlier texts born out of that period of radicalization, constructing a protest narrative for the 1990s that stands firmly in the tradition of the first-person fictions of second-wave feminism.

In the twenty-first century, the personal is still political, and still, therefore a site of radicalization and potential political mobilization. Fifty years after the publication of *The Bell Jar* and *The Golden Notebook*, a new movement is radicalizing women who are tired of being personally blamed for a collective political failure. The movement that developed around *Slutwalk* in 2011 is, but one incarnation of the women's liberation movement in the present. Sparked by a Toronto police officer who advised women that if they didn't want to be raped, they should avoid dressing like a slut, it became an international movement from India to Canada to the United States to Mexico. The *Slutwalk* movement has once more sought to make 'personal' issues questions that are political not individual. Likewise, it has struggled with questions of class and racial bias, and, has been forced to reckon openly with a post-feminist right wing eager to roll back the very last vestiges of the feminist movement's accomplishments. Despite these obstacles, the movement is significant precisely because it has captured the imagination of millions, and provided a new forum in which an emerging, radicalized group of women can be politicized, trained and engaged in the debates which continue to haunt every incarnation of the women's rights movement. *Slutwalk* is, in many ways, indicative of a new stage in the women's movement. It is a rejection of post-feminism and the era of "I'm not a feminist but… " And yet, it continues to grapple with much of feminism's legacy as the debates of the past inform those of the present. A new women's movement will, undoubtedly, need to come up with new demands, political objectives, strategies and tactics. Nonetheless, they can learn much from their sisters of generations past, for whom, to make the personal public, no matter the cost, was a political strategy which mobilized a generation of women, and, produced a generation of writers who built a new feminist canon, book by book, which continues to inspire and guide us today.

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