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Mirja Lobnik	Date

Nomad Memory:
Inscribing Orality in Literatures of the Americas and South Asia

By

Mirja Lobnik
Doctor of Philosophy

Comparative Literature

Valérie Loichot, Ph.D.
Advisor

Angelika Bammer, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Michael Elliott, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Elissa Marder, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Accepted:

Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D. Dean of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies

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By

Mirja Lobnik
Magister Artium, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, 2000

Advisor: Valérie Loichot, Ph.D.

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Abstract

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This dissertation investigates conceptions of memory as they emerge from the inscription of orality in literary texts. It argues for the central role of an oral sensibility as it pertains both to the sonic and rhythmic materiality of the textual body and to the latter's positionality relative to the reader, in establishing memory as a contingent, situated, and intersubjective practice. By engaging with the oral dimensions of literature through the lens of literary thinkers such as Walter Benjamin and Édouard Glissant, it lays bare an aesthetic that reveals material processes of transmission and auditory agency as defining features of memory. Through readings of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*, it traces the emergence of what I call *nomad memory*: a site of a passage where sound reverberates inside and across bodies that act as vessels for the articulation and transmission of the past. The idea of *nomad memory* derives its use from an emphasis on a communally bound, interactive sort of becoming that refers less to memories as such than to echoes of memory. Insofar as these echoes migrate among human and textual bodies whose structural design determines their very resonance, they both exceed the boundaries between the self and others and capture the social, spatial, and temporal situatedness of historical remembrance. The chapters follow a trajectory that yields an increasingly intensifying oral sensibility, from an apprehension of the physical components responsible for sound production to an awareness of the inherently subjective and communal nature of oral discourse. While each of the texts considered mark stages of development in their capacity to approximate an oral transmission, their narrative design reflects an affinity with mnemonic structures and processes. Apart from literary conceptions of memory, findings by neuroscientist Daniel L. Schacter afford a complimentary view on how literary representations of memory intersect with the brain's processing of mnemonic information. This dissertation finally involves a dialogue between Canadian, Indian, African American, and Native American writers whose work is crucially linked by a common literary aesthetic.

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It is a word, tapping, or a rustling that is endowed with the magic power to transport us into the cool tomb of long ago, from the vault of which the present seems to return only as an echo.

—Walter Benjamin

Introduction

Memory and Orality: Crossing Conceptual Thresholds

> For the dialectician, what matters is having the wind of world history in one's sails. For him, thinking means setting the sails. What is important is *how* they are set. Words are for him merely the sails. The way they are set turns them into concepts.
>
> —Walter Benjamin
>
> *The Writer of Modern Life*

Walter Benjamin once cast his notion of historiography in a nautical metaphor. The art of the historian, the German-Jewish literary critic and philosopher argued, lies in situating words in the same way as seamen set their sails upon travelling the oceans. "What matters," in Benjamin's words, "is having the wind of world history in one's sails" (*The Writer of Modern Life*, 151). If sails are like words, then how can we ensure that they will catch the winds of the past? True, both sailor and historian are equipped with conceptual charts that allow them to ascertain the strength and direction of prevailing winds and ideas respectively. And still, that which motivates the movement of these invisible forces remains forever out of reach. Benjamin, therefore, puts his trust into specific conjunctions of knowledge acquired in the past and the actuality of immediate perception to provide what he considers genuinely historical images. In contrast to a Proustian mnemonic eliciting sensations that shaped a specific past episode, Benjamin's images constitute fleeting configurations in which knowledge of the past not so much historicizes as crystallizes present truths (Osborne, 161). As Benjamin puts it, "It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation" (*The Arcades Project*, 462). The old thus mingles with the new not as a result of an inherent connection but, rather, on account of its flash-like legibility in the present as part of a formation or pattern temporarily adopted by a set of disparate components. Benjamin's use of astronomical metaphors serves to articulate his focus on the very positioning of both the perceived phenomena and their perceiver: "Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars" (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 34), he famously argues. Like the constellations of the stars, then, historical images or ideas in Benjamin's sense involve a fleeting but irrevocable shift in perception, while at the same time requiring decipherment or interpretation.

The coalescence of intrinsically unrelated elements into unique, legible figures is all the more important to Benjamin's early-twentieth-century cultural analysis as it allows for a break from history's most recent configurations: modern capitalism and the rise of fascism. Suspicious of totalizing forces, whether those aimed at homogenizing and reifying each and every facet of experience or those used to forge a unified, overarching group consciousness, Benjamin directs his gaze towards segments of social life dominated and marginalized by the destructive instrumentality of capital and ideology. For him, revolutionary images, ultimately, emerge solely by means of a strategic poetic montage in which past and present are torn from their immediate contexts and conjoin in endlessly novel constellations. Given a deep-seated commitment to abstract empiricism and the triumph of instrumental reasoning among many modern historians, it takes, after all, a violent act, in Benjamin’s words, to “wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it” (“Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 255) and to therein shift attention towards the farthest peripheries of a vision whose focus rests primarily on those versions of the past assumed to be definite and complete.[1] Precisely Benjamin’s emphasis on the indeterminacy of historical knowledge and the resulting existence of various possible but never, or not exhaustingly, pursued interpretations of the past is, as we shall see, what makes his thought so relevant to the topics discussed in the chapters that follow.

More than half a century later, yet in response to the same historical conditions—to the gravity of the fascist threat and the ethical challenges of capitalism—Ladislaus de Almásy in Michael Ondaatje’s novel *The English Patient*, the focus of the first chapter of this dissertation, similarly, sets sail to interrupt the detrimental logic of modernity. Not “concerned with our name, our legend, what our lives will mean to the future,” as Almásy proudly proclaims, “we were interested in how our lives could mean something to the past. We sailed into the past . . . We knew power and great finance were temporary things. We all slept with Herodotus” (142). An archaeologist and explorer of the Libyan desert in the 1930s, Almásy sought to unearth the hidden treasures of the past. Like Benjamin's historical navigator, he was interested in the debris of history: those elements that had been neglected, forgotten, or marginalized. His nightly companionship with the Greek writer Herodotus, often labelled "the Father of History," also evokes the subjective corollary of Benjamin's historical images—the dream image—capable of defamiliarizing and casting new light on ordinary experiences and cognitions. But most importantly, Ondaatje's image of sailing into the past recurs in a text that, as I shall show, constitutes a Benjaminian gesture against totalizing political and historical discourses.

---

[1] Benjamin expresses his opposition to modern historians such as Leopold von Ranke in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” “Historicism,” he argues,

> contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this at his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. (263)

The metaphor of navigating the unknown waters of the past captures the issues that lie at the heart of *Nomad Memory: Inscribing Orality in Literatures of the Americas and South Asia*: the negotiation of a deliberate search for and an unexpected encounter with the past, the tangible presence of something absent, the situatedness or positionality of memory, and the material embodiments, displacements, and repressions of past experiences. Yet where Benjamin charges the image of sailing or sea travel largely with visual power, *Nomad Memory* considers primarily its aural implications. Who, after all, can deny the ability of the ocean wind to create layered sonic textures as it scrapes across the surface of the water, swelling and dipping, sliding in and out of recognizable patterns? From the deck of a sailboat, the wind's seamlessly looping, whistling, or howling sounds may mingle with groans of wood and whispers of cloth.

The main concern of *Nomad Memory*, in other words, lies with the power of sound and auditory perception to capture and unveil details of the past which, escaping the eye, have been largely ignored or marginalized. Based on close readings of texts inspired by oral practices, the experience of social marginalization, and tangled cultural affiliations, it aims to show how (written) literature, counterintuitive as it may seem, provides aural clues to a visually obscured, seemingly inaccessible past; random, everyday sounds may here be redolent with intimations of trauma and other (visually) missed events. The loss of belonging and local attachment experienced by individuals caught up in the disruptive events of World War II in Ondaatje's *The English Patient* hereby speaks above all to the formation of hybrid identities in the face of forced global migrations and cultural dispersion. Set mainly in pre-war Egypt and post-war Italy, the novel complicates all forms of (visual) historical representation, while mining the deeper ground of a shared auditory space for experiential connections across ethnic, cultural, and political borders. All of the texts to be considered share Ondaatje's concern with the past as well as the author's focus on voice, storytelling, and the physical embodiments of memory: haunted by the quiet presence of an exiled native tongue, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* centers on the search for local or indigenous forms of expression in the aftermath of European colonialism in India; the traces of a violent past, of social displacement and cultural disintegration, finally, run through both Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, a work inseparable from the history of slavery and its social and cultural repercussions in the Americas, and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*, a multigeneric text raising issues of social cohesion and cultural survival in a Native American context.

Filled with voices of the past in search of new pathways to connect with the present, the texts at issue derive their force, in part, from a rendition of experience in the sense of the German term *Erfahrung* as set forth by Benjamin ("On Some Motifs in Baudelaire").

To be distinguished from another German word, *Erlebnis*, which denotes experience as something lived-through or witnessed and assigned a precise point in time, *Erfahrung* refers to historically contingent patterns of experience accumulated over time and ungraspable as a whole in any absolute or unconditional sense. As a certain "wisdom" drawn from experience and applicable to present circumstances, *Erfahrung* is oriented towards an intersubjective realm in which individuals communicatively encounter one another. Partaking of both the past and the future, it constitutes less a specific content than a particular mode of transmission or communicability shared and passed on across bodies. For Benjamin, the art of storytelling provides the very basis for an exchange of experience thus conceived. As he argues in "The Storyteller:"

> The storytelling that thrives for a long time in the milieu of work—the rural, the maritime, the urban—is itself an artisan form of communication . . . It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel. (91-92)

In Benjamin's estimation, then, stories constitute organic, malleable vessels whose ephemeral, continuously morphing contours accommodate the various experiences from which they are formed. The incorporation of experiences—built up by sedimentation and legible only as imprints or traces—yields different layers of meaning which are not exhausted by a particular subject matter. Rather, meaning resides in the manner of a story's formation which is traceable to the arrangement and juxtaposition of the imprints left behind, imprints that, by indicating the slightest movements of the artist's hand, end up revealing the entire process of creation.

In line with a notion of experience as registered in fragmentary traces and, therefore, defying any sense of organic wholeness (*The Arcades Project*, 331), the texts under consideration render the past in (aurally perceived) bits and pieces that are not directly and unilaterally transferred into an individual's consciousness or, for that matter, into an individual's memory. Rather, the past tends to be doubly transmitted: shaped and negotiated by means of subjects who tell and therein transmute the stories they heard into their own experience. Individual characters turn into what Benjamin would call "vessels" through which the words of another are breathed, resonating both within their bodies and with the bodies of their listeners. As the following chapters shall reveal, the occurrence of a historical transmission hinges precisely on the creation of an intersubjective or collective space in which sound—given its movement from the speaker, through the air, to the listener—attains a bodily presence that incites a sensational dialogue among human and non human bodies. Here, sounds as well as silences transform into objects tangibly passed on from one person to another; any vessel, after all, unless vacuum walled, contains air and thus harbors the potentiality for (sonic) vibration. At the center of the different texts under consideration, therefore, lie both the curious materiality of sound—being durable and ephemeral at the same time—and the transformative power of hearing.

While revealing material processes of transmission and auditory agency as defining features of historical remembrance, all of the texts here discussed strive to put flesh and blood on the bare bones of history. To pursue this goal, they bring the past into a relationship with biological and physical environments—from our skin to the very air we breathe—that extends beyond the visual. Experiences of cultural contact, for instance, tend to be tactile as much as they are visual. As sociologist Mimi Sheller stresses, speaking of the body in relation to colonial encounters, "some are whipped, others are caressed . . . The marks of race were applied by these variations of touch as much as coded by the gaze" (114). The goal of the authors here considered, in other words, is to shift attention away from a modern, visually-based discourse engendering disinterest, distance, and alienation toward one that recovers an awareness of embodied, lived experience.

Schematically, then, *Nomad Memory* maps the ways in which contemporary writers such as Ondaatje, Roy, Morrison, and Silko infuse their texts with both aural (sonic, vocal, and musical) and oral (polyphonic, situational, and dialogic) attributes. It aims to reveal an aesthetic that not merely simulates the performative, improvisational, and participatory dimensions of an oral transmission but inflects the perception of orality in a larger sense. In doing so, it addresses the issue of orality as it impinges on the use of narrative strategies that may, at first glance, appear as a mere reinvention of earlier ones: one may recall the conflation of oral and written traditions in canonical literary works of the past, ranging from religious texts such as the Bible or the Vedas to epic poetry including Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. To what extent, *Nomad Memory* asks, does the inscription of orality in contemporary literature go beyond these earlier forms of discourse? Does it involve more than the incorporation of what Ugandan scholar Pio

Zirimu termed *orature*: the use of performed utterances, including songs, poems, proverbs, drama, and dance, as an aesthetic means of expression? What, finally, explains today's frequent recourse to oral tradition as a mode of literary production?

An investigation of the aural/oral dimension of language is particularly crucial in light of vision's longstanding predominance as a primary source of human experience and knowledge, one tied closely to the notion of a Cartesian disembodied eye prone to incise, objectify, and order in an effort to seize and appropriate what is seen.[2] While anthropologists, historians, and linguists have carefully analyzed oral traditions since the 1920s, it was only in the 1970s that scholars from various fields, including literature, multimedia, and music, began to explore and theorize oral phenomena, paying increasing attention to issues such as the phenomenology and bodily articulation of sound, voice, and performance. Investigating the discursive ramifications of acoustic environments (read as an indicator of both social and political conditions) as well as sound's relationship to the human body, literary theorist Roland Barthes and musical scholar Jacques Attali hereby anticipated the broader turn towards an engagement with presence, material inscription, and embodiment in the late 1980s. Up to the early years of this century, the musical avant-garde encompassing, among others, the work of Pierre Schaeffer and John Cage, closely engaged with sonic phenomena of everyday experience, raising awareness of both ambient sounds previously unheard and the complex simultaneity of sonic events characterizing the modern world. Cultural, film, and media theorists such as Steven Connor, Michel Chion, and Arthur Kroker drew particular attention to the phenomenology of hearing, accentuating sound's relation to all of the other modalities of sensing, in particular vision.[3]

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[2] For elaborations of René Descartes's theory of light and vision, see "Optics," one of the three scientific treatises in his *Discourse on Method, Optics, Geometry, and Meteorology*. 1965. Trans. Paul J. Olscamp, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company. 2001.

Yet notwithstanding an interest in oral thought and expression, numerous, predominantly Western, discourses still consider oral practices as less prone to documenting reality; in fact primary oral cultures often tend to be seen as lacking a historical consciousness given their strong reliance on memory.[4] It may, therefore, come as no surprise that a modern critic such as Benjamin perceives of history as a form of image inscription to some extent comparable to photography in its instantaneous, flash-like appearance and fragmentary nature. Benjamin's devotion to the visual throughout his work bears testimony to his idea of modernity as such as first and foremost a visual culture. In his famous studies on nineteenth-century Paris, he accentuates the heightened attention to visual appearance in a modern society, one marked by an increasing aestheticization of commodities as manifest in advertisements, window displays, and store design, among other optical stimuli. In his estimation, new (visual) technologies erased the traces of the material process of production and of the human agency involved.

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[3] See Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du Texte*, Paris: Seuil, 1973, English edition trans. Richard Howard, New York: Hill and Wang, 1975, as *The Pleasure of the Text*; Jacques Attali, *Bruit: Essai sur l'Économie Politique de la Musique*, 1977, English edition ed. Susan McClary, trans. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2008, as *Noise: Political Economy of Music*; Pierre Schaeffer, *Á la Recherche d'une Musique Concrète*, Paris: Seuil, 1952; John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1961, and X*: Writings '79-'82*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan Univ. Press; Steven Connor, "The Modern Auditory I"; Michel Chion, *L´Audio-Vision. Son et Image au Cinema*, English edition ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman, New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1994, as *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*; Arthur Kroker, *The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics*, Hampshire, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986.

[4] In line with this historical perspective, Ian Adams challenges Jacques Derrida's claim that Western primacy has been given to the oral. It is true, as Adams concedes in his "Oracy and Literacy: A Post-Colonial Dilemma?," a number of largely Romantic and post-Romantic European thinkers highly valorized speech during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Yet this assertion, as he equally argues, cannot be made for Western thought as a whole. For contemporary debates on the historical status of orality, see Ian Adams, "Oracy and Literacy: A Post-Colonial Dilemma?" *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 31.1 (1996): 97-109; Ashis Nandy, "History's Forgotten Doubles." *History and Theory* 34 (1995): 44-66.

And yet, as Nora Alter and Lutz Koepnick emphasize in *Sound Matters: Essays on the Acoustics of Modern German Culture*, "nineteenth-century urbanization and industrialization also resulted in an equally diverting and disruptive cacophony of sounds" (119)—the latter being "a product of the same process that, in Benjamin's view, replaced tradition with fashion, visual contemplation with distracted looking, storytellers with image-makers" (119). While novel visual stimuli, according to Benjamin, fundamentally altered the structure of experience, causing consciousness to avert perceptions lying outside familiar patterns of meaning, the noises of a modern city, Alter and Koepnick argue, similarly, "restructured the social organization of attention, ruptured meditative silences, and undercut absorbed forms of listening" (119). If figuring less prominently than visual stimuli, the realm of the acoustic thus still constitutes a crucial component of Benjamin's thought.

In what follows I take as my point of departure both peripheral allusions to and detailed elaborations on sound and mnemonic processes in Benjamin's two autobiographical pieces about Berlin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900* and "A Berlin Chronicle." Both texts return to urban scenes of Benjamin's childhood, capturing Berlin's noisy fabric made of, among other sounds, "rattling taxis" ("A Berlin Chronicle," 10), "screeching elevators" (25), "waves of conversation . . . sprays of clattering plates" (43), and children's "chattering uproar" (52). Far from anchored by a smooth sonic landscape, such phrasings indicate the disruptive, even unsettling, quality of the surging, enveloping sounds to which Benjamin's "ear was helplessly abandoned" (14) and which included above all the "shrilling" (38) ring of the telephone. On the threshold of a new era, Benjamin, after all, experienced the intrusion of electronically mediated noise into his household. The sudden sound of the telephone ringing, he reminisces, "was an alarm signal that menaced not only my parents' midday nap but the historical era that underwrote and enveloped this siesta" (49). The "alarm signal" emitted by the telephone, then, occasioned a disruption of experience that caused an awakening not merely from one's sleep but from a certain state of consciousness at the levels of both the individual and a larger collective. It punctured consciousness in ways that initiated a perceptual shift deemed to be, in Benjamin's estimation, the very condition of possibility of remembrance. The ringing sound of the telephone, at the same time, conjured memories of his father engaged in conversations on the phone as well as of the disembodied voice at the other end of the acoustic device. A rupture or shock on the one hand, it thus constituted a powerful trigger of memory, on the other. The final pages of Benjamin's "A Berlin Chronicle" forcefully attest to the author's, up to this point, only implicit embrace of an aural mnemonics. Doubting the appropriateness of the term *déjà vu* in delineating the mnemonic process, Benjamin, here, explicitly favors a metaphor that situates itself within an acoustic rather than a visual realm:

> One ought to speak of events that reach us like an echo awakened by a call, a sound that seems to have been heard somewhere in the darkness of past life. Accordingly, if we are not mistaken, the shock with which moments enter consciousness as if already lived usually strikes us in the form of a sound. It is a

> word, tapping, or a rustling that is endowed with the magic power to transport us into the cool tomb of long ago, from the vault of which the present seems to return only as an echo. (59)

The mnemonic function of sound, then, lies in its twofold ability to disrupt and awaken. The necessary link between a rupture of experience and a shift in perception critical to the moment of remembrance carries a very particular meaning when seen against the Proustian notion of *mémoire involontaire* as rendered in the French author's famous autobiographical work *Remembrance of Things Past*. A specific type of memory, *mémoire involontaire* involves the unexpected, cue-dependent experience of sensations that, while shaping an episode in the past, were not fully absorbed by human consciousness given the mind's only partial translation of experiences into coherent patterns of meaning—partial in being both slanted towards what is intelligible (and thus omitting incongruous elements) and incapable of grasping several configurations of experiential components simultaneously.[5] In contrast to a conscious effort to remember, moments of *mémoire involontaire* possess a vivid sensory immediacy that, following Proust, stems from a severance of the link between past and present occasioned by a forgetting or, differently put, from a disruption of ordinary structures of experience as detailed above.[6]

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[5] The only partial assimilation of sensations, thoughts, and impressions that constitute a particular moment is thus tied closely to the mind's translation of otherwise inchoate fragments of immediate experience into a coherent image of reality—consciousness eliding those aspects of experience that lie outside the brain's abstract patterns. Finally, as literary critic Thomas Wägenbaur stresses, "The information overload from sensory perception is such that the brain must perform most tasks subconsciously and can reserve only a certain portion of its capacity for the actual conscious and mnemonic activity" (6).

[6] Precisely the disruption of habitual patterns of meaning causes Benjamin, for instance, to remember words which he used to mispronounce as a child. Uneroded by continuous use or, in Proustian fashion, forgotten,

"It is to this immolation of our deepest self in shock that our memory owes its most indelible images" ("A Berlin Chronicle," 57): Benjamin's words resonate deeply with a Proustian mnemomic. Still, where Proust envisions a return to the past, Benjamin locates memory in a transitory moment in the present that constitutes the medium for historical images to emerge, while simultaneously marking their very disappearance. Permeated by historical connections, the present, Benjamin argues, is the site not of a presence but of the crystallization of a historicity that always carries its dissolution within itself. Benjamin's figure of the "tapestry of lived life" woven by forgetting yet unravelled by "purposive remembering" sensitive to logical patterns and relations and guided by personal concerns and habits, captures this oscillation between appearance and dissolution ("The Image of Proust," 202).

Benjamin's work helped pronounce that, at its base, the modern experience precluded the possibility of transmitting the past through anything beyond "an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again" ("Theses on the Philosophy of History," 255). It foreclosed the possibility of narrativizing the past in any other form than momentary constellations of meaning. Against the backdrop of what Benjamin envisioned as the decline of storytelling, an art that, for him, distinguishes itself from print narratives precisely in its ability to exchange experiences rather than mere flashes of insight, *Nomad Memory* aims to reinvestigate the ways in which literature allows for the articulation of an aesthetic that unsettles the discursive

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their "wrong" pronunciation would preserve semantic associations that are shaped solely by sonic structures.

boundaries between oral and written forms of narration. Moreover, it seeks to counter Benjamin's lack of confidence in the capacity of modern literary genres such as the novel—and, by extension, the individual writer—to render the kind of experience that accumulates into a form of communicable knowledge or wisdom: *Erfahrung*.

Indicatively, the themes of an individual's experiential separation from a larger collective and the need to reinstate historical continuity recur in efforts to remember and to articulate the past by many writers of the African Diaspora. Marred by centuries of colonization, dislocation, and enslavement, the experience of Africans and African descendants encompasses both the forced migration of slaves—of those stripped of their belongings and cultural heritage—and the voluntary migration of formerly colonized people leaving and often hoping to return to their homeland.[7] In certain ways, the sense of an ineffable loss of cultural belonging, of an irretrievable past, among African Americans parallels the modern experience of a violent rupture with the past in European and Anglo-American history. Morrison accordingly attributes the very beginnings of modernism to the historical era of slavery. "These things," she argues, "had to be addressed by black people a long time ago: certain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability . . . Slavery broke the world in half, broke it every way" (Gilroy, *Living Memory*, 178).

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[7] In *Caribbean Discourse*, Glissant insists on the inherent diversity of the immigrant experience. He writes:

> The enslaved African is the "stripped migrant." He could not bring his tools, the images of his gods, his daily implements, nor could he send news to his neighbors, or hope to bring his family over, or reconstitute his former family in the place of deportation. Naturally, the ancestral spirit had not left him; he had not lost the meaning of a former experience. But he will have to fight for centuries in order to recognize his legitimacy. The other migrant, also stripped to essentials, retained all of that; but he will be—Italian or Spanish from Latin America, Lebanese or Chinese, confined to the tertiary sector—incapable of transforming into a *technological discourse* the technical methods that he kept as part of his heritage. This privilege will be reserved in the 'new world' for the WASP descendants of those who came on the Mayflower. (50-51; original emphasis)

My emphasis, thus far, on a shared sense of cultural insecurity among modern critics like Benjamin and the contemporary writers under analysis must not, of course, conceal the precise social and historical conditions shaping our current cultural landscape. The disintegration of communal tradition, tribal ties, and personal identity experienced by many Native Americans, among other groups marginalized by hegemonic cultural discourses which continue to prevail in today's society, differs starkly from a European/ Anglo-American intended demystification of traditional bases of authority and the ensuing concern with a loss of meaning (understood in terms of rationally constituted and assessable relations) among socially dominant groups. Conceived merely as an aesthetic of so-called high European culture marked by an ideology of Western political and creative dominance, modernism may, indeed, seem an inappropriate lens through which to analyse the texts under consideration. And yet, a deepening globalization has prompted new notions of modernity commonly associated with intensified commercial, technological, and cultural exchanges and the emergence of intercultural contact zones.[8] The above reservations notwithstanding, *Nomad Memory*, therefore, embraces an approach to modernism that locates relational conjunctures between modern Euro-

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[8] For a sense of the range of modernisms, see Kwame Anthony Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2006; James Ferguson's "Decomposing Modernity: History and Hierarchy after Development", in *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, ed. Ania Loomba, Suvir Kaul, Matti Bunzl, Antoinette Burton, and Jed Esty, Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2005, 166-181; Susan Stanford Friedman's "Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of Modern/Modernity/Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity* 8:3 (2001): 493-513; Andreas Huyssen's *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1986; Fredric Jameson, "Modernism and Imperialism," in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*, ed. Seamus Deane, Minnesota: Univ. of Minneapolis Press, 1990, 43-66; Charles W. Pollard's "Postcolonial Modernism/Modernity Postcolonialism," in *New World Modernisms: T.S. Eliot, Derek Walcott, and Kamau Brathwaite*, Charlottesville: The Univ. of Virginia Press, 2004: 15-40.

American concerns and interests as they pertain to non-Western or minority writers such as Roy and Morrison. More precisely, it aims to situate the themes central to the twentieth-century aesthetic movement—the fragmentation and unmooring of personal identities—within the context of decolonization and today's human and cultural mobilities. Following literary critic Susan Stanford Friedman's "polycentric, planetary concept of modernity" ("Periodizing Modernism," 433), it abstains from "positing a mosaic of different modernisms, each separated from all others by the fixed barriers of geopolitical and cultural borders" in favor of conceiving of "differences as porous, boundaries as permeable, and borders as borderlands where self-other confrontations and mingling are mutually constitutive, both between different societies and within them" (*Modernism*, 36).[9] This dissertation, in other words, highlights the heterogeneous and multiple origins of modernity and, by extension, its historically and locally specific articulations.

Against the background of a more broadly conceived modernism, then, *Nomad*

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[9] In "Cultural Parataxis and Transnational Landscapes of Reading: Toward a Locational Modernist Studies," Susan Stanford Friedman suggests

> the development of transnational strategies for reading a global landscape of interlocking and mutually constitutive centers that are influenced by and in turn influence others. Such a geography of modernism requires the recognition of heterogeneous and multiple sites around the globe that produce their own modernities and modernisms in different points in time, each with its own hegemonies and internal divisions and each placed in some sort of changing but hierarchical relation to others. Such an approach is locational, attuned to the geographical specificities and historical overdeterminations that give each manifestation its own particular idiomatic inflection . . . This internationalism requires attention to traveling ideas and cultural forms, transcultural dialogue, reciprocal influences and indigenizations, and the cultural hybridity that results from widespread intercultural communication and contact zones. Ideas, cultural practices, aesthetic artifacts, artists—all travel and migrate incessantly, producing syncretic formations. Modernity, I would hypothesize, is a historical condition that intensifies such hybridity and movement with the result of epistemological and representational dislocations that are characteristic of modernism wherever it flourishes, although the particular forms of those ruptures take different shapes in different locations. (36)

Memory adopts the particular paradigm of the black Atlantic to explore literatures that have emerged from multifaceted and often disjointed cultural traditions across the Americas, including Native American locales, and South Asia. It follows, in particular, the pathway forged by Martinician poet, novelist, and philosopher Édouard Glissant whose work focuses on cultural fragmentation, ethnic dislocation, and plural histories in the Caribbean.[10] Arguing powerfully for an explicit avowal of discontinuity in the creation of a distinctive Caribbean culture, Glissant may, at first glance, counteract the search for intersections among people of different linguistic, ethnic, and religious affiliations. Yet precisely the attention on a break in the linear progression of time that Glissant brings to bear on contemporary historical discourses, a break occasioned by the experience of being thrown into the holds of slave ships, "wrenched," as he writes, from "everyday, familiar land, away from protecting gods and a tutelary community" (*Poetics of Relation*, 5), allows for lateral connections among distinct histories to emerge. In Benjaminian fashion, Glissant articulates the significance of rupture as a constituent factor of historical remembrance. For him as for the German critic, historical consciousness does not suggest the return to an authentic point of origin but constitutes a vertiginous break in experiential continuity: an abyss, as he puts it, which encompasses the fall into the belly of the slave ship, the depths of the sea punctuated by "scarcely corroded balls and chains" (6), "the panic of the new land, the haunting of the former land" (7), an abyss, in other words, representing the traumatic experience of the Middle Passage.

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[10] Although Martinique may not be an exemplary case of the African diasporic experience (having never been granted independence and becoming integrated into its former colonizer's nation as a French *département d'outre mer*, instead), its geographical, cultural, and historical particularities lend themselves well to discussing the issues under consideration. Located in the heart of the Caribbean archipelago, the island, to invoke Glissant, "has always been a place of encounter and connivance and, at the same time, a passageway toward the American continent" (*Caribbean Discourse*, 33).

The transformation of a gaping absence into a site of memory lies at the heart of Glissant's so-called "poetics of Relation." In his own words,

> The unconscious memory of the abyss served as the alluvium for these metamorphoses. The populations that then formed, despite having forgotten the chasm, despite being unable to imagine the passion of those who foundered there, nonetheless wove this sail (a veil). They did not use it to return to the Former Land but rose up on this unexpected, dumbfounded land . . . And this undreamt of sail, finally now spread, is watered by the white wind of the abyss. (*Poetics of Relation*, 7-9)

The image of a sail in the wind hardly appears a haphazard choice in Glissant's description: not only does it invoke journey and the unfettered volatility of the unconscious but it suspends the difference between two homonyms: *la voile* (sail) and *le voile* (veil). Read as an expression of historical consciousness, the slave ship's sail unfolds as a collectively woven narrative always in motion, while propelled by unassignable (or veiled) forces. Attentive to the nuanced particularities of individual experience, its fabrication resists the projection of universalizing norms and categories and embraces, instead, the uncertain paths of an intricately textured, multiperspectival poetics of Relation. The lack of absolutes, transparency, and ideological stability inherent to

Relation heightens the sailboat's ability to serve as a symbol of narrative unities whose "only discernible stabilities . . . have to do with the interdependence of the cycles operative there, how their corresponding patterns of movement are in tune . . . unities whose interdependent variances jointly piece together the interactive totality (*Poetics of Relation*, 92). The sail's generative movement coupled with its interwoven strands—its relational texture—points to Glissant's ultimate concern with reframing notions of history in ways that accentuate both the plurality of its components and the evolving manifold interactions among them.

"[Latent], open, multilingual in intention, directly in contact with everything possible" (*Poetics of Relation*, 32), Glissant's poetics of Relation affords a "turbulent confluence" of variables indispensable for dismantling and reconfiguring conceptual frameworks that determine the ability of dominant discourses to maintain their hegemony: while its constitutive indeterminacy and unpredictability puncture ideological closures, its opacity counters naïve attempts at grasping and representing another's experiences in circumvention of any kind of projection or distortion. As postcolonial critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues in her seminal discussion of the possibility of speaking of and for colonized subjects in the context of Indian historiography, "to confront them is not to represent (*vertreten*) them but to learn to represent (*darstellen*) ourselves" (288)—"to represent" here denoting representation by political proxy and as aesthetic portrait respectively.[11] As "a strategy of protection"

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[11] And yet, as postcolonial critic Celia Britton emphasizes in *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory*, "Glissant's opacity is still a far more active, positive form of resistance than Spivak's theorization allows for.

(Britton, 21), Glissant's notion of opacity foregrounds the limits to our understanding of others as well as parts of one's own self and therein averts the assimilation or appropriation of an Other whose subjectivity, following Spivak, is "irretrievably heterogeneous" (284).

Glissant's effort to establish a more inclusive genre of historical writing situates itself within the context of an explosion of memory discourses.[12] At a time when the experiences of transnational migration, diaspora, and exile are not the exception but the rule, memory has gained prominence as a means of rediscovering and reconnecting with cultural roots. In the wake of decolonization, among other social and political movements shifting the focus from global to local concerns, memory's tendency to unveil heterogeneous, multiple, and divergent historical nuances has helped, moreover, unmask the pretenses and limitations of discourses "guided not by memories alone, but by tacit theories of principled forgetfulness and silences" (Nandy, 66). While motivated by social and political considerations, "The turn toward memory is subliminally energized," in cultural critic Andreas Huyssen's estimation, "by the desire to anchor ourselves in a world characterized by an increasing instability of time and the fracturing of lived space" (*Present Pasts*, 18). An expansion of planetary and cosmic time scales and an accelerated pace or sense of time accompanying scientific and technological

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To sum up the difference simply, Spivak focuses more on the subaltern's inability to 'speak' the dominant discourse whereas Glissant focuses more on the dominant discourse's inability to 'understand' the subaltern" (20).

[12] Following Andreas Huyssen, the "desire for narratives of the past, for re-creations, re-readings, re-productions, seems boundless at every level of our culture" (*Present Pasts* 5). As Huyssen argues, it manifests itself in contemporary social and cultural phenomena ranging from the rise of autobiography and the increase of historical documentaries to new trends in architecture and the visual arts.

innovations, after all, have both contributed to the erasure of the distinctions between disparate historical moments and geographical spaces—causing time to appear as discontinuous and fragmented.[13] Our "obsessions with memory" (*Present Pasts*, 95), then, ultimately stem from memory's ability to fulfil the need for an expansion of temporal horizons: the need for a space unaffected by disruptions of cultural continuity and the changes in temporal awareness ensuing from technological advances and the impact of new media.

An engagement with memory, narrative form, and alternative constructions of the past dominates the scholarship on the texts under analysis. Critical inquiry on Ondaatje's *The English Patient* has centered largely on the novel's association with postmodern tenets and strategies: its contestation of modernity's totalizing discourses (or grand narratives), generic indeterminacy, intertextuality, as well as use of historic detail and images. The novel also received considerable attention as a text that engages with colonial legacies, transformed notions of gender, race, and culture, and Greek, Egyptian, and Christian mythologies.[14]

Originating from a formerly colonized country marked by patriarchal structures as well as caste and class divisions, Roy's *The God of Small Things* drew critical attention first and foremost within the fields of postcolonial, subaltern, and feminist studies. Postcolonial perspectives comprised a Marxist strain, concerned with the economic, cultural, and political dimensions of European colonialism, and language-oriented approaches, such as psychoanalysis and poststructuralism, which highlighted, on the one hand, the commercially defined multiculturalism surrounding the novel's marketability and Roy's experimental and linguistically inventive style, on the other. Current analyses of Roy's novel focus on the social and ecological legacy of colonialism, modern development, and globalized (post)modernity—environmental themes figuring prominently in both the writer's nonfiction and her political activism.[15]

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[13] In her discussion of the influence of science and technology on the representation of time in contemporary narrative, literary critic Ursula Heise stresses both "the shortening of temporal horizons in the late twentieth century, and public awareness, in Western societies, of the co-existence of radically different time scales from the nanoseconds of the computer to the billions of years in which contemporary cosmology calculates the age of the earth and the universe" (6-7).

[14] For postmodern perspectives on *The English Patient*, see Linda Hutcheon, Gordon Gamlin, Anne Hilliger, Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, and Rufus Cook; for postcolonial perspectives, see Bharati Mukherjee and Chelva Kanaganayakam; for the treatment of gender, race, and culture, see Susan Ellis, D. Mark Simpson, and Josef Pesch; and for an investigation of the novel's mythical resonances, see Stephen Scobie and Annick Hillger.

Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, predating Ondaatje's and Roy's novels by roughly twenty years, spawned decades of literary discourse on African American history, tradition, and folklore; the novel's underlying motif of the heroic quest and its gender representation hereby carried both a special resonance with African American life and experiences. More recent criticism has thematized, in particular, Morrison's use of language and narrative strategies, her insistence on the interactions between African and Graeco-Roman traditions, her intertextual dialogue with the modernist works of William

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[15] Most notable among the many collections of critical essays on *The God of Small Things* are Indira Bhatt and Indira Nityanandam's *Explorations: Arundhati Roy's* The God of Small Things, J. Dodiya and J. Chakravarty's *The Critical Studies of Arundhati Roy's* The God of Small Things, R.S. Pathak's *The Fictional World of Arundhati Roy*, Carole Durix and Jean-Pierre Durix's *Reading Arundhati Roy's* The God of Small Things, Murari Prasad's *Arundhati Roy: Critical Perspectives*, Amar Nath Prasad's *Arundhati Roy's* The God of Small Things: *A Critical Appraisal*, Alex Tickell's *Arundhati Roy's* The God of Small Things, and Katja Losenski's *Globalization and Colonialism in Arundhati Roy's* The God of Small Things. Roy's non-fiction works include *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, *Power Politics*, *War Talk*, *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*, and *The Shape of the Beast*.

Faulkner, and her inscription of oral traditions.[16]

Categories of ethnicity and cultural belonging, similarly, frame critical engagements with Silko's *Storyteller*. Rooted in the author's experience of growing up at Laguna Pueblo, this multi-generic work, a blend of short stories, poems, folktales, anecdotes, historical notes, and photographs, sparked an increased perception of Native American culture as an antidote to technological development and a globalized, (post)modern world. Anchored in social and ecological values prevalent in tribal communities, *Storyteller* has lent itself to analyses that pertain to the author's defiance of literary conventions, her integration of print and orality, and her portrayals of the land as a defining part of historical experience over the past two decades.[17]

Nomad Memory offers one version of how a convergence of issues surrounding memory and orality in the texts under analysis may come to inform what I call an oral aesthetic of memory. It locates the past in a sonic space that extends the notion of text beyond the limits of signs and signification to include traces of the interaction, or Relation, between textual and human bodies. "Orality," Glissant writes, "is inseparable from the body in movement. What is said is inscribed not only in the best position for its expression . . . but also in the most semaphoric evolutions through which the body implies and supports speech" (*Caribbean Discourse*, 237-238). The aim of this dissertation, therefore, is to investigate the ways in which literature inspires an aural/oral awareness that pertains not only to the vocalization and subvocalization (or internal verbalization) of written words but also to the reader's positionality, in terms both spatial and temporal. More precisely, it intends to show how literary texts enable a (both temporally and spatially) situated reading experience by bringing their materiality—their own (textual) body—to the fore. It may highlight, for instance, an author's close engagement with a word's textural and timbric qualities capable of instilling particular feelings or emotions as a way of directing the reader's attention to the physical and aesthetic dimensions of language.

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[16] Collections of critical essays on Morrison's *Song of Solomon* include Valerie Smith's *New Essays on* Song of Solomon, Jan Furman's *Toni Morrison's* Song of Solomon*: A Casebook*, and Harold Bloom's *Toni Morrison's* Song of Solomon*: Modern Critical Interpretations*. Notable among critical editions on Morrison's fiction more broadly are Gurleen Grewal's *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle: The Novels of Toni Morrison*, Rachel Lister's *Reading Toni Morrison*, Lucille P. Fultz's *Toni Morrison: Playing with Difference*, Nelly Y. McKay's *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, and Henry Louis Gate and Anthony Appiah's *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*.

[17] Critical studies on Silko's *Storyteller* include Brewster E. Fitz's *Silko: Writing* Storyteller *and* Medicine Woman, Melody Graulich's *"Yellow Woman:" Leslie Marmon Silko*, Louise K. Barnett and James L. Thorson's *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Collection of Critical Essays*, and Helen Jaskoski's *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Further notable critical editions addressing literary works by Silko include James Ruppert's *Mediation in Contemporary Native American Fiction,* Gerald Vizenor's *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures*, and Louis Owens's *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel*.

Nomad Memory seeks above all to identify two sets of oral features. It exposes, on the one hand, a literary work's aesthetic characteristics such as sonic, performative, and structural elements by examining, for instance, how a text's aforementioned sonic aspects may affect the readers' perception and therein change and transform their interpretation of text and images. On the other hand, it explores a text's functional accomplishments: interactive, mnemonic, and pedagogical components that allow for both a dialogue between text and reader and a transmission of past knowledge and experiences. An author's insertion of italicized commentaries on culture-specific terminologies or customs used/ referenced in the text, for instance, testifies to an awareness of and attempt to appeal to a wide-ranging readership.

An investigation of the ways in which the oral intervenes into the written in literary works inspired by oral practices situates itself within the wider contours of postcolonial and cultural studies. In the context of Caribbean and African writing, critics such as Glissant and Renée Larrier have highlighted spoken rhythms, structures of address, and what Glissant describes as "the solidarity of the collective voice" (*Caribbean Discourse*, 147). Scholars in the field of African American studies, including Henry Louis Gates Jr., Paul Gilroy, and Houston A. Baker Jr., have brought into sharper focus the role of the blues, along with other vernacular forms such as folk songs, tales, and rituals, in shaping literary texts. Critics of Native American literature Karl Kroeber and James Ruppert, among others, have pointed to a reliance on a mythic heritage complete with oral lore, song, and ritual as a central aesthetic resource. If not explicitly addressing issues of orality, Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's work on dialogism and multivocality figures prominently in critical analyses of both African American and Native American literatures given its focus on the novel's discursive and performative patterns. A concern with the oral dimension of literary texts, finally, overlaps with an investigation of the performative and mnemonic patterns of oral art forms by authors such as Walter Ong, Richard Bauman, and Ruth H. Finnegan, as well as with epistemological questions regarding history, experience, and truth—questions essential to the work of Trinh T. Minh-ha, Ashis Nandy, Homi Bhabha, and Johannes Fabian, among other postcolonial critics and theorists.

While literary reflections on memory and orality provide the main conceptual framework for this study, *Nomad Memory* also incorporates findings by neuroscientist

Daniel L. Schacter whose work, if most commonly studied in isolation from literary investigations, affords a complimentary view on mnemonic processes. By engaging with cognitive paradigms and neural models, it intends to show how literary representations of mnemonic processes intersect with the brain's complex operations of linking and integrating information across various sensory modalities and experiential registers. No longer viewed as "a single or unitary faculty of the mind," Schacter argues, memory constitutes "a variety of distinct and dissociable processes and systems" each of which depends "on a particular constellation of networks in the brain that involve different neural structures" (*Searching for Memory*, 5). While some regions of the brain absorb and hold different parts or features of sensory experience, separate neural ensembles (or so-called convergence zones) integrate these elements into distinct perceptual patterns, thus translating perceptions into mental concepts. In neuroscientific terms, then, "remembering occurs when signals from convergence zones trigger the simultaneous activation of sensory fragments that were once linked together" (*Searching for Memory*, 66).[18]

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[18] Inseparable from this process of what Schacter refers to as "encoding," remembering always entails a reading of the past based on linguistic skills, as well as on interpretative practices derived from social and cultural traditions. Bakhtin addresses the role of discourses in representing, and hence (ideologically) shaping, the past in *The Dialogic Imagination*. He writes: "Cultural and literary traditions . . . are preserved and continue to live not in the individual subjective memory of a single individual and not in some kind of collective 'psyche,' but rather in the objective forms that culture itself assumes (including the forms of language and spoken speech)" (249). While Bakhtin's words point to culture as a specific framework within which representations of the past are built and structured, they also evoke the distinction between memory as an individual phenomenon and what Maurice Halbwachs has called collective memory—a concept suggesting the always socially constructed nature of memory. For scholarly research on the (re)constructive nature of memory, see Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past*. New York: Basic Books, 1996; Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2003; Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989.

The conjunction of memory (neuroscientifically conceived) and orality in the literary analyses that follow constitutes a gesture towards finding connections between a literary aesthetic that aims to approximate an oral transmission of the past and the distinct patterns of neural activation underlying the act of memory. The particular nature of memory in the texts under consideration, this dissertation posits, is linked closely to their authors' respective affiliation with an oral culture and heritage—a shared dynamic arguably testifying to a strong, if still largely unfathomable, connection between orality and mnemonic processes. The value of memory here lies accordingly only partially in its capacity to provide an alternative to prevailing historical constructions of the past, as critics have commonly emphasized. Rather, memory emerges as the primary means of (historical) transmission.

The literary texts to be considered in the following chapters thus exemplify less a transcription of oral discourse than a dialectical relation between writing and orality. Each of them reflects an affinity with mnemonic processes that are story-driven, that is, driven by the particulars of voice and dialogue, while marking distinct stages of development in their capacity to approximate an oral transmission of the past. Arranged accordingly, the chapters follow a trajectory that yields an increasingly intensifying oral sensibility, from an apprehension of the physical components responsible for sound production to an awareness of the inherently subjective and communal nature of oral discourse. More than that, they trace an aesthetic progression from space-bound conceptualizations of cultural experience towards an oral paradigm that, by closely attending to the material processes of vocal transmission, to the persistence of sonic matter during breathing, vocal pauses, or periods of silence, and to the transformative power of hearing, lays bare an individual's auditory agency within and across cultural borders.[19]

The first chapter, "Echoes of the Past: Nomad Memory in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*," lays the conceptual groundwork for understanding the role of sound in mnemonic processes. Although less obviously steeped in an oral heritage than other literary works by the Sri Lankan-born Canadian writer, *The English Patient*, still betrays an indebtedness to oral culture and tradition in its close attention to the sonic and intersubjective aspects of language, as well as its frequent allusions to myths, rituals, and music, in particular jazz. Therefore, it serves an entry point for exploring some of the most crucial phenomenological features of audition and presents an initial step toward delineating the distinction between a discursively constructed memory and one that is sensual, intuitive, and deeply communal.

With this reading setting the argument in motion, I turn to a text that explicitly relates memory to questions of individual and national identity in the context of contemporary India. Charting the link between conscious memories and memories exceeding the lines of conscious articulation, the third chapter, "The Sensuous and the Silent in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*," explores the aurally palpable presence of a silenced past. It focuses, in particular, on the peculiar mnemonic imprint of disruptive experiences whose remembrance pervades and structures Roy's novel. Research by French critic, composer, and filmmaker Michel Chion on the audiovisual relationship in sound cinema will add an important component to my analyses of both Ondaatje's and Roy's novels. Chion's investigations of sound's particularizing function will help me reveal how sound reroutes attention away from contextual, interpretive frameworks to the phenomenal features of concrete, sensory experiences. Not only do "abstract relations," as Chion stresses in reference to aural cinematic space, "get drowned in the temporal flow" (44) but acoustical qualities, in and beyond the cinema, bear the trace of a sound's very origin. As Chion argues, "sound's details cause us to 'feel' the material conditions of the sound source, and refer to the concrete process of the sound's production" (144). Thus, for instance, Roy captures the acoustic atmosphere of a movie theater in terms of the sources rather than abstract tonal attributes of surrounding sounds: from fans whirring on the ceiling to the audience munching on peanuts. Informed by Chion's reflections on sound and auditory perception, the first two chapters, then, posit sound both as a destabilizing menace to the certainty and coherence of historical remembrance and as a tool to recover the traces of (historical) origins obscured by modern, predominantly visual technologies.

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[19] Spatial metaphors for contemporary social and cultural experiences include, among others, Gilroy's web of diasporic connections (218), Spivak's peripheries and margins, and Bhabha's liminal spaces.

The last two chapters distinguish themselves from previous sections by their concern with performative properties of literature that hinge above all on an author's skilful use of rhythm: that which, following French poet, linguist, and theoretician Henri Meschonnic, constitutes the most subjective element of language and, in his own words, "shows us that discourse . . . is not just made of signs. That . . . language includes communication, signs, but also actions, creations, and relationships between the bodies, the hidden unveiling of the unconscious which are events that do not happen to the sign" (72). Both chapters seek to show how the physical, creative, and relational dimensions of language unfold into rhythmic choreographies of gesture and action.

Jazz, an art form steeped in African American life and culture, offers critical recourse for exploring rhythmic patterns and the dynamics of a socially anchored memory in the third chapter, "The Pulsing Tapestry of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*." All too aware of literary critic Alan Munton's alert to the dangerously simplifying tendencies among Morrison scholars to draw analogies between jazz and her novels, I, nonetheless, wish to posit a connection between jazz and *Song of Solomon*, one that stems less from shared structures or themes than a common aesthetic based on rhythm and social relations;[20] it should not be forgotten that Morrison herself has variously compared her writing to jazz music.[21] Indicatively, too, tropes of storytelling and language acquisition dominate the jazz discourse. Jazz critics Paul F. Berliner and Ingrid Monson organize their studies of jazz improvisation above all around the image of conversation, an image prevalent among jazz musicians to refer to both musical and cultural aspects of the music—and this notwithstanding the limits of linguistic metaphors to do so (Monson, 97); as Monson notes, "the intertextual aspects of music," for instance, "are more complicated than those in the realm of language" (128), branching off into the resonance of song lyrics, associations conveyed through a written score, and aurally perceptible relationships.[22]

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[20] For an insightful if partially erroneous evaluation of scholarship that focuses on Morrison's literary incorporation of jazz, see *Alan Munton's* essay **"**Misreading Morrison, Mishearing *Jazz*: A Response to Toni Morrison's *Jazz* Critics." *Journal of American Studies* 31 (1997): 235–51.

[21] See Danille Taylor-Guthrie, *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi. 1994.

[22] Scholarly literature on jazz includes historical and theoretical approaches to the music. My own reading is

The interactive and social dimensions of jazz, moreover, echo theories and concepts developed in the sphere of language. They resonate, in particular, with Bakhtin's notion of utterance as a double-voiced and ideologically charged force—its (always situationally determined) meaning simultaneously affirming and subverting general, or hegemonic, categories—as well as with what Gates calls "Signifyin(g)" or "black double-voicedness" (51): the inversion of literary and linguistic conventions by means of formal revision and intertextual relation.[23]

The fourth chapter, "Telling the Past: Rhythm and Voice in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*," points to an instance of orality within the context of Native American oral practices. Casting herself in the role of a tribal storyteller, Silko selects the stories she tells from a wide, collective repertoire, while interpreting and therein modifying these stories through various retellings. Scholar of Zuni oral tradition Dennis Tedlock's emphasis on the performative dimension of oral storytelling provides a relevant backdrop for my critical considerations of *Storyteller*:

> The teller is not merely repeating memorized words, nor is he or she merely giving a dramatic "oral interpretation" or "concert reading" of a fixed script. We are in the presence of a *performing art*, all right, but we are getting the *criticism* at the same time and from the same person. The interpreter does not merely play

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based primarily on Paul Berliner's comprehensive *Thinking Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* and Ingrid Monson's theoretically rich *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction*.

[23] For an African American literary aesthetic attentive to the context and attributes of literary writing and musical performance, see Henry Louis Gates's *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press: 1989.

> the parts of but is the narrator and commentator as well.[24] (*Traditional Literatures of the American Indian*, 70; original emphasis)

If the teller's (vocal and bodily) performance communicates both literal and subtler shades of meaning, it is marked also by untold, if still dimly perceivable, attitudes, assessments, and responses.[25] It evokes what scholars of oral traditions, such as Alan Dundes and Barre Toelken, have called the *textural* (as opposed to *structural*) dimension of oral storytelling, a dimension resulting from years of traditional development, experience, and ritual practice and encompassing, following Toelken, "linguistic features, as well as any verbal manipulations which evoke, suggest, and describe, or those which in any way qualify, modify, expand, or focus the rational structure by reference to or suggestion of emotions, mores, traditional customs and associations, aesthetic sensitivities and preferences, and so on" (103).[26] The focus of this chapter, accordingly, lies with the particular rhythm of Silko's telling as it pertains to her choice of words, placement of punctuation, and sentence structures on the one hand, and her play on the readers' responsiveness or, as Bakhtin would put it, on the dialogue between her own and others' points of view and conceptual horizons (282)—a dialogue inextricably linked to her text's both linguistic and paralinguistic components—on the other.

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[24] In *Traditional Literatures of the American Indian*, Dennis Tedlock highlights some of the elements that account for the performative dimensions of tribal narrative arts: "The stresses, pitches, pauses, and also the *sheer words*, are different from one interpreter to the next and even from one occasion to the next, according to the place in time, according to who is in the audience, according to what they do or do not already know, according to what questions they may have asked—even according to what may happen, outside of the events of the narrative itself, during this particular telling. Or the interpreter may suddenly realize something or understand something for the first time on this particular occasion" (70).

[25] In contrast to the unconscious traced in psychoanalysis, the unconscious in the context of Native American storytelling suggests an implicit meaning defined in relation to what the author consciously intends. Importantly, as Kroeber stresses, "[t]his intrinsic implicitness does not, of course, exclude the possible relevance of repression *also* being operative in and determinative of a text" (*Retelling/Rereading*, 227-228; original emphasis).

[26] In *Traditional Literatures of the American Indian*, Toelken expands Dundes' definition of texture in terms of "the language employed: the particular phonemes, morphemes, rhymes, stresses, tones, pitches, and so on" to include "*any* coloration given a traditional item or statement as it is being made. In narrative it would certainly include linguistic features, as well as any verbal manipulations which evoke, suggest, and describe, or those which in any way qualify, modify, expand, or focus the rational structure by reference to or suggestion of emotions, mores, traditional customs and associations, aesthetic sensitivities and preferences,

Taking up differently positioned texts informed by orality, the individual chapters pose a series of singular cases that allow us to trace the emergence of what I call *nomad memory*, a form of memory that exists mainly in passage, in terms both temporal and spatial. The immediate transfer of knowledge and experience in Native American and South Asian traditions of oral storytelling, after all, recalls a nomad's movement in space. Here, memories migrate among bodies that enact the past as a transient performance, while carrying the imprint of each former telling. Memories, like nomads, then, shape and are shaped by the body or space they temporarily inhabit. Exceeding the boundaries between the self and others, *nomad memory*, furthermore, defies a geographic or political enclosure of the past. It evokes what Huyssen has tentatively called global memory, a memory that bears witness to the transnational/ transcultural crossings in an increasingly globalized world. Prismatic and heterogeneous by nature, global memory,

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and so on" (103; original emphasis). Toelken elaborates on this in itself untranslatable dimension in his analysis of a typical "Coyote tale": "First, on the story (structural) level, we have a morpheme used as part of a word which communicates a particular meaning, with its normal range of denotation and connotation. Second, we have on the 'moral' (textural) level a morpheme used to suggest certainty, reliability, 'truth' within the local context. Third, we have a complicated set of reaction based on the combination of the other two . . . There is, in short, a simultaneous assignment of two different phonemes by use of the same morpheme" which "would seem to constitute a usable, understandable textural formula that establishes a bridge between story and meaning by helping to create irony" (105-106).

following Huyssen, withstands universalist or holistic claims of local, regional, and national histories prone to be fixed on boundaries and margins. The idea of *nomad memory* yet arrives at more than accentuating particularity and difference. Uniting within itself oral and textual attributes, it both captures the social, spatial, and temporal situatedness of historical remembrance and, while socially anchored, exceeds communal, cultural, and national boundaries.[27]

While many facets of memory still remain a mystery, and this notwithstanding a wave of memory research, there can be little question that our present conceptions of memory owe as much to the sciences as they do to humanistic inquiry. *Nomad Memory* hence allows for the voices of the past inscribed in the texts under analysis to speak up from the crossroads of different disciplines and traditions. True, a comparative approach of this kind may risk obscuring the geographical distance and national, ethnic, and religious differences that separate writers such as Ondaatje and Silko. Yet, in spite of the specificity of the historical and cultural situations out of which their texts have emerged, all of them bring to the fore different aspects of memory and orality in ways that accentuate the manifold relationships between the two, while offering new insights into the complexities of both. Moreover, an interdisciplinary paradigm helps to evacuate categories, such as “postcolonial,” “minority,” or “diasporic,” marred by social and cultural domination. Rather than providing a static conceptual framework prone to classify or define along the lines of particular disciplinary jargons or norms, it, instead, allows for broader theoretical brush strokes that acknowledge and capture the fluid positionality of any given text.

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[27] The concept of *nomad memory* resonates with cultural critic James Clifford's expansion of the term "contact zone" coined by cultural critic Mary Louise Pratt in

> an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographical and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect. By using the term "contact," I aim to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination. A "contact" perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. (7)

While Pratt employs the notion of "contact zone" in the context of European imperialism, Clifford extends it "to include cultural relations within the same state, region or city—in the centers rather than the frontiers of nations and empires. The distances at issue here are more social than geographic" (204).

If *Nomad Memory* succeeds, it will do so by contributing to scholarly work in the fields of postcolonial and cultural studies in two specific ways. First, it redirects attention away from a visuospatial discourse (privileging a sense that measures, fixates, and controls and prone to authorize but a single, fixed angle of vision) towards one aimed at finding and negotiating meaning within an acoustic space: a space that, by disposing of the edges and boundaries of a (visual) frame, elides strategies of containment and therein helps thwart social and cultural distances. Given vision’s spontaneous, bodily, and profoundly social dimensions, its aim is not to defend an oral paradigm that transcends the visual but, rather, to reassert the auditory and the visual as part of a continuum. In doing so, it seeks to unhinge the oral modality (often relegated to the margins of historical inquiry) as well as cultural practices indispensable to the survival of a culture’s oral heritage from any possibility of discursive exclusion. Secondly, by reinscribing sound on the map of history, it locates the past in a discursive space that not only transgresses the confines of the visual but also yields the all-encompassing, inclusive, and responsive component of aurality. Insofar as it acknowledges the always contingent, contextual, and intersubjective/collective nature of history, an acoustic space of this kind is the very condition of possibility for dismantling and reconfiguring a rationalized, commodified past. Taking a certain literary aesthetic rather than political discourse as its point of departure, *Nomad Memory*, finally, constitutes a step towards reshaping and redefining the fields of postcolonial and cultural studies.

Chapter One

Echoes of the Past: Nomad Memory in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*

> The sand desert has not only oases, which are like fixed points, but also rhyzomatic vegetation that is temporary and shifts location according to local rains, bringing changes in the direction of the crossings. The same terms are used to describe ice deserts as sand deserts: there is no line separating earth and sky; there is no intermediate distance, no perspective or contour; visibility is limited; and yet there is an extraordinarily fine topology that relies not on points or objects but rather on haecceities, on sets of relations (winds, undulations of snow or sand, the song of the sand or the creaking of ice, the tactile qualities of both). It is a tactile space, or rather "haptic," a sonorous much more than a visual space.
>
> —Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari
>
> *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*

Infinite expanse, meandering nomad paths, smooth, forever shifting relations among elements: while conjuring up thoughts of the desert, its endless yellow dunes merging with an equally endless sky, the images also capture the current neuroscientific understanding of the mechanisms and coding strategies underlying mnemonic processes; in other words, they capture a notion of memory as an emergent property—fluid, malleable, and always in motion.[28] To be sure, metaphors of memory abound—

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[28] From today's critical perspective, memory involves less the retention of an original impression, as conveyed, for instance, in the image of the wax tablet, than the assimilation of sensory fragments by previously established and continuously evolving neural networks. For scholarly research on the

both in the sciences and the humanities. Spatial metaphors, in particular, have dominated memory discourses for centuries, from the wax tablet of the Greek philosophers to the computer commonly used among contemporary cognitive scientists. Yet even if these metaphors capture some of memory's most decisive facets, they fail to reflect the continually shifting configurations of neural activity that constitute memory from the perspective of current memory research. They also leave no room, as Schacter emphasizes in his neuroscientific study of memory, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past*, "for the subjective experience of remembering" (16), an experience intimately tied to a conviction that there is more to memory "than merely retrieving different kinds of information," that incidents and episodes from our pasts are "part of [one's] personal history, related to events that came before and have occurred since" (16).

While the image of the desert alone may not suffice in capturing memory's properties, its associations with nomadic movement approximates most closely the mechanisms and strategies underlying mnemonic processes as unveiled in current memory research and

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(re)constructive nature of memory, see Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past*. New York: Basic Books, 1996; Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2003; Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989. As we shall see in later chapters, memory's emergent property in terms of a phenomenon in which individual components combine to form a network which can only be described as a function of the components acting together, rather than as a strict addition of individual components, resonates deeply with Glissant's poetics of Relation. As Glissant elaborates in *Poetics of Relation*:

> Each particular culture is impelled by the knowledge of its particularity, but this knowledge is boundless. By the same token one cannot break each particular culture down into prime elements, since its limit is not defined and since Relation functions both in this internal relationship (that of each culture to its components) and, at the same time, in an external relationship (that of this culture to others that affect it). Definition of the internal relationship is never-ending . . . because the components of a culture, even when located, cannot be reduced to the indivisibility of prime elements . . . Definition of the external relationship could be infinitely analyzed as well, because . . . no particular culture in turn can be considered as a prime element in Relation. (169-170)

which this chapter sets out to explore. Like a nomad's movement in space, the act of memory involves patterns of activity that emerge from the contributions of both internal and external environments—past and present. As Schacter argues, "To establish a durable memory, incoming information must be encoded . . . by associating it meaningfully with knowledge that already exists in memory" (43). To remember is to build precisely on this (transient or enduring) change in neural activity—the so-called engram.[29] The engram, after all, serves as only one factor among others contributing to the nature, texture, and quality of what we recall of a certain moment in the past during each subsequent recollection of that moment. Another important component is the retrieval cue present at the moment of recall and containing features of the cognitive environment that influenced a memory's encoding other than the actual events. Rather than merely arousing or activating a dormant memory, the cue, following Schacter, "combines with the engram to yield a new, emergent entity—the recollective experience of the rememberer—that differs from either of its constituents" (70). Schacter finally points to neural processes of mental construction some of which memory recall shares with other cognitive functions including, for instance, imagination.[30]

While we shall return to and deepen our understanding of Schacter's approach to memory throughout, this opening chapter focuses primarily on the representations of memory and orality in Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. In concert with Schacter's conception of memory as "a central part of the brain's attempt to make sense of experience, and to tell coherent stories about it" (308), it investigates memory as a mode of transmission that communicates less specific contents than historically contingent patterns of experience or what Benjamin calls *Erfahrung*: a body of knowledge that is narratively coherent and transmissible from generation to generation. By closely engaging with the novel's representation of the acoustic and dialogic aspects of spoken discourse on the one hand, and the phenomenological features of sound and audition, on the other, it seeks to reveal memory as the very mode by which experiences, once shared, traverse bodies—if not bodies of land or water, then variously situated human bodies.

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[29] The engram—or the brain's record of an event—consists of a specific pattern of neural activation whose storage entails a strengthening of connections between active neurons (*Searching for Memory*, 71).

[30] As Schacter argues, "an important part of your recollective experience—whether or not you see yourself as a participant in a remembered event—is, to a large extent, constructed or invented at the time of attempted recall" (*Searching for Memory*, 21-22). Given that visual imagery shares some of the same neural processes with perception, invention may reach its peak in cases of a failure to remember the precise context or setting of an event—its so-called source (272). A confusion of the sources of particular knowledge may lead to one's mistaken incorporation of other's recollections into one's own memories (206).

Quite fittingly, perhaps, the shifting sands of the desert form one of the major settings in *The English Patient*. A scenic backdrop "where nothing was strapped down or permanent" (22), they evoke the perpetual, largely unfathomable movement of figural articulation and dispersal that underlies memory in Ondaatje's novel—events, here, revealing themselves mainly through acts of remembering. As "a place of pockets. The trompe l'oeil of time and water" (259), they also display memory's retentive yet infinitely malleable and often deceptive qualities. Comprising two interwoven narratives set in 1945 in Italy and throughout the late 1930s and early 1940s in Cairo, the Libyan desert, and England respectively, the novel explores the lives of four people, a conglomerate of different nationalities, stranded in an abandoned, bomb-damaged villa near Florence. All of them—a man, presumably English, dying of burns received in a plane crash, Hana, a

Canadian nurse who supplies the man with food and morphine, David Caravaggio, an old friend of Hana's, and Kirpal (Kip) Singh, a Sikh soldier charged with defusing bombs—strive to cope with the disastrous effects of war and a resulting shattered sense of belonging. Hana's nomadic tendencies within the walls of the villa, "with her pallet or hammock, sleeping sometimes in the English patient's room, sometimes in the hall" (13) capture metaphorically the condition of each member of this quartet of characters—each of them equaling cultural nomads uprooted from their native grounds. No longer relying solely on the subtleties of his metaphors, the author, finally, explicitly locates memory's unfolding in "a world of nomads" (248). *The English Patient* hence lends itself well to approaching the idea of *nomad memory* conceptually before the examination of the latter's increasingly literal manifestations in the chapters that follow.

The perpetually fluid or, rather, nomadic motion of memory in *The English Patient* arguably springs from the author's infusion of his text with oral/aural elements. Driven by a meticulous attention to the embodied, performative, and intersubjective qualities of voice and dialogue, Ondaatje's writing highlights the profound sensuality of language: "an activity," in anthropologist Johannes Fabian's words, "of concrete organisms and the embodiment of consciousness in a material medium—sound" (163). An emphasis on the material dimension of language—at once substantial and ephemeral—gains particular significance in light of a cultural, predominantly Western, bias toward visual perception as the favored mode of organizing and communicating knowledge; both modern evolutionary views of language, presupposing a gradual shift from orality to literacy, and the practices of colonial rule point to the primacy historically given to the written or printed word. Ondaatje hence valorizes, perhaps unsurprisingly given his European and Sri Lankan origins, an approach to language that, from a Western historical perspective, has been largely ignored and marginalized. In his close attention to voice and auditory perception, he gives prominence to the temporal dimension of human experience and, by implication, notions such as process and transformation.[31] In what follows we shall capture the movement from a discourse dominated by the visual to a one oriented toward sound and aural perception in Ondaatje's novel. An analysis of an oral/aural awareness or sensibility of the kind Ondaatje's novel inscribes, will help us reveal the emergence of a memory that defies the enclosure within bodily (or spatial) boundaries, one that keeps us attuned to the different, contextual nuances of the past and, thus, cognizant of the delicate, almost imperceptible and sometimes unanticipated, shades and subtleties that tend to escape historical and nationalist discourses.

Ondaatje's story of Almásy burned beyond recognition after a plane crash in the North African desert near the end of World War II figures centrally in tracing the limitations of discourses that seek to assimilate the past under the guise of coherence and continuity and fail to render its subtle but crucial facets.[32] True, the former desert explorer and archaeologist displays a deep concern with past events and circumstances, ranging from the movements of grand armies to the minutiae of ancient everyday life. Almásy's encyclopedic historical knowledge accounts for his marvelous sense of orientation in a place mainly composed of plains and sand dunes. As he proudly claims: "When I was lost . . . unsure of where I was, all I needed was the name of a small ridge, a local custom, a cell of this historical animal, and the map of the world would slide into place" (19).[33] Still, Almásy's confidence in naming and situating the world around him contrasts starkly with his disorientation and sense of wonder that follow his crash into the desert: "Where was he? What civilisation was this that understood the predictions of weather and light? El Ahmar or El Abyadd, for they must be one of the northwest desert tribes" (8-9). Despite Almásy's familiarity with the desert's various native populations and his ability to locate them geographically, tribal particularities seem beyond his conceptual reach.

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[31] Fabian highlights the oral/aural dimension as a major facet of human experience in his comments on scientific methods of inquiry in *Time and the Other:*

> [These] recommendations not only exaggerate (the visual), they omit dimensions of experience. No provision seems to be made for the beat of drums or the blaring of bar music that keep you awake at night; none for the strange taste and texture of food, or the smells and the stench . . . Often all this is written off as the "human side" of our scientific activity. Method is expected to yield objective knowledge by filtering out experiential "noise" thought to impinge on the quality of information. But what makes a (reported) sight more objective than a (reported) sound, smell, or taste? Our bias for one and against the other is a matter of cultural choice rather than universal validity. (108)

The power of sound to invoke the human element resides in its very nature: as a temporal phenomenon, it parallels human experience whose each and every aspect is deeply immersed in time.

Almásy's realization of limited insight occurs at a moment in his life that marks a shift from an emphasis on vision to one on sound—lending the notion of "insight" an added resonance. While Almásy strongly relied on his access to visual and written material during his past expeditions in the desert, sound rather than vision emerges as his main link to the world after he finds himself among the Bedouins and is later joined by Hana, Caravaggio, and Kip. Almásy's deepening of sensory awareness as he spends his final days in an abandoned Italian villa north of Florence, his thoughts mostly revolving around his former lover Katherine, crystallizes within an aesthetic increasingly integrating written and oral forms of remembrance.

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[32] Initially referred to as "the English patient," the burned man appears to reveal himself as Ladislaus de Almásy, a Hungarian desert explorer, when his speech, continuously alternating between first and third person narration, begins to refer to him by the name Almásy. The fusion of the patient's and Almásy's at first distinct storylines in the chapter "A Buried Plane" equally supports a reading along those lines. Thus, I will refer to the burned man as Almásy throughout this chapter. However, my choice should not divert from the significance of a Hungarian being mistaken for an Englishman, crucially pointing to the limits of any attempt to label or classify human beings. Even more, Almásy's supposed Englishness is intensely politically charged, given the British exploration and colonization of Africa in the past.

[33] All further references to *The English Patient* that occur in the text proper are taken from Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, New York: Vintage, 1996.

"[Maps] of the sea floor . . . charts painted on skin . . . rock engravings" (18): visual documents of this kind had served as the foundation for Almásy's recovery of the past, his "slow unearthing of history in the desert" (241). Offering a glimpse into a world no longer in existence, they had allowed him to find resemblance between landscapes ancient and modern. A copy of Herodotus's *The Histories* had provided further details on geographies as well as cultural, political, and religious practices of ancient civilizations; a major textual source, it had supplemented the often incomplete and fragmentary patterns drawn and engraved on maps or cave walls. All of these (both visual and written) historical sources had allowed Almásy to "see" a reality that lay hidden within what appeared to be mere sand and rock: the inland sea the desert once was or previously flourishing oasis towns. Visible in the "here" and "now," they had promised an immediate access to the past. Almásy conveys this sense of immediacy as he muses on his passion for reading: "I have always had information like a sea in me. I am a person who if left alone in someone's home walks to the bookcase, pulls down a volume and inhales it. So history enters us" (18).[34] One single breath, then, suffices to absorb historical knowledge. So accentuated, the past suggests both an immediate and transparent presence. Almásy's seamless, almost imperceptible, equation of factual and historical knowledge attests to the supposed transparence and empirical stature of history. It gestures toward the kind of historiography that closely adheres to the normative ideals of objectivity and coherence, one prone to open, as Ondaatje stresses in reference to Tacitus's *Annals*, "with an author's assurance of order" (93).

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[34] From Amy Novak's perspective, "[the] patient's understanding of history as an object that one 'inhales' or

Almásy's mapmaking deeply implicates him in the historical endeavor to draw a coherent picture of the past. His confidence in locating a geographical region by mention of only one of its facets situates itself within a culturally motivated discourse that presupposes the very possibility of logical and consistent relations among elements—cartography, after all, constituting a sign system that encompasses syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic dependencies among its components. And yet, by geographically situating both cultural and natural features of the land, Almásy creates a reality that emerges only *within* a particular conceptual framework; as he repeatedly emphasizes, mere silence and emptiness surround him in the desert. The glimpse his mapmaking affords into the past is thus equally far from objective. Almásy, perhaps inadvertently, links the very act of seeing to the discursive construction of historical reality: "There is, after Herodotus, little interest by the Western world towards the desert for hundreds of years. From 425 B. C. to the beginning of the twentieth century there is an averting of eyes. Silence . . . And then in the 1920s there is a sweet postscript history on this pocket

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consumes suggests that he believes the past is something that he can contain, catalogue, and possess" ("Textual Hauntings: Narrating History, Memory, and Silence in *The English Patient*," 116).

of earth, made mostly by privately funded expeditions" (133). Against this background, the desert emerges no longer as a blank or empty space. Far from suggesting a lack, its silence, instead, bears witness to a historical (visual) erasure.[35]

The correlation of a "missing" history and an "aversion of eyes" (or dis-regard) as referenced above is crucial considering the very nature of perception: not reducible to the empirical act of seeing, it involves a recognition that is based on the assimilation of elements of the present into already established patterns of meaning; in other words, it implies a comprehension of the unknown in light of the known. The idea of "grasping" or "seizing" the present in terms of the past, however, masks the essential noncoincidence of these temporal dimensions. As French philosopher Paul Ricoeur states in his reflections on the phenomenology of memory and perception: "Recognizing appears at first as an important complement to recollection . . . The small miracle of recognition, however, is to coat with presence the otherness of that which is over and gone" (39). Ricoeur's words point to the limits within which language operates. Based on memory and, in its belatedness, never coinciding with some authentic cause or origin, language merely *refers to* rather than *constitutes* experiences empirically perceived.[36] The very gap that exists between that which we posit as empirical facts and representation, whether in language, image, or recorded sound, potentially results in the erasure of events and circumstances fundamentally incompatible with or irrelevant to prevailing discursive practices. Almásy's musings on European expansion and colonialism point precisely to an omission of this kind: "The ends of the earth are never the points on a map that colonists push against, enlarging their sphere of influence. On one side servants and slaves and tides of power and correspondence with the Geographical Society. On the other the first step by a white man across a great river, the first sight (by a white eye) of a mountain that has been there forever" (141). The passage establishes a link between history and the always politically and ideologically determined nature of what we perceive to be reality—the imperial white gaze of colonialism lurking just below the surface. Like a mountain destined to remain unseen for ages, the desert, too, conceals a past that happened but has never been, to invoke Ondaatje's phrase, "made historical" (18). As a latent presence, it evokes "silent" or historically invisible realities: realities that lie outside the "map" of history.

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[35] The correlation between a "missing" history and a dis-regard for the desert over long periods of time is not surprising given sight's longstanding dominance as a primary source of human experience and knowledge, one tied closely to its propensity to dissect, delineate, and stabilize reality. Sight here suggests the notion of a Cartesian disembodied eye, that is, an emphasis on those aspects of vision that tend to incise, objectify, and order in an effort to seize and appropriate what is seen. By contrast, phenomenological perspectives, including Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *The Primacy of Perception, and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics* (ed. James M. Edie. Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press: 1964), reveal vision's spontaneous, bodily, and profoundly social dimensions.

[36] It is important to note that memory is itself based on representation. As Andreas Huyssen states in his reflections on memory in *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*: "The temporal status of any act of memory is always the present . . . even though all memory in some ineradicable sense is dependent on some past event or experience. It is this tenuous fissure between past and present that

Inevitably overshadowed by the limits of (historical) representation, Almásy's ambition to map the Libyan desert seems equally at odds with his embrace of a powerful if imprecise notion of a world without maps:

> We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have

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constitutes memory, making it powerfully alive and distinct from the archive or any other mere system of storage and retrieval" (3).

> climbed into as if trees, fears we have hidden in as if caves. I wish for all this to be marked on my body when I am dead. I believe in such cartography—to be marked by nature, not just to label ourselves on a map like the names of rich men and women on buildings. We are communal histories, communal books. We are not owned or monogamous in our taste or experience. All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps. (261)

On one level, Almásy displays a deep mistrust of maps and mapmaking. Resonating with his colleagues' wish for fossil trees, tribes, and sand dunes to bear their names (139), his words invoke the colonial pursuit to own the world by virtue of being the first (individual or nation) to map and therein fix or "label" a newly discovered space. Almásy voices his resistance to the concept of ownership on both a personal and public level throughout the novel.[37] And yet, despite his desire for "an earth that had no maps," Almásy still believes in cartography, albeit one that deviates from conventional acts of mapping. For the kind of cartography Almásy envisions involves a marking of the body rather than the page. Aspects of the past, ranging from the sensation of a flavor over emotions to the intimate immersion within another's physical and mental consciousness, are here bound closely to the sensual body. Turning, quite literally, into a body of knowledge, they reveal themselves no longer as abstractions but as concrete and tangible images blossoming out of flesh. While a living organism thus serves as a surface for writing, the marks, too, derive from a living substance; they originate from experiences that, in concert with the creative, often unpredictable forces of nature, tend to confound expectations and, surprising in their unique and striking particularity, resist being labeled or classified. What emerges is the idea of an organic cartography that renders the always evolving, highly idiosyncratic topography of human life and experience, one that encompasses not merely cognitive but also sensual, emotional, and deeply communal elements.[38] Almásy's peculiar depiction of the world as a "historical animal" and his pride in "having information like a sea in him" both subtly hint at the fluid and organic nature of the past. His very reliance on Herodotus who opened the horizon, possibly unawares, to alternative historical constructions by referring to different, even contradictory, versions of the past, betrays an acknowledgement of the fluidity and malleability of historical remembrance.[39]

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[37] Katherine, the woman he will come to love, taunts him precisely for this resistance: "You slide past everything with your fear and hate of ownership, of owning, of being owned, of being named" (238). As his own words suggest, ownership is inextricably bound up with acts of naming and mapping.

Orality

The English Patient comes exceedingly close to meeting Almásy's ideals in its particular attention to the process of orally sharing and passing on one's memories.

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[38] As Marlene Goldman emphasizes in her reading of Ondaatje's novel, "By tracing the image of the map, we can see that the desire to map and the quest for knowledge alone to not usher in apocalypse. Instead, catastrophe springs from a particular orientation towards knowledge, characterized by the desire to possess and reify, or worse, to eradicate maps altogether . . . The patient's behaviour outlines one possible approach, which involves treating maps as communal knowledge that ideally should travel from one person to another" ("'Powerful Joy:' Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and Walter Benjamin's Allegorical Way of Seeing." *University of Toronto Quarterly: A Canadian Journal of the Humanities* 70.1 (2001): 902-22; 909-910). Goldman's idea of "traveling knowledge" resonates with the concept of nomad memory as detailed in this dissertation.

[39] As David Grene observes in his foreword to Herodotus's *The History* (trans. David Grene. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987), Herodotus inferred the past not solely from written, factual records but also from probability, invention, and sources unverified by archaeological or documentary evidence. The historian therefore relied on both writing and orally transmitted stories including folktales, legends, and myths.

More precisely, it captures the past in all its volatile dimensions and resists the temptation to fix and contain it by focusing on the immediate, if fleeting, transfer of experiences from one person to another. The novel establishes the framework for an oral transmission of the past in one of its opening scenes that depicts Hana tending to Almásy's needs as he lies dying of the burns he incurred in the crash:

> Every four days she washes his black body . . . She wets a washcloth and holding it above his ankles squeezes the water onto him, looking up as he murmurs, seeing his smile . . . Reaching his shoulders she blows cool air onto his neck, and he mutters. What? she asks, coming out of her concentration. He turns his dark face with its grey eyes towards her. She puts her hand into her pocket. She unskins the plum with her teeth, withdraws the stone and passes the flesh of the fruit into his mouth. He whispers again dragging the listening heart of the young nurse beside him to wherever his mind is, into that well of memory he kept plunging into during those months before he died. There are stories the man recites quietly. (4)

The passage introduces Almásy as a man burned beyond recognition. Curiously enough, his physical impairment does not lessen his ability to communicate—his body, as Ondaatje points out much later in the novel, "nonexistent except for a mouth, a vein in the arm, wolf-grey eyes" (247). Almásy thus proves capable of expressing himself through a smile and, most tellingly, speech. His verbal intentions alone, however, do not suffice to initiate his utterances. It takes Hana's response to or rather acknowledgement of Almásy's effort to speak for his inarticulate murmur to transform into a whisper powerful enough to "drag" his listener to "wherever his mind is." Surprising with an even fuller sound, his speech ends up displaying features of an oral performance; he not merely *tells* but *recites* stories from the past. And yet, a closer look reveals Almásy's storytelling to originate less from a verbal than from a bodily interaction. As the scene above suggests, Hana elicits Almásy's initial murmur through her healing and nourishing influence: she ritually sprinkles water onto Almásy's body, blows cool air onto his neck, and feeds him fruit. Water, air, and nourishment combine to evoke breath as a regenerative bodily force, the power of spoken words residing in the sound "breathed" into them.

Allusions to air, breath, and the human mouth invoke an oral speech imagery that pervades *The English Patient* as a whole. We will recall Almásy's claim of "inhaling" history—his breath constituting the living presence of the past. The novel further includes numerous references to Hana's breathing, at one point likened to "the voice of a cello" (104), as well as to her fascination with Kip's mouth; as she tells him: "It's your mouth I'm most purely in love with. Your teeth" (128). An engaging portrayal of Kip's personality lays open the mouth's highly diverse communicative functions:

> When someone speaks he looks at a mouth, not eyes and their colours, which, it seems to him, will always alter depending on the light of a room, the minute of the day. Mouths reveal insecurity or smugness or any other point on the spectrum of character. For him they are the most intricate aspects of faces. He's never sure what an eye reveals. But he can read how mouths darken into callousness, suggest tenderness. One can often misjudge an eye from its reaction to a simple beam of

> sunlight.[40] (219)

A vital means to communicate mood and emotion beyond speech, the expression of the mouth (inextricably tied to lip shape and jaw position), at the same time, determines the very nature of the sonic, even musical vibrations of one's voice: the bursts of air variably modified by specific tongue and lip movements. Subtle allusions to the physiological mechanics of speech such as those infusing the scene above extend the novel's orality beyond a conversational framework to a range of motifs that convey the externalization and materialization of an internal process, motifs, in other words, that evoke the transformation of inner into outer speech.

The materiality of speech surfaces early in the novel in Almásy's peculiar way of receiving Hana's words as she reads aloud to him the books she finds in the library: "He listens to her, swallowing her words like water" (5). The earlier implicit correlation between words and water is here made manifest. In its emphasis on the material, tangible quality of Hana's speech, the scene renders (even more in its resonance with Hana's passing of fruit into Almásy's mouth) the exchange of words in a most literal sense. Ondaatje refines and deepens the metaphor in his depiction of Almásy's memories of the Bedouins, in particular his memories of "the face that had come each night and chewed and softened the dates and passed them down into his mouth" (6). The already chewed and softened dates Almásy receives arguably parallel stories orally passed on from generation to generation and therein endlessly fashioned and refashioned. The fact that Almásy knew the Bedouins "only by the taste of saliva that entered him along with the date" (6) further enhances the analogy drawn between the exchange of food and that of spoken words. Both entail a transmission that stems from an openness or, perhaps more fittingly, a hospitality towards an outer, often unknown world and that, as a result, proves capable of revealing experience in its sensuous and singular nature. By consuming the Bedouins' saliva, then, Almásy receives these strangers in both senses of the word; he takes them in as hosts, as they themselves are hosting him.

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[40] Kip's suspicion towards eyes and apparent confidence in what mouths reveal seem to suggest an implicit reversal of Western hierarchical discourses that favor vision over the spoken word. Ondaatje's intertextual reference to the story of the Lydian king Candaules gives voice precisely to a bias toward vision. Obsessed with the beauty of his wife, Candaules approaches his friend Gyges with the following demand: "*I think that you do not believe me when I tell you of the beauty of my wife, for it happens that men's ears are less apt of belief than their eyes. Contrive therefore means by which you may look upon her naked*" (232; original emphasis). In spite of Kip's attitude mentioned above, his daily routine of dismantling bombs in fact involves an emphasis on sight rather than hearing: "He had learned diagrams of order when he joined the army, blueprints that became more and more complicated, like great knots and musical scores. He found out he had the skill of the three-dimensional gaze, the rogue gaze that could look at an object or page of information and realign it, see all the false descents" (110-111).

Ondaatje's focus on the materiality and bodily incorporation of words locates speech in the realm of concrete, external sense perception; more specifically, it ties spoken language to the material reality of sound composed of periodic waves of air molecules (or matter) and imbuing human experience with an embodied sense of presence. The perception of natural sounds adds a vibrant and palpable dimension to Hana's visual encounters in the novel's opening scene: "She stands up in the garden where she has been working and looks into the distance. She has sensed a shift in the weather. There is another gust of wind, a buckle of noise in the air, and the tall cypresses sway. She turns and moves uphill towards the house" (3). Initially directing the reader's attention to a panoramic view, the passage swiftly moves to the sonic aspects of Hana's sensory impressions; as we have seen, Hana infers a "shift in the weather" from sounds caused by the wind. One should note, too, that a sonic rather than visual landscape surrounds Almásy mostly blindfolded and kept in darkness by the Bedouins: "One night he heard what seemed to be wind chimes high in the air, and after a while it stopped and he fell asleep with a hunger for it, that noise like the slowed-down sound from the throat of a bird, perhaps flamingo, or a desert fox . . . The next day he heard snatches of glassy sound as he lay once more covered in cloth. A noise out of the darkness" (9).[41] Almásy's lack of clear vision seems to render him particularly sensitive to subtle sonic nuances; as suggested above, he is acutely aware of the recurrent, glassy, and slowed-down nature of the sounds surrounding him. His highly nuanced auditory perception impresses upon the reader even more strongly a sense of the immediate, tangible presence of sounds apparently measurable according to frequency, timbre, and pace. Still, sonic materiality here extends beyond abstract qualities of timbre or pace to encompass the physical and sensual texture of a sound's very source. As Almásy's efforts to place and interpret the sounds he perceives (15) indicate, a sound carries within itself the material trace of its origin. Not unlike vision, aural perception thus takes on a second dimension in its movement from sensation or receptivity to a discursive act of listening. Whether unveiling the significance of the Bedouins' loud yet indiscernible voices only with the "dialect suddenly clarifying" (19-20) or referring to a landscape of "birdcalls that he could recognize from a halting fragment" as a "fully named world" (21), Almásy tends to infer meaning by identifying single units of sound as part of a larger conceptual framework. The perception of natural and mechanical sounds requires a similar act of interpretation as the following passage reveals:

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[41] Michael A. Forrester's reflections on auditory perception shed light on the nature of Almásy's initial disorientation. As he writes, "there is a considerable difference between our visual and acoustic education. One reason for this is that we often see without hearing (e.g. through a window) but we very rarely hear the sounds of nature and of life without seeing something, if not with the eyes then with the imagination" (42).

> That summer the English patient wore his hearing aid so he was alive to everything in the house. The amber shell hung within his ear with its translations of casual noises—the chair in the hall scraping against the floor, the click of the dog's claws outside his room so he would turn up the volume and even hear its damn breathing, or the shout on the terrace from the sapper. (88)

Again, Almásy registers sounds that emerge out of darkness. Here, however, Almásy seems more confident in attributing the sounds he hears to causes or origins unseen: a chair, a dog's claws, a human being. Arguably, his ability to identify causes that lie outside his visual field springs not only from his attentive apprehension of sonic qualities but also and significantly from his familiarity with or prior knowledge of random yet most common everyday sounds. The sounds he perceives, after all, conjure up images and associations that are deeply anchored in past experiences and hence memory. Schacter, among other memory researchers, has pointed to the crucial role of memory in the immediate perception of reality. For him, experience involves less an unmediated perception of the phenomenal world than the assimilation of incoming information into existing cognitive schemata—the neural architecture of the human brain being developed and shaped by experience over time.[42] Thus first and foremost determined as a relationship to memory, perception, including sonic perception, follows always already established discursive practices and regimes.

Still, sound figures as a creative, innovative force in Ondaatje's novel. It extends well beyond a transmission of meaning to capture those aspects of life and experience not yet fully grasped or contained within existing conceptual frames. Most certainly, it is no coincidence that Almásy's immersion into the world of sound coincides with a plunge into darkness; broadly evoking the realm of the unknown, this darkness soon reveals itself as one of a very particular kind:

> He travelled on a skid behind the Bedouin for five days in darkness, the hood over his body. He lay within this oil-doused cloth. Then suddenly the temperature fell. They had reached the valley within the red high canyon walls, joining the rest of the desert's water tribe that spilled and slid over sand and stones, their blue robes shifting like a spray of milk or a wing. They lifted the soft cloth off him, off the suck of his body. He was within the larger womb of the canyon. (19)

Almásy's plunge into darkness parallels a reimmersion into the prenatal state when sound perception (along with touch, taste, and smell) serves as a main link to the outside world.[43] The author's metaphoric equation between the depth of the canyon and the maternal womb renders the place where sound prevails as one of growth and transformation. The creative power of sound in Ondaatje's novel stems precisely from the material *practice* rather than mere materiality of vocal and sonic performance, a practice presupposing the very potential for change. It is intimately connected to the unpredictable physical form that both voice and sound may assume.[44] Ondaatje sensitizes the reader to the affective dimension of sound in his close attention to the acoustic nuances of most commonly used words, often inciting a slight surprise at something formerly unnoticed or unknown. "I love the word 'curl,' such a slow word, you can't rush it" (103), Hana confesses as she winds herself around her lover's body. Much later in the novel Ondaatje renders her impressions on the word "maman:" "*a French word . . . a circular word, suggesting cuddles, a personal word that can be even shouted in public. Something as comforting and as eternal as a barge*" (292; original emphasis). Almásy, similarly, expresses his views on the sound of words: "*The deserts of Libya*. Remove politics, and it is the loveliest phrase I know. *Libya*. A sexual, drawn-out word, a coaxed well. The *b* and the *y*. Madox said it was one of the few words in which you heard the tongue turn a corner" (257; original emphasis). From Hana's sense of comfort that she draws from the sound of the words "curl" and "maman" to Almásy's reference to a particular technique of the tongue adding to what he perceives to be the poignant loveliness of the phrase "Libya" (a phrase implicitly alluding to both the communicative and regenerative function of oral speech), Ondaatje's lyrical musings on individual words highlight the capacity of the sonic aspects of language to arouse deeply emotional and personal associations. While these associations are inextricably bound to experiences in the past, memory here figures not merely as a cognitive, intellectual framework. Rather, it points to a mnemonic dimension that encompasses unconsciously perceived experiential components and, as this analysis seeks to show, one that enhances the creative potential of sonic perception.

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[42] Schacter elaborates on the relationship between memory and momentary experience in *Searching for Memory*. He states:

> What has happened to us in the past determines what we take out of our daily encounters in life; memories are records of how we have experienced events, not replicas of the events themselves. Experiences are encoded by brain networks whose connections have already been shaped by previous encounters with the world. This preexisting knowledge powerfully influences how we encode and store new memories, thus contributing to the nature, texture, and quality of what we will recall of the moment. (6)

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[43] As contemporary researchers such as Sara Shahidullah and Peter Hepper have shown, the human auditory system is among the first senses to develop in the womb and possibly the most developed of all the senses before birth.

[44] As Chion argues in *Audio-Vision*:

> There is always something about sound that overwhelms and surprises us no matter what—especially when we refuse to lend it our conscious attention; and thus sound interferes with our perception, affects it. Surely, our conscious perception can valiantly work at submitting everything to its control, but, in the present cultural state of things, sound more than image has the ability to saturate and short-circuit our perception. (33)

Memory

The complex entanglement of memory and sound emerges powerfully in the events initiated by Hana's unveiling of an object concealed in the villa's library. Roaming the villa's various rooms, Hana enters the library and unexpectedly "grabbed the grey sheet that covered the piano and walked away to a corner of the room hauling it in after her, a winding-cloth, a net of fish" (62). Notwithstanding the scenic shift from the Lybian desert to the abandoned Italian villa, Hana's act of revelation calls to mind Almásy's archeological endeavor to unearth a hidden past. Hana assumes the role of an archeologist only at first glance, however. After all, her discovery was not preceded by an elaborate plan or preparation but the result of an impulse devoid of any apparent cause or origin. Ondaatje's imagery offers a brief if enigmatic glimpse into the nature of the object revealed. "A winding-cloth, a net of fish:" the sheet covering the piano imbues that which lies hidden with an aura of death, while, at the same time, pointing to the presence of something at once accidentally found and sought-for. Its larger significance gradually emerges as the scene unfolds: "No light. She heard a far grumble of thunder" (62). Ondaatje's reference to thunder subtly draws the reader's attention to an alternative approach to a seemingly invisible, buried past: sound. Hana's "catch" in and of itself foregrounds an emphasis on sonic perception. Although constituting, like engravings or ruins, a material remnant from the past, the piano evokes less a (textual) trace that can be stored or recorded than one sonic or, rather, musical in nature. Still, Ondaatje hesitates in taking the step from sound to music:

> She was standing in front of the piano. Without looking down she lowered her hands and started to play, just chording sound, reducing melody to a skeleton. She paused after each set of notes as if bringing her hands out of water to see what she had caught, then continued, placing down the main bones of the tune. She slowed the movements of her fingers even more. She was looking down as two men slipped through the French doors and placed their guns on the end of the piano and stood in front of her. The noise of chords still in the air of the changed room. (62-63)

Despite the setting's implicit evocation of music, the passage entails a move away from "chording sound" to a "noise of chords"—the latter suggesting a sonic experience that, in conventional terms, lacks musical quality. Hana's apparent efforts to avoid melodic development, "reducing melody to a skeleton" and "placing down the main bones of the tune," parallel this movement. Rather unambitiously and with no particular melody in mind, she merely heeds the movements of her fingers as they glide over the piano's keys, seemingly without guidance. Yet their lack of purpose only appears as such. As Ondaatje states in a phrase immediately following the passage mentioned above: "Her arms down her sides, one bare foot on the bass pedal, continuing with the song her mother had taught her" (63). The sounds that emerge hence reveal themselves as fragments of a tune or melody that Hana cannot fully grasp or fathom. The scattered, fragmentary pieces seem to fall into place only with Hana's acknowledgment of the presence of two so far unnoticed strangers. Ondaatje's portrayal of this crucial moment offers important insights into the dynamic, albeit subtle interplay, between sonic perception and the act of remembering, more specifically, it points to the way in which the perception of vaguely familiar sounds can cause memories to change and evolve over time:

> [Two] men and a woman across a piano . . . the guns in their wet brightness whenever the lightning slipped itself into the room filling everything with colour and shadow as it was doing now every half-minute thunder crackling all over the valley and the music antiphonal, the press of chords, *When I take my sugar to tea . . .* She broke free of the chords and released her fingers into intricacy, tumbling into what she had held back, the jazz detail that split open notes and angles from the chestnut of melody . . . her hands playing now against and within the lightning and thunder, counter to it, filling up the darkness between light. Her face so concentrated they knew they were invisible to her, to her brain struggling to

> remember her mother's hand ripping newspaper and wetting it under a kitchen tap and using it to wipe the table free of the shaded notes, the hopscotch of keys. (64)

Passive anticipation thus gives way to a resolute, unrestraint musical performance. While the single notes that Hana plays erupt from deep within her, their unfolding seems to lie beyond her control; her "tumbling into what she had held back," as Ondaatje stresses, "the jazz detail that split open notes and angles from the chestnut of melody" captures this very ambiguity. The imagery of those lines yet ultimately directs the reader's attention towards Hana's actual lack of conscious mastery of the gradually materializing song. Insofar as it dissolves the boundaries between nature and artifice, it renders the series of notes that emanate from the instrument as an organically developing melody. If its precise cause remains unknown, Hana's sudden immersion into a long forgotten song appears to have finally arisen from highly coincidental circumstances: a combination of indistinct memories, momentary emotions, and the scene's very setting; a momentary intuition, an inexplicable hunch, after all, had prompted Hana to walk up to and uncover the piano in the first place.

On one level, Hana's sudden release of creative energy recalls Proustian moments of *mémoire involontaire*: moments of an unexpected reexperiencing of a past sensation.[45]

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[45] In contrast to an act of memory that stems from an intellectual effort and involves some form of conscious, voluntary control, *mémoire involontaire* entails the unexpected reexperiencing of a past sensation tied closely to a momentary apprehension of correspondence between temporally distant impressions. Proust evokes forgetting as the very condition of possibility for moments of *mémoire involontaire* to occur. By severing the link between the past and the present, forgetting disrupts the linear progression of time and makes past impressions appear in their sensuous immediacy (*Le temps retrouvé*, 177).

Read in this way, the experience of an involuntary memory turns out to follow several failing attempts to artificially induce this very moment. Hana at first positions herself in front of the piano the way she used to as a child, "her feet still unable to reach the pedals if she sat, so she preferred to stand, her summer sandal on the left pedal and the metronome ticking" (64). In anticipation of familiar yet only vaguely remembered sounds, she hence presses the keys from a standing position, heeding closely what her body might potentially remember. *Mémoire involontaire* involves precisely both the recreation of a moment in the past and a memory of the body rather than the mind. Given the constraints imposed by a memory that lies outside the realm of conscious perception, it comes as no surprise that Hana's deliberate efforts seem to be in vain and that the emerging sounds initially fail to keep their implicit promise. Aside from rare moments of *mémoire involontaire*, all that indeed remains of the past are what Proust refers to as "snapshots" (172) of voluntary memory: single images and scenes that form part of established patterns of meaning and thus accessible to conscious recall. Accordingly, Hana's attempt to revive a past that appears to be deeply buried in her unconscious coincides with vivid memories of how her mother would draw chalked notes onto the kitchen table, wiping them off later, and how she herself would learn those notes by heart and practice them, as Ondaatje stresses, "on any surface, a kitchen table, a wall while she walked upstairs, her own bed before she fell asleep" (63). Hana's effortless remembrance of these events suggests their significance for her who, when young, enjoyed playing the piano yet did not own one and had to think of alternative, often creative ways, to do so. The wished-for, albeit at first failing, remembrance of the old song her mother had taught her is of a very different nature. It coincides with an unforeseen, almost unlikely constellation of events and circumstances, a constellation that comprises the intermittent light filling an otherwise all-pervading darkness, the rumbling of thunder in the distance, the moisture in the air, Hana's impulse to perform in front of an audience, among numerous other elements constituting that particular moment. Along the lines of a Proustian mnemonics, then, the combination of these minute contextual details, ranging from sensory experiences to personal goals and desires, may well mirror a specific configuration of sensations, thoughts, and impressions that accompanied and colored a moment in the past. Yet, perhaps, not having been Hana's focus of attention during their occurrence, these events escaped her at a conscious level and had never been integrated into her conscious or voluntary memory.

If anchored in what seems to be a Proustian moment of remembrance, Hana's performance is yet intrinsically tied to the present; it takes, after all, an immediate sensory experience to trigger images of *mémoire involontaire*. However, while Proust's reflections on memory focus on the human capacity to recapture a particular moment of the past, Ondaatje, by contrast, pays particular attention to the immediate moment and its inherent possibilities.[46] Moreover, unlike Proust who favors taste and smell over the other senses, Ondaatje renders sound as the main and most powerful mnemonic path to a reality that seems no longer accessible. True, sound shares its capacity to elicit memories from the past with vision, touch, and smell; its distinguishing power, however, and one Ondaatje strongly draws upon in his novel, springs from its essential evanescence. As cultural critic Ong puts it in his *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, "Sound exists only when it is going out of existence" (32) and must, as he emphasizes elsewhere, "emanate from a source here and now discernibly active, with the result that involvement with sound is involvement with the present, with here-and-now existence and activity" (*The Presence of the Word*, 111-112). With its appearance thus inextricably tied to the haunting certitude of its dissolution, sound yields an increased focus on present actuality. Its constant movement in time further results in a vagueness and uncertainty that impede its precise fixation. The aforementioned scene captures both the fleeting nature and the perpetual motion of aural phenomena. Here, sound affords an intuitive experience that obviates, even if momentarily, the assimilation of elements of the past into already existing patterns of meaning. In other words, the sounds that emerge carry memories whose vagueness allows them to combine with experiential elements of the present in ways previously unthought-of.

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[46] According to Proust, this moment of remembrance involves the experience of associations, memories, and emotions that shaped the remembered episode yet could have never been absorbed by human consciousness all at once, given the immersion of every aspect of experience, including thought and sensation, within the constant flow of time. Rare moments of *mémoire involontaire* thus evoke a realm of simultaneity or, as Proust puts it, a realm lying outside time (*Le temps retrouvé*, 179).

The creative, innovative quality of Hana's act of remembrance manifests itself in a musical approach that allows her to draw upon *and* modify the past at the very same time. It is certainly no coincidence that the piece Hana plays on the piano is a jazz song. While deeply anchored in a shared musical tradition, jazz also and most characteristically involves innovation; that is, it joins remembrance with novel ways of rendering and relating to the past. The role of memory is particularly relevant given the music's oral, largely undocumented heritage.[47] As a result, jazz musicians develop the conceptual grounding as well as the aural and mnemonic skills on which their performances depends largely by means numerous sessions of observation and listening. Hana's memorization of the notes that her mother would draw on a table and wipe off later gains relevance precisely because of a limited access to and often absence of written records of individual jazz pieces. It evokes the importance of aural musical knowledge, with its related powers of absorption, apprehension, and recall. Her memories, too, parallel what jazz critics such as Berliner have called the muscular memory of a jazz musician, a form of memory capable of generating musical material. Based on the repetition of finger movements, this memory of the body involves neuromuscular responses to familiar finger patterns (most commonly chords) that free up a musician's capacity for improvisation. The body, in fact, takes part in both remembrance and creativity. As Berliner emphasizes, "it interprets and responds to sounds as physical impressions, subtly informing or reshaping mental concepts" (190). Hana's total immersion into the music's immediate unfolding convincingly renders the capacity of sound to engage the listener on an intellectual, physical, and even emotional level. It confirms the affective qualities of sonic perception mentioned above.[48] Her musical performance finally provides an intriguing glimpse of the interactive and participatory nature of jazz: like in a live jazz performance, the scene's different components variously interact with one another, exchanging different shades of timbre and establishing a smooth, graceful continuity of both mood and emotion. Analogous to a jazz musician, Hana creatively responds to surprises and unexpected turns that arise during this lively composite performance—the sound of thunder conversing rhythmically with Hana's solo and leading her beyond initial intentions to the creation of novel musical ideas.[49]

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[47] In his comprehensive study on jazz, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*, Berliner stresses that "Improvisers must depend greatly upon their ears for repertory because there is frequently a lag between the introduction of new pieces to the jazz scene and their availability in printed form. In fact, much of the jazz repertory remains part of the community's oral tradition and is not published as single sheet music items or in fake books"(93).

[48] Berliner explicitly points to affect in musical performance when stating that "Soulful performances embody such affective qualities as pathos, intensity, urgency, fire, and energy." He further emphasizes that "Musicians use the term *energy* both literally and figuratively. Just as it requires energy to produce and project sounds on musical instruments, it requires energy for performers to draw upon feelings as they

An emphasis on both preservation and innovation lies at the heart of Ondaatje's attempt to counter (historical) representations that seek to fix the past once and for all. As we have seen in the context of jazz, the ability to open up the past hinges upon a focus on the immediate moment. On the verge of being assimilated into existing conceptual schemes, the moment carries within itself all the possible yet unrealized versions of reality. To be sure, the momentary instant signifies the presence of something that has always already vanished—its mere trace resurfacing in an image, a narrative, or any other form of representation. The latter, after all, always follows experience—its belatedness causing the very fissure, in Huyssen's words, "that opens up between experiencing an event and remembering it in representation."[50] Yet as Huyssen equally

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infuse sounds with emotion. Moreover, the sound waves themselves comprise a form of energy that touches listeners physically, potentially also touching them emotionally" (*Thinking in Jazz*, 256; original emphasis).

[49] The following passage in Berliner's *Thinking in Jazz* strikingly resonates with the scene under consideration: "The rhythm section commonly provides more than structural markers amid its multilayered backdrop of musical counterpoint. At times, rhythm section players interject punctuations and unique melodic figurations between the soloist's phrases in brief antiphonal response to them" (358).

[50] Within the context of a phenomenology of sound, Chion argues that "we don't hear sounds, in the sense of recognizing them, until shortly after we have perceived them. Clap your hands sharply and listen to the resulting sound. Hearing—namely the synthesized apprehension of a small fragment of the auditory

stresses, “Rather than lamenting or ignoring it, this split should be understood as a powerful stimulant for cultural and artistic creativity” (*Twilight Memories*, 3). It is precisely the creative potential inherent in the immediate moment that the novel’s musical backdrop seeks to accentuate. Composing and performing on the spur of the moment, jazz performers privilege the palpability and sometimes overwhelming emotional intensity of sounds, themselves deeply anchored in the past, over the attempt to permanently and safely contain them. As they integrate present impressions and experiences into musical pieces that form part of an existing repertoire, they highlight the past’s always momentarily determined and continuously changing nature. The creation of a space that allows for the construction of alternative, so far unknown yet possible histories, appears to compensate for the loss of stable meaning—a sacrifice that Ondaatje, too, is willing to make. The latter alludes to this favored realm of possibilities when he refers to a particular jazz tune, “How Long Has This Been Going On,” and stresses that “the introduction’s melody is purer than the song it introduces” (107). As Caravaggio and Hana begin dancing to the song, they come to realize the truth of that statement: “The phrasing so slow, so drawn out, she could sense the musician did not wish to leave the small parlour of the introduction and enter the song, kept wanting to remain there, where the story had not yet begun, as if enamoured by a maid in the prologue” (109). The lure of the song’s introductory part appears to lie in its promise to capture life and experience in all its contours. While this promise will inevitably fail

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event, consigned to memory—will *follow* the event very closely, it will not be totally simultaneous with it” (13; original emphasis).

given the necessary exclusion of elements in each particular rendition, jazz still raises awareness of possible unknown senses. We can glimpse the latter, in each musical performance, as a haunting presence or, rather, as melodic counterpoint that might surface at any given moment.

Speech

Jazz music foregrounds the very qualities that account for the creative potential of sound. Unique in their concrete manifestation and singular in their relation to momentary circumstances, oral phenomena are vibrantly alive and dynamic by nature. Not limited to phonetic considerations, the sonic perception of embodied, oral speech is equally and decisively shaped by momentary intonational, expressive, and musical qualities. Improvisation seems to motivate oral expression hence not solely within the musical realm but also, if less noticeably perhaps, on the level of spoken language, with each individual utterance amounting to a particular rendition of a given word. Just as the phonetic sound of words can "move" a listener in certain ways, so too can an individual's often spontaneous usage of words and phrases. Almásy's "little waltz in the way he spoke" (52), for instance, expands the meaning of the stories he tells, imbuing them with a sense of gracefulness and beauty.[51] The rhythm and tone of his voice, too, offer a glimpse into the ease with which he seems to remember most minute details of the past. Similarly, Caravaggio's "slow drawl" (53) as he leisurely converses with Hana,

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[51] Hana's adoration for Almásy seems in part to originate from his intoned vocalizations when speaking about his past experiences. As she confesses: "There was something about him she wanted to learn, grow into, and hide in, where she could turn away from being an adult. There was some little waltz in the way he spoke to her and the way he thought" (52).

Almásy's formal tone when aiming to create distance between himself and Katherine (249), and the latter's reading aloud of a story from Herodotus's *The Histories* in a wary voice (233), a voice marked by keen caution and watchful prudence, all subtly reveal momentary moods, attitudes, and motives that shape and color oral language.

Hana's contextually varying performances of the French national anthem, the "Marseillaise"—with its lyrics repeated verbatim—contributes to our understanding of what it means to speak of a verbal utterance as a unique, singular occurrence. Listening to Hana singing the song on the night of her twenty-first birthday, Caravaggio remembers her as she would step up on a table at somebody's birthday party and begin singing the same song many years earlier. Having this particular past version in mind, he now

> listened with a pleasure . . . but this was quickly altered by the way she sang. Not the passion of her at sixteen but echoing the tentative circle of light around her in the darkness. She was singing it as if it was something scarred, as if one couldn't ever again bring all the hope of the song together . . . Singing in the voice of a tired traveller . . . A new testament. There was no certainty to the song anymore, the singer could only be one voice against all the mountains of power. That was the only sureness. The one voice was the single unspoiled thing. A song of snail light. Caravaggio realized she was singing with and echoing the heart of the sapper. (269)

Sung in the same sequence yet part of a new song: Hana's words have changed in ways that escape a determinate grasp on their meaning. At its most literal level, the passage indicates her altered emotional state. The passion, hope, and certainty of the past have vanished. Hesitancy and doubt are now pervading the song, her doubtful attitude most probably originating from the painful and disillusioning experiences during the war. Yet Hana's singing also bears traces of a subtle communication between her voice and the disparate features of her surroundings—her song echoing both "the tentative circle of light around her" and "the heart of the sapper." The words sung, then, are not only oriented toward Hana's own past. Colored by specific semantic and expressive intentions to which we will return later on, they attend to the responsive feelings that the song generates in those listening, while simultaneously appropriating another's voice: the "voice of a tired traveller." If Hana's singing thus resonates beyond an immediate context or single performance, it takes shape and gains significance only in the space between speaker and audience. The creation of a shared, dialogical space vividly exemplifies both the formation of musical ideas in jazz and what Bakhtin has called the "living impulse" of language, an impulse that, rooted in the dialogic play of verbal intentions, reaches out beyond the word and that accounts for a notion of language as something highly dynamic and alive.[52]

As we trace links between the metaphors traversing the opening pages of Ondaatje's novel, we will discover that speech bears the imprint of life, mainly in its association with water but also, and more significantly for our considerations, in opposition to its static, seemingly lifeless graphic counterpart.[53] Hana, for instance, marvels at the stiff pages of the book she reads and "felt like Crusoe finding a drowned book that had washed up and dried itself on the shore" (12). Even earlier she had been distracted by "the porousness of the paper" (7) of the book lying in front of her, a condition that seems to suggest the fragility rather than permanence of writing. In contrast to speech entwined closely with notions of survival and endurance, evocations of the written or printed word hence appear tinged with a sense of loss, deterioration, and even death. Hana's aforementioned conversion of the skeleton of a song—its bare notation—into a vibrant musical performance resonates tellingly with writing thus conceived.

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[52] For a detailed analysis of the discursive and performative aspects of language, see Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination.*

The metaphorically established boundaries between speech and writing increasingly blur as the novel proceeds. Let us consider, for instance, the nature of the intertext that appears twice in Ondaatje's novel: the "Marseillaise." Having been transmuted from printed verse into oral form, the song obtained currency largely by oral means; not coincidentally, Hana in *The English Patient* learns to sing the song in school: a prime site for the circulation of knowledge by means of memorization or rote learning. The song's capacity to be shared and transmitted across generations thus hinges primarily upon what anthropologists such as Richard Bauman have called entextualization: "the process of rendering discourse extractable, of making a stretch of linguistic production into a unit—a *text*—that can be lifted out of its interactional setting" ("Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life," 73). Conceived as a situated communicative practice attending closely to rhetorical and poetic patternings, performance presents the very means by which social actors may attain this goal. "In this sense of performance," as Bauman argues, "the act of expression is put on display, objectified, marked out to a degree from its discursive surroundings and opened up to interpretive scrutiny and evaluation by an audience" ("Language, Identity, Performance," 1).[54] The possibility of the "Marseillaise" to be reactivated and deployed as a discrete textual unit in forever new contexts—both inside and beyond the borders of Ondaatje's novel—hinges precisely on entextualizing strategies as detailed above.

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[53] Ondaatje metaphorically renders the endurance of speech, given its association with water, when speaking of the furniture Hana would use for fires; as he stresses, "[whatever] was wet escaped the burning" (13).

While speech in *The English Patient* assumes textual qualities, the act of reading in turn takes on a performative dimension. Based on a written document, Katherine's recital of passages from *The Histories* on one of her husband's desert expeditions yet displays various emergent elements: elements that arise from situational circumstances as we have encountered them in Hana's vocal and musical performances. Choosing to read aloud the story about a king obsessed with his wife, "a story," as she emphasizes, "that had jarred her in its familiarity of situation" (233), Katherine links her reading to her own strategic agenda. A further signal of her motivation, Katherine's explicit appeal to her husband urging him to listen (232) highlights the collaborative participation of the audience as an integral component of any performance. While the degree of her husband's attention and possible awareness of her true intentions remain unknown,

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[54] Entextualizing strategies include what Carol Fleisher Feldman has called genres: highly patterned and artful oral forms such as poetry, oratory, and myths that assist in fixing a form of expression in memory. Making a text memorable, they facilitate reflection and interpretation, processes often exclusively associated with writing ("Oral Metalanguage." *Literacy and Orality*. David R. Olson, Nancy Torrance. Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991. 47-65).

Katherine’s reading affects another listener among the audience. As we learn, Almásy “fell in love with a voice. Only a voice” (144). Katherine herself seems deeply moved by the words she speaks for “a path suddenly revealed itself in real life . . . She was evolving” (233-234).

Insofar as emergent elements of concrete verbal discourse are intimately tied to human responses, it may come as no surprise that Almásy falls in love twice: once while listening to Katherine’s voice; a second time “while dancing” (242)—dancing, I hasten to add, to the rhythms of jazz music in “The years when it floated out of the Hôtel Claridge on the Champs-Élysées and into the bars of London, southern France, Mo-rocco, and then slid into Egypt, where the rumour of such rhythms was introduced in a hush by an unnamed Cairo dance band” (243)—the music’s connection to the dancing body enhancing its capacity to seduce the audience, then and now. While stimulating the mind and emotions, then, jazz calls forth the human element above all in its sheer physicality encompassing both the musician’s playing of the instrument and the audience’s participation through the moving body.[55]

Writing

By steadily, if unobtrusively, opening up an oral dimension that accentuates the physical, aural, and vocal qualities of language, *The English Patient* infuses the very notion of writing with oral elements. Materiality is not, after all, an exclusive characteristic of orality—the inscription and preservation of writing always necessitating some kind of material support. The text's emphasis on the concrete materiality of the written word imbued, as we shall see, with sensory and perceptual qualities, in fact, reveals the fragility I ascribed to its porous surface as a certain degree of permeability, instead. If we pause here to recall the historical sources that had formed the basis of Almásy's archeological research, we will become aware of their highly heterogeneous nature. While partly consisting of books and, therefore, printed words with clearly distinguishable characters, they also comprised ancient maps and wall engravings: words written on textual surfaces prone to be flawed or damaged. Not always easily decipherable, the textual sources Almásy relied upon often required a close examination of their physical features. As Almásy's portrayal of one of his fellow explorers testifies, this examination would engage an individual's emotional, intuitive, and sensory faculties:

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[55] In *Circular Breathing: The Cultural Politics of Jazz in Britain* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2005), George McKay states that the exotic timbres and dance inspiring rhythms of jazz first caught the ear of the European public as a “corporeal and sonic novelty” (15). While pointing to the music’s participatory elements—ranging from aural innovation over physical movement of audiences to democratic, liberatory inscriptions—McKay engagingly captures the physicality of the music. As he puts it: “Freaky or trick sounds drew attention to technique and self-consciously foregrounded the physicality of playing, from exploring harmonics or circular breathing on reed instruments, to vocalizing or multiphonics through brass, to overblowing on the flute” (16). McKay’s references to Eurocentric claims of ownership and appropriations of jazz further resonate tellingly with the desire to possess and reify the past in *The English Patient.*

> He was a man who wrote, who interpreted the world . . . If he witnessed a new knot among a desert tribe or found a rare palm, it would charm him for weeks. When we came upon messages on our travels—any wording, contemporary or ancient, Arabic on a mud wall, a note in English written in chalk on the fender of a jeep—he would read it and then press his hand upon it as if to touch its possible

> deeper meanings, to become as intimate as he could with the words.[56] (243)

What elicits the explorer's enthusiasm for the written word, whether carved on a mud wall or fashioned from chalk, then, is its tactile, physical appeal. As it lends itself to a gentle merging with materials either partially or wholly organic by nature, writing appears no longer as a solid inscription but emerges, instead, as an ephemeral, forever-evolving phenomenon. Both the gradual fading and the erasability of letters composed of substances prone to disintegrate and perish over time enhance the sense of impermanence, the aforementioned charts painted on skin and rock engravings thus taking on added significance. An emphasis on the different constitutive parts of an inscription, on surface, substance, and tools, finally leaves the reader with an awareness of the very instance of writing which resembles speech in its impermanence.[57]

Nothing captures writing as a momentary occurrence more vividly than the handwritten notes that cover the margins and blank spaces in Almásy's copy of Herodotus's *The Histories*—"the Herodotus journal" (156), as Ondaatje tellingly calls it.[58] More than a reflection of Almásy's idiosyncrasies, they seem to capture his shifting moods, moment to moment, in response to situational circumstances. Almásy's lyrical meditation on African desert winds, for instance, is written in "small gnarled handwriting" (16). If easily overlooked, the term "gnarled" strongly shapes the nature of Almásy's musings. Conjuring up the idea of a hand marked by age and experience, perhaps wisdom, it signals Almásy's far-ranging knowledge after years of traveling and exploring the world. It also points to Almásy's particular emotional and mental state when composing those lines. Note, too, Hana's submersion in Almásy's "crabbed handwriting" (97) as she reads about moments he shared with Katherine and his views on love and betrayal. Again, the words' specific physical form, their crabbed look, reveals added shades of meaning. It betrays a sense of irritation and resentment that Almásy may have felt at the very moment of writing—the indication of emotional agitation reverberating ironically with Ondaatje's earlier, peculiar description of ink as "serene" (36). By contrast, the "Neat handwriting" (154) filling the rectangle of a postcard apparently addressed to Katherine hints at Almásy's desire to make an impression on the woman he loves. Ondaatje explicitly alludes to the intimate connection between momentary circumstances and the shape of words as they appear on the page in his portrayal of Almásy in the act of writing: "His hand flabby over the Herodotus journal, all the tension in the rest of his body, so he writes words down wrong, the pen sprawling as if without spine" (156). Evoking the image of a moving hand and pen, the words highlight the corporeal, (dis)positional dimension of Almásy's writing. They point to the process of writing by hand, one highly sensitive to continually shifting influences and captured beautifully in the following excerpt taken from

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[56] While the idea of a word's "deeper meaning" intimates a transcendental dimension of existence, I read it primarily as an expanded meaning—an expansion that arises from an act of reading that engages multiple human senses simultaneously.

[57] The letters which Hana carries with her evoke the instance of writing in a most literal sense, "[letters] she knows were written on a pink rock on an island in Georgian Bay, written with the wind coming over the water and curling the paper of her notebook . . . each containing a flake of pink rock and that wind" (91-92). The written text thus incorporates elements which shaped the moment of its composition.

[58] A discussion of the politics of print and the emancipating role of words written by hand lies at the center of Alice Brittan's "War and the Book: The Diarist, the Cryptographer, and *The English Patient*." (*PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 121.1 (2006): 200-13). In reference to the work of authors such as Stephen Greenblatt and Mary Louise Pratt, Brittan highlights the portability and spatial flexibility of print, both facilitating the advancement of scientific thought and imperial practices in the past. The mobile nature of writing gains particular significance in light of the complex entanglement of oral and written dimensions in Ondaatje's novel.

Ondaatje's *Handwriting: Poems*: "Handwriting occurred on waves, on leaves, the scripts of smoke, a sign on a bridge along the Mahaweli River. A gradual acceptance of this new language" (6).

What exactly, then, is the relationship between this "new language" marked by movement and change on the one hand, and words engraved on stone or printed in books, on the other? If handwriting is inextricably bound up with a performative act, a concrete gesture of the hand, how and to which extent can we conceive of Ondaatje's printed literary text as taking on performative qualities? Benjamin's reflections on the oral realms of storytelling and theatrical performance, in particular his attention to gestures, help us approach the questions posed. "[In] genuine storytelling," Benjamin argues, "the hand plays a part which supports what is expressed in a hundred ways with its gestures trained by work" ("The Storyteller," 108).[59] Implicit in these words is Benjamin's conception of storytelling as a craftsmanship: a practice that requires not only verbal but also manual skills. The hand here emerges as an essential element in the production of meaning.[60] Benjamin goes so far as to grant autonomous status to what seems at first a mere supplement to the spoken word when describing Franz Kafka's work as "a code of gestures." The latter, as Benjamin emphasizes, "surely had no definite symbolic meaning for the author from the outset; rather, the author tried to derive such a meaning from them in ever-changing contexts and experimental groupings . . . Each gesture is an event—one might even say, a drama—in itself" ("Franz Kafka," 120-121). A gesture, then, entails more than a concrete motion of the body. It constitutes a momentary event whose meaning arises less from an act's intrinsic qualities than the way it situates itself within a larger contextual framework. Putting Benjamin's words in dialogue with our earlier analysis of Almásy's handwritten notes, we will now be able to attribute their performative quality not merely to a concrete act of writing but also, and decisively, to a particular way of presenting or rather, to use the language of theatre, a particular way of staging words or phrases. Ondaatje's text as such hence increasingly reveals a performative dimension that manifests itself in aesthetically or rhetorically staged moments of narration.

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[59] Oral speech as such, one might argue, cannot be reduced to voice alone; gestures, too, tend to form an integral part of a verbal utterance, rendering hearing an experience both aural and visual. The influence between oral and the written spheres seems thus reciprocal.

[60] In fact, the term *craftsmanship* translates into the German *Handwerk*—a term indicative of an emphasis on hands.

Ondaatje's often verbatim repetition of textual units, whether single words and phrases or entire scenes and sequences of events, evokes a staging of the kind detailed above.[61] "A scurry in the ceiling like a mouse" (8): following Hana's memories of her father, this in itself enigmatic phrase appears even more mysterious when repeated pages later, shortly before her old friend Caravaggio joins her and Almásy in the abandoned villa. Precisely the sense of wonder that the phrase incites signals an implicit, albeit significant, shift from language as representation to language as staged performance. Words, here, turn into events, placed and re-placed within forever shifting contextual configurations. As linearity dwindles, meaning increasingly arises from the intersection or dialogue, rather than causal connections, among textual elements. A Bakhtinian emphasis on context rather than text surfaces above all in the novel's complex intertextual pattern. An intricate web of (implicit and explicit) intertextual references, *The English Patient* resounds with echoes and repetitions of themes, characters, and events found in literary and historical works of the past, ranging from Kipling's *Kim* and Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma* to Tacitus's *Annals* and Herodotus's *The Histories* as referenced earlier. While this is not the place to pursue a detailed analysis of the thematic linkages among these texts, I want to emphasize the incoherent, often contradictory way, in which Ondaatje weaves intertextual components into the narrative fabric of his novel. Aside from mingling similarities and dissimilarities between text and intertext, for instance, he continuously shifts interfigural parallels, thereby creating a multilayered pattern of relations.[62] As each new configuration creates a muted echo of earlier ones, the reader becomes inevitably aware of the always contextually embedded nature of language—both spoken and written. Even more, the fluid connections among textual elements evoke the precarious instantaneity and vocalic ephemerality of oral speech. Fully aware of the widespread status of intertextual resonances as a literary, predominantly postmodern, device, I consider the phenomenon, following Ong, to be closely entwined with the influence of orality on contemporary writing. As Ong argues, "Oral habits of thought and expression are essentially interweavings with each other, deeply repetitive . . . responsive to the total context in which they come into being" ("Before Textuality," 265).[63] Ondaatje's intertextual strategies hence arguably reflect methods that are deeply rooted in a primary oral world.

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[61] Ondaatje's narrative technique suggests what Gérard Genette has called *repeating anachronies* or "recalls:" repetitions of phrases and scenes with often only slight variations of wording or narrated elements (*Narrative Discourse*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980. 54). Repetitions of this kind occur, for instance, when Ondaatje replicates, almost literally, the following passage: "[A] young man named Geoffrey Clifton had met a friend at Oxford who [had] mentioned what we were doing. He contacted me, got married the next day, and two weeks later flew with his wife to Cairo" (142; 229). When these lines appear for the first time, they do not seem to carry any deeper meaning; they might be viewed as merely representational. They gain particular significance only when repeated near the end of the novel, marking, as the reader is now aware, the beginning of the tragic circumstances affecting both Katherine and Almásy. A dialogue between the two displays similar dynamics. "From this point on . . . we will either find or lose our souls" (158; 238): Katherine thus addresses Almàsy who will recall her exact words much later in the novel. Again, the repetition generates a new meaning turning an actual scene into a nostalgic memory.

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[62] For instance, Ondaatje refrains from relating Kip to only one intertextual referent in Kipling's novel. While Kip's name sets up an initial link between the two fictional characters Kip and Kim, Ondaatje explicitly identifies Kip with a further character in *Kim* when stressing that "if Kip was anyone, he was the officer Creighton" (111). Similarly, the author identifies Kim with more than one character in his novel. As we learn: "it was Hana in the night who stayed with the old man, who guided him over the mountains to the sacred river . . . it was Hana who was the young boy in the story" (111). Resembling Kim who joins the lama on his quest for the holy river, Hana, too, tends to someone she considers "a saint" (45).

Echoes of the Past

The transmission of the past in Ondaatje's novel follows closely the latter's orally informed narrative pattern. Far from being a stable presence, the past emerges as something perpetually reactivated and unfolding its dialogic force within the novel's constantly shifting cultural, historical, and geographical landscape. That is to say, the author draws on remnants of the past, ranging from ruins and paintings over books to personal memories, and reinscribes these fragmentary pieces in different contexts.[64] Ondaatje's references to architectural remains near the Santa Chiara Hospital in Pisa exemplify this method of inscription:

> [A] white lion . . . stood alone on top of the battlements, linked by colour to the

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[63] As a corrective to Ong's elaboration, J. Peter Denny argues that "cross-cultural differences in thought concern habits of thinking, not capacities for thought" (66-89; 66). Denny's crucial argument should not lessen the value that Ong's insights yield into the link between orality and intertextuality. Richard Bauman's recent study on intertextuality as a communicative practice, *A World of Others' Words: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Intertextuality* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004) embraces similar views. It highlights intertextuality as a defining focus of oral poetics since the late seventeenth century and points to the formative influence of perspectives emerging within the field on textual criticism.

[64] In fact, the author refrains from narrativizing these fragments in any definite way. Caravaggio seems to point exactly to this lack of narrative progression when realizing shortly after his arrival at the villa that, here, "he has no plots to set in motion" (40).

> white marble of the Duomo and the Camposanto, though its roughness and naive form seemed part of another era. Like some gift from the past that had to be accepted . . . Every night it was her sentinel while she moved among patients. Even through the shelling the army had left it there, much more concerned about the rest of the fabulous compound—with its mad logic of a tower leaning like a person in shell shock. (40-41)

Set against the backdrop of a war, historical markers have lost their former meaning: an ancient tower resembling today more "a person in shell shock" than an architectural fragment. Still, a statue of a white lion appears to blend seamlessly into the present environment, "linked by colour to the white marble of the Duomo." If blending with its surroundings in ways that lie beyond apparent logic or comprehension, "any memorial marker in the landscape," in the words of scholar of Jewish studies James E. Young, "is still perceived in the midst of its geography, in some relation to the other landmarks nearby" (7).[65] Differently put, monuments suggest permanence only as inert pieces of stone; their meaning over time, given always evolving contextual circumstances, remains forever subject to change and transformation.

Almásy's memory of a card game he used to play with his aunt shows with remarkable precision how images of the past interweave and connect with those of the present.[66] While among the Bedouins, he matches guns with their corresponding cartridges. His very gestures serve as triggers for his memories to unfold:

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[65] In *The Texture of Memory*, Young points to the perilous tendency of monuments to convert the temporal realm to material form, thus petrifying or reifying the past, and the need, as he puts it, to "vivify memory through the memory-work itself—whereby events, their recollection, and the role monuments play in our lives remain animate, never completed" (15). The continuous reinvention of memorials to the past—ranging from stone statues to oral narrative—lies, I believe, at the very heart of Ondaatje's novel. At times, this reinvention entails an inversion of traditional notions of commemoration. Ondaatje strips monuments of their glorifying function, for instance, when referring to a "headless statue of a count, upon whose stub of neck one of the local cats likes to sit, solemn and drooling when humans appear" (34).

> [On] the grass of her lawn she had scattered a deck of cards face down . . . Each player allowed to turn up two cards and, eventually, through memory pairing them off . . . Now, with his face blindfolded in a mask of grass fibres, he picked up a shell and moved with his carriers, guiding them towards a gun, inserted the bullet, bolted it, and holding it up in the air fired. The noise cracking crazily down the canyon walls. '*For echo is the soul of the voice exciting itself in hollow places*.' A man thought to be sullen and mad had written that sentence down in an English hospital. And he, now in this desert, was sane, with clear thought, picking up the cards, bringing them together with ease, his grin flung out to his aunt, and firing each successful combination into the air.[67] (20-21; original emphasis)

Notwithstanding a mingling of past and present elements, the past no longer emerges as something deplaced from its former context.[68] Superimposed delicately on the present scene, it appears to form part of an atemporal whole, its disparate parts accessible at any given moment. A simultaneity of this very kind accounts for Almásy's impression of "moving in ancient time" (246) while traveling in the desert.[69] And yet, Almásy's act of remembering suggests less a representation of the past than a production of a space or, rather, a (spatial) constellation of textual components in which the past reappears in terms of a similar configuration. An implicit reference to ancient mnemonics which involves both an intense visual memorization and a spatial retranslation of past connections among elements reinforces a reading along those lines. Here, too, the emphasis lies less with elements as such than with their particular configural arrangement. Almásy's hand movements mirroring those of the past, moreover, arguably parallel the orator's walk through an imaginary building aimed to retrace former paths of association. The past, then, becomes visible only as a transitory montage of fragments: a figural configuration whose appearance is inevitably followed by its very dissolution. Ondaatje's poetic evocation of echo—a situationally shaped and fleeting response to something that has always already vanished—is especially suited to capture the act of memory as a sudden and merely temporary connection to the past.[70]

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[66] The game Almásy remembers, Pelmanism, is itself related to the act of remembering: a memory card game, it involves the pairing of matching cards that are laid face down, with two cards flipped face up each turn.

[67] Not coincidentally, the passage includes a reference to the American poet Ezra Pound whose association with the fascist regime during the Second World War led to his incarceration at a U.S. Army prison camp in Pisa and eventual transference to a mental asylum in Washington, D.C. While Pound's poetry marks the Modernist return to more natural speech rhythms, the poet's relevance to Ondaatje's novel lies mainly in his capacity to link the musicality of conversational speech with visual images inspired by the Chinese ideogram; in other words, it lies in his creative combination of oral and written forms of expression.

[68] I am borrowing the term "deplaced" from Paul Ricoeur's reflections on the phenomenon of the trace in his *Time and Narrative* (trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, 3 vols. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984-88). Pointing to the ambiguous character of the trace, being both a present mark and a vestige from the

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past, Ricoeur argues that "The phenomenon of the trace—along with the phenomena of ruins, remains, and documents—thus finds itself deplaced from the historical toward the intratemporal" (122).

[69] Almásy's constant immersion into the past strikingly captures the immediacy of things remembered. Almásy often tends to actually *be* wherever his mind takes him: "still in Africa" (33) or "[lingering] once more with the woman beside him under a fan, her cheek against his stomach" (247). The entanglement of past and present dimensions resurfaces when Almásy mistakes Caravaggio, eagerly listening to Almásy's stories of the past, for an old colleague and friend: "When he opens his eyes again, Madox is there, looking ragged, weary, carrying the morphinic injection, having to use both hands because there are no thumbs" (247).

[70] Ondaatje's emphasis on the aural quality of memory resonates deeply with Benjamin's reflections in "A Berlin Chronicle." In a passage worth quoting at length, Benjamin, too, evokes memory in terms of an echo:

Duplicating the novel's complex narrative pattern, the intertextual resonances in the historical and literary works variously inserted into the pages of *The English Patient* highlight the forever shifting connections between images of the past and those of the present. Inspired by her conversations with Kip, Hana's entry into Kipling's *Kim*, for instance, adds a perspective utterly absent in the author's portrayal of India. It gives voice to the historical experiences of the Sikhs under British colonial rule and hence the silenced and unremembered. The notes, maps, and drawings Almásy glues into his copy of *The Histories* equally add new insights, often confirming or revising parts of the book's content (246).[71] Both *Kim* and *The Histories* thus constitute more than portrayals of the past. They tell the story of their own continuous transformation and point to the endlessly malleable, always provisional nature of historical remembrance. The novel's own assemblage of disconnected textual fragments allows for further transformations to

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> The *déjà vu* effect has often been described. But I wonder whether the term is actually well chosen, and whether the metaphor appropriate to the process would not be far better taken from the realm of acoustics. One ought to speak of events that reach us like an echo awakened by a call, a sound that seems to have been heard somewhere in the darkness of past life. Accordingly, if we are not mistaken, the shock with which moments enter consciousness as if already lived usually strikes us in the form of a sound. It is a word, tapping, or a rustling that is endowed with the magic power to transport us into the cool tomb of long ago, from the vault of which the present seems to return only as an echo. But has the counterpart of this temporal removal ever been investigated, the shock with which we come across a gesture or a word as we suddenly find in our house a forgotten glove or reticule? And just as they cause us to surmise a stranger who has been there, there are words or gestures from which we infer that invisible stranger, the future, who left them in our keeping. (59)

[71] For instance, when Almásy discovered

> the truth to what had seemed a lie, he brought out his glue pot and pasted in a map or news clipping or used a blank space in the book to sketch men in skirts with faded unknown animals alongside them. The early oasis dwellers had not usually depicted cattle, though Herodotus claimed they had. They worshipped a pregnant goddess and their rock portraits were mostly of pregnant women. (246)

The passage highlights the dialectic interplay between the past and the present, one that casts new light on former events and circumstances.

occur: it integrates the past while yet preserving its openness to forever new readings.[72] By bringing a largely silenced, unknown past into a new and unfamiliar constellation with the present, Ondaatje's narrative strategy ultimately recalls Benjamin's practice of literary montage, a practice that spurs an apprehension of memory as a crucial if precariously momentary medium for revealing the always heterogeneous, deeply unreconciled, and essentially incomplete nature of the past.[73] The moment of apprehension remains indeed critical for, as Benjamin stresses, "every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably" ("Theses on the Philosophy of History," 255). Benjamin's emphatic, rather ominous assertion calls for an attention to the most subtle nuances of human life and experience, a skill largely depending on and heightened by the kind of aural sensitivity that Ondaatje's text incites in his readers.

Silence

Ondaatje's emphasis on the sonic dimension of experience subtly encourages the reader to listen carefully for what is silent or unspeakable. From the desert's silence over the unnerving silence of an abandoned city to the silence invading the realm of sound: *The English Patient* abounds in evocations of silence. While these silences often defy rational comprehension, their haunting, deeply compelling resonance remains. Often, they tend to signal less the absence of sound than the absence of discernible sound. The silence pervading the desert, for instance, suggests a history, as Amy Novak stresses, that has been "[banished] . . . to an unknowable space beyond the limits of (Western) understanding" (219). Novak's words hint at the totalizing historical gesture that tends to erase aspects of the past incongruent or presumably irrelevant to dominant discourses. Yet if Novak reads the silence of the desert's indigenous population as a sign of passive exclusion, I conceive of it as a resisting force: a palpable if invisible presence that provides a space for racial, ethnic, and cultural otherness. The "desert could not," after all, "be claimed or owned . . . Its caravans, those strange rambling feasts and cultures, left nothing behind, not an ember" (138)—both the desert and its inhabitants escaping and resisting the mapmakers' grasp. What might appear as an imposed silence on one level in fact emerges as a reluctance to share knowledge and experience, on another. "The Senussi creed," as Almásy is well aware, is "not to reveal the secrets of the desert to strangers" (140).

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[72] *The English Patient* thus steps outside the realm of fiction to embrace the reader as the very agent of change.

[73] My reading of *The English Patient* is largely informed by Benjamin's practice of textual montage, a practice that allows for the past to emerge in new, surprising, and even shocking ways. As Benjamin states in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History:"

> Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this at his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. (263)

Thus, Benjamin further argues that "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger . . . The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it" (255). Memory in Ondaatje's novel suggests precisely a historical understanding of this kind, one revealing the heterogeneous and forever incomplete nature of the past.

Kip, to some extent, shares and displays the fate of the "Other." The silence that tends to engulf him leads Hana to "[imagine] all of Asia through the gestures of this one man" (217), her observing eye evoking the empirical Western gaze as she minutely watches his every move from a distance. Accustomed to being "the anonymous member of another race, a part of the invisible world" (196), Kip himself speaks of his life as "silent" (200). Yet again, rather than judge him as being, in Novak's words, "denied status as a knowing, speaking subject" (220), I want to focus attention on those facets of Kip's personality that complicate the notion of a seemingly forced silence. If Kip tends to be shy, reserved, and taciturn in his manner, he still emerges as someone whose (audible) gestures speak louder than words. From the silence harboring the secret knowledge of a mine explosion and intended to spare Hana and Caravaggio the distress over someone's possible death (112; 114) to the one that follows the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Kip's silences present themselves, after all, as powerful statements. As an aural phenomenon, the silence he displays in response to the bombings in fact withstands and preserves a historical rupture that vision proved incapable of safely holding in place; as we learn, "his geography exploded" (41). It is therefore highly significant that Kip learns about the devastating news through the radio. Enraged, he thus addresses Almásy: "I'll leave you the radio to swallow your history lesson" (285). While alluding to the materiality and bodily absorption of oral speech mentioned above, Kip's words furthermore accentuate the importance of hearing and listening. Thus, it is perhaps not coincidental that Almásy changes from someone incessantly talking to one who listens in the course of the novel, his initial soliloquy gradually transforming into conversational speech and dialogue. Just like Almásy's verbal restraint achieves particular resonance in light of his former loquacity, Kip's silences render the moments in which he voices his views and opinions all the more meaningful. His scream after hearing the news about the bombings appears particularly harsh precisely because it emerges from someone whose body "had never raised its voice among them" (282).

Kip's conversations with Almásy, too, reflect a rebellious, far from diffident, nature and reveal his silence to be consciously chosen. As the author emphasizes, "the young soldier was not used to remaining still and silent. He would get restless and kept interrupting the pauses and silences the Englishman always allowed himself, trying to energize the train of thought" (89). Kip proves most lively and talkative during the "verbal nights" (270) he spends with Hana when otherwise quiet surroundings turn into a sonorous space of intimate utterances: "In the tent there have been nights of no talk and nights full of talk. They are never sure what will occur, whose fraction of past will emerge, or whether touch will be anonymous and silent in their darkness. The intimacy of her body or the body of her language in his ear" (270). Far from silent, their verbal exchange equals a living embodied sonic performance. Shaped by both unexpected turns and mutual awareness, it recalls the rambling spontaneity and bold physicality of jazz. More than that, pauses, silences, and fragmentary details that tend to defy being narrativized point to aspects not yet revealed or articulated, at times, perhaps, impossible to be put into words but still not missing or mute.

Eliciting awareness of that which appears to be missing or incongruent, subtle sonic nuances compel the mind to search for meaning despite ubiquitous uncertainty. Caravaggio unmasks Hana's and his own fascination with Almásy's gossipy anecdotes precisely as the human desire to make sense of the world: "You see, I think it is easier to fall in love with *him* than with *you*. Why is that? Because we want to *know* things, how the pieces fit. Talkers seduce, words direct us into corners. We want more than anything to grow and change" (121; original emphasis). Yet notwithstanding a presumably innate human wish to know, Ondaatje favors a more humble approach to life, one that receives, as the author puts it, "all aspects of the world without judgement" (49), one that involves "Tenderness towards the unknown and anonymous, which was a tenderness to the self" (49). Ondaatje's confession of not knowing Hana "well enough to hold in my wing" (301) accentuates this reluctance to claim full grasp of life's experiences.

Almásy's and Hana's attitudes towards the past reflect the very "tenderness towards the unknown and anonymous" Ondaatje implicitly calls for. If driven by the desire to map an unknown territory, Almásy still proves highly sensitive to the nourishing influence of that which cannot be cognitively laid hold of or contained in his grasp. As he muses during one of his archeological expeditions: "A man in the desert can hold absence in his cupped hands knowing it is something that feeds him more than water" (155). The connection made between a gesture of receiving and nourishment beyond water recalls Almásy's experiences of both listening to Hana's voice—"swallowing her words like water"—and receiving food from the hands, even mouths, of the Bedouins. As a vessel formed by the union of one's hands, the cupped hands here, however, suggest more than a gesture of reception. Whatever one places within, after all, will be displayed as an offering and always holds the potential of being carried over from one (body) to another. Hana, similarly, forgoes any attempt to contain or master the past in favor of an open-minded, non-possessive reception of historical images. As we learn,

> Moments before sleep are when she feels most alive, leaping across fragments of the day, bringing each moment into the bed with her like a child with schoolbooks

> and pencils. The day seems to have no order until these times, which are like a ledger for her, her body full of stories and situations. Caravaggio has for instance given her something. His motive, a drama, and a stolen image. (35-36)

Thus, it has become a comforting ritual for Hana to let images of the past randomly flit through her mind in the evenings. By choosing a specific time rather than notebook to record her daily impressions, she abstains from fixing the past permanently and, instead, allows it to evolve and transform from day to day. Just as importantly, Hana's remembrance entails a temporary possession or, rather, a temporary theft of stories and images that pertain less to her own than to another's past experiences. Recalling our discussion of the very nature of sonic perception, we will register Hana's act as a literal incorporation of Caravaggio's oral speech which resonates within both her own and her friend's concrete, speaking body; after all, Hana would listen to Caravaggio's stories since she was a child (208).

While Hana's nightly imaginings suggest an immersion into another's past the way Almásy had idealistically envisioned it, her singing of the French national anthem approximates an act of commemorating a larger, collective past. As Caravaggio recalls the moment of witnessing Hana singing the song for the first time,

> Everyone had to stand and sing a song . . . You were still at school then, and you had learned the song in a French class . . . maybe you didn't know what the exact words meant, but you knew what the song was about . . . Your father's eyes looking up at you, miraculous with this new language, the cause pouring out so

> distinct, flawless, no hesitations. (53)

What Hana passes on through her singing is less the song's precise subject matter—including a call upon French citizens to rid the nation of "impure blood"—than a vague sense of triumph which she seems to detect aurally in a song filled with flaming patriotism. In the aforementioned more pensive version of the song which she delivers at the villa years later, her proud display of musical talent morphs into a lesson aimed at teaching Kip—who "had heard the song sung in the camps" (269)—how to properly sing the song: "you have to sing it *out*," said Hana, "you have to sing it standing up!" (269; original emphasis). Volume, vocal nuance, and posture here arrive at more than symbolically infusing a nation's historical document with new meaning. As Hana breathes *out* the words which she once absorbed aurally—"singing with and echoing the heart of the sapper" (269)—her resonating body literally transforms a call to xenophobic violence into a message of ironic rebellion; the young Indian sapper being precisely among those deemed "other."

A similar literal refashioning of a larger, even transcultural, past manifests itself in Kip's expression of solidarity between South Asia and Japan after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Here, like in Hana's performance of the "Marseillaise," the human body functions as a vessel for an oral transmission; Kip, after all, registers the official announcement of the bombings aurally, while his ensuing anguish finds vocal expression in his scream. Moreover, when Kip verbalizes his frustration and rage against the ones who began "bombing the brown races of the world" (286), explicit allusions to breath and voice frame the sapper's speech: right beforehand, "Caravaggio can hear air being breathed in and out of his nostrils, fast and hard, a piston;" right afterwards, "there is the thin squawking from the crystal set, the radio still speaking in its underwater voice" (286)—the echo of Kip's vocal protest arguably drowning out the voice of reason. Representations of the past in Ondaatje's novel thus crystallize in a truly nomadic form of remembrance: here, echoes (rather than images) move smoothly, if only fleetingly, across personal, situational, and territorial boundaries.

Seeds of Memory

Like the desert where, as Almásy claims, "to repeat something would be to fling more water into the earth," *The English Patient*, too, given a continuum of oral and textual performance, evokes a space where "nuance took you a hundred miles" (231). In its refusal to offer a coherent, unified picture of the past, the novel silently remembers the past's various possible versions by inscribing them structurally into its intricate narrative fabric. Precisely the undecidability of meaning the novel thus yields guarantees the remembrance of the past in all its unique, often contradictory, facets and complexity. An undecidability of this kind in fact distinguishes the text's oral qualities from the fragmentation and indeterminacy largely characterizing so-called postmodern writing; far from calling meaning as such into question, it invites a creative, at times sensual, engagement with past events and circumstances. True, memory in *The English Patient* constitutes a figural constellation based on mere textual rather than referential connections among elements.[74] The novel yet succeeds in capturing and stabilizing the fleeting impressions of the past in an image, that is, a material gesture—both phonetically/graphically and in reference to a concrete act of writing. As a gesture that integrates the momentary, transitory nature of memory, *The English Patient* extends beyond a static inscription prone to ossify contingent particularities into essentialist and exclusionary figurations to embrace a perpetually evolving remembrance—never limited, never complete. The novel's deep concern with historical revision finally betrays an unmistakably postcolonial sensibility that closely attends to voices silenced and unheard—voices to be explored in the following chapter. The central role the author accords to Herodotus's work is indicative of this particular approach to the past. Described by Almásy as someone "[travelling] from oasis to oasis, trading legends as if it is the exchange of seeds, consuming everything without suspicion" (118-119), Herodotus, too, strove to reveal a multifaceted, heterogeneous reality that lurked just beneath the smooth and orderly surface of conventional historiographies.[75] The idea of "trading legends as if it is the exchange of seeds" acutely captures the materiality of spoken words as well as their continuous growth and transformation. Yet most significantly, the parallel thus drawn between seeds and stories points to the mere

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[74] When Benjamin refers to Proust as someone who "consecrates the countless pages which he covered with

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his handwriting . . . to the creation of his microcosm" ("The Image of Proust," 215), he evokes precisely this noncoincidence between past and present dimensions.

[75] As Almásy's portrayal of Herodotus shows, *The Histories* include aspects not usually found in conventional historiography:

> I have seen editions of *The Histories* with a sculpted portrait on the cover. Some statue found in a French museum. But I never imagine Herodotus this way. I see him more as one of those spare men of the desert who travel from oasis to oasis, trading legends as if it is the exchange of seeds, consuming everything without suspicion, piecing together a mirage. 'This history of mine,' Herodotus says, 'has from the beginning sought out the supplementary to the main argument.' What you find in him are cul-de-sacs within the sweep of history—how people betray each other for the sake of nations, how people fall in love. (118-119)

potential or promise that stories hold. Their vigor and endurance always depends on nourishing and nurturing influences. Only those falling on fertile, receptive ground, will ultimately sprout and flourish.

Chapter Two

The Sensuous and the Silent in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

> A sigh isn't just a sigh. We inhale the world and breathe out meaning. While we can. While we can.
>
> —Salman Rushdie
>
> *The Moor's Last Sigh*

"May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst" (3).[76] Roy's *The God of Small Things* opens on a note of teeming abundance; the author's portrayal of India's lush tropical scenery cannot fail to sensuously engage her readers, to make them feel the heat and humidity in the air and absorb the vibrant colors and lively sounds of nature. Yet surprisingly, the initial crescendo of gushing sensuality ends in a deadening rather than enlivening of the senses: "Dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air. Then they stun themselves against clear windowpanes and die, fatly baffled in the sun" (3). The bluebottles' vacuous hum and painful, indeed fatal, bafflement achieve particular resonance in light of the preceding, to some degree unforeseeable bursting of jackfruits—the insects' stunned confusion and surprise seemingly arising from the apparent suddenness of the event.

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[76] All further references to *The God of Small Things* that occur in the text proper are taken from Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, New York: Random, 1997.

Like a seed, the novel's opening scene encapsulates the unfolding story of a young woman's mysteriously inaccessible past linked closely to the larger, communal history of her home country: India. It hints at memories that hover on the verge of revelation throughout *The God of Small Things* yet fail to flourish due to the experience of a rupture; to invoke Herodotus's likening of the trading of stories to the trading of seeds in ancient times, they stop short from falling on fertile, receptive ground. To be sure, Rahel Kochamma's return to her former home in Kerala twenty-three years after her departure promises to unveil the mysteries and secrets of her childhood. This promise of revelation is yet wedded to a troubling air of inaccessibility; the novel, after all, provides only fragmentary, often dazzlingly enigmatic glimpses of that which lies hidden. While bearing the imprint of the disruptive experiences that shattered the fullness and alleged coherence of Rahel's life, the past still lingers—passing from an irretrievable absence to an aurally palpable, often silent, presence in the course of the novel. The reading offered here carefully engages, therefore, with the text's evocation of a lush, richly layered sonic landscape. More specifically, it traces the emergence of an intricate acoustic tapestry which, given the absence of coherent, unambiguous semantic content, prompts the reader to read the narrative sonically and strive to register each breath, whisper, or silence. Thus given prominence in the reader's search for meaning, sounds habitually taken for granted or ignored complicate and reinforce the polytextural nature of remembrance by helping reveal voices historically marginalized in India's social, cultural, and political landscape.

Roy's portrayal of the past in a state of perpetual disintegration calls to mind the apparent fragmentation of experience in modern times and, by extension, the erosion of the human capacity to exchange experiences, as famously registered, decades earlier, by Benjamin. An inalienable feature of modern urban life, aversive stimuli or shocks fundamentally altered, following Benjamin, the very structure of experience; they caused consciousness to ward off the perception of those experiential elements incongruent with familiar patterns of meaning. While sharing a concern with ruptures and discontinuities, Roy and Benjamin both, too, gesture toward the lingering possibility of a historical transmission within the frame of a larger, collective memory. If mainly focalized through Rahel, *The God of Small Things* depicts events, after all, that lie beyond an individual's personal experience—Rahel being in possession of memories, as Roy suggestively emphasizes, "that she has no right to have" (5). Similarly, Benjamin develops a concept of memory that goes beyond subjective remembrance; dissociated from a remembering subject, memory here evokes a particular, socially embedded communicative framework that provides the very condition for the transmission of what he refers to as *Erfahrung*: the kind of experience that crystallizes into a collective and communicable body of knowledge. Benjamin's reflections on modern memory therefore provide a particularly fruitful ground for an exploration of Roy's approach to the past in *The God of Small Things*. And yet, while both authors grapple with crises provoked by modernity, more precisely, by the disintegrative forces unleashed by global capitalism and the ideological means to counter them, Roy's novel crucially expands the notion of modernity: not only does its postcolonial perspective allow the author to articulate the irrevocable rupture with India's pre-colonial past and the ensuing ambiguity and confusion regarding a shared historical consciousness, but its aural/oral components succeed in transforming novelistic space into a textual repository of collective knowledge and experience.

Large retrospective sections gradually shed light on the novel's main events and circumstances, introducing Rahel, her twin brother, Estha, her mother, Ammu, her grandparents, Mammachi and Pappachi, and her grandaunt, Baby Kochamma. Moments of the past thus revealed appear to revolve around a single event—vague in its specific contours yet overbearingly powerful in its presence; the scattered narrative fragments indeed cohere only in light of this particular past occurrence. Roy's narrative, moreover, traces the movement from a time when "life was full of Beginnings and no Ends" (4) to one painfully marked by the appearance of "Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks, and Limits" (5)—life having been ruptured and suggesting no longer a unified realm of limitless possibilities. To be sure, *The God of Small Things* initially captures the reader's attention by means of images that engage several senses simultaneously. What ultimately allows for an access to the past, however, is first and foremost an oral/aural awareness and sensitivity—the layering of memory and sound here calling forth postcolonial debates on the silencing of voices. As I shall show shortly, the air as such, by virtue of the sounds it carries, is saturated with memories of the past.

Allusions to sight—or, rather, the lack of it—dominate throughout the novel's opening pages. One of our first impressions of Estha, "barely awake, his aching eyes glittering like glass" (7), highlights his hazy, indistinct vision—his sight blurred by sleepiness and pain. Mammachi, similarly, if more permanently, proves to be "almost blind" (7). Denied visual access to the world around her, she, in turn, prevents others from catching even a glimpse of her eyes by "[wearing] dark glasses" (7). Mammachi's moods and emotions are not always hidden or unknown, however. When attending her granddaughter's funeral, the tears that "trickled down from behind [her glasses] and trembled along her jaw like raindrops on the edge of a roof" (7), as Roy imaginatively puts it, betray the depth of her sadness and grief over the loss of her grandchild, Sophie Mol. What is more, less rolling than "trembling" down Mammachi's cheeks, they compel a shift from mere visual contemplation (tears, indeed, are not always visible) to tactile and, by association, even aural sensation and perception. If only figuratively, the trembling tears indeed impart their vibratory motion to the air particles around them and vibration leads to sound. Roy's metaphoric equation of Mammachi's tears with raindrops supports a reading along those lines, the image of raindrops resonating with earlier allusions to the sound of rain.

By exposing the limits of sight, its limitation imposed by a particular physical or mental condition, the novel's opening pages mark a consciousness that escapes the inevitability of an imperial vision. Postcolonial theorist Bill Ashcroft addresses the entrapment within an ocularcentric paradigm, dominant in Western culture since the ancient Greeks, when he states that

> the prominence of the visual, and the equation of knowledge and sight, have had a profound impact on the conception, representation, and experiencing of place in the colonized world. Other ways of knowing, whether through other sense or other intuitive or imaginary forms of cognition, have been suppressed beneath

> the passion of the ocular. (127)

By sparking a more finely attuned auditory awareness, then, Roy's text not only prepares the reader for a primarily aural revelation of the past but it also runs counter to imperial practices and ideologies.

Roy's initially implicit attention to sound crystallizes in rich sonic textures that form a pervasive if subtle backdrop to many scenes and events in her novel. The rustle of small, moving animals, for instance, creates the multihued sonic canvas for another of the author's numerous portrayals of nature:

> It was raining when Rahel came back to Ayemenem. Slanting silver ropes slammed into loose earth, plowing it up like gunfire. The old house on the hill wore its steep, gabled roof pulled over its ears like a low hat. The walls, streaked with moss, had grown soft, and bulged a little, with dampness that seeped up from the ground. The wild, overgrown garden was full of the whisper and scurry of small lives. In the undergrowth a rat snake rubbed itself against a glistening stone. Hopeful yellow bullfrogs cruised the scummy pond for mates. A drenched mongoose flashed across the leaf-strewn driveway. (4)

Somewhat analogous to a close-range acoustic recording, the passage dissects and delineates the sounds of hidden, hardly visible animals—their whispers curiously connecting with their restless, agitated movement. And indeed, as philosopher Don Idhe has emphasized in his reflections on auditory perception, "motion and sound, when paired, belong together. 'Visualistically' sound 'overlaps' with moving beings" (50). If at first glance merely an image, then, the snake's act of rubbing itself against a stone perceivably takes on aural qualities, producing in the mind's ear a fretting, chafing sound. While forming part of Roy's effort to increasingly sensitize her readers to memories aurally perceived, the renewed focus on natural sounds also encourages them to "listen" closely to what nature might have to "tell" us about the past—the geological transformation of stones, for instance, bearing witness to their erosion and sedimentation over millennia, as Benjamin has taught us ("The Storyteller," 96). Subtly called upon to aurally absorb the varied sounds that emanate from Roy's text, then, the reader catches a vague (aural) glimpse of a history or, rather, a "memory" that appears to pervade the natural landscape as such.

The aural power of Roy's imagery in the scene rendered above centers above all on the sound of rain as it forcefully slaps the ground, its "slanting silver ropes [slamming] into loose earth, plowing it up like gunfire." The heavy, indeed violent, rainfall strikingly recalls the bursting of jackfruits in the text's opening lines. And yet, in contrast to the emptiness and silence that ensues in the earlier scene, what follows here is the aimless confusion among "small lives," a confusion foreshadowing the one which "lay in a deeper, more secret place" (4). If limited aural perception figures in both scenarios, it here, too, stems less from a numbing or deadening of the senses than a deliberate unwillingness to listen; as we have seen, exposed to the violent sound of the rain, the "old house on the hill wore its steep, gabled roof pulled over its ears like a low hat." As if aimed to counterbalance a demonstrative unwillingness to listen, sound thus emerges as an assault on the delicate membranes of the ear: a disruptive force whose impact proves to be both unpredictable and potentially hurtful.

Muffled Voices

Notwithstanding Roy's graphic allusions to the invasiveness of sound and the peculiar vulnerability of the ear, *The God of Small Things* raises awareness of voices in search for a receptive signal, including, for instance, the voice of Rahel's cousin, Sophie Mol. Before learning about the precise circumstances of the girl's death, the reader catches mere glimpses of their nature: as she lay in her coffin during the funeral service, her "face was pale and as wrinkled as a dhobi's thumb from being in water for too long" (6); a few pages later the reader learns that she "died because she couldn't breathe" (9). Yet if, as the unfolding narrative retrospectively reveals, Sophie Mol suffocated by drowning, Rahel's fanciful ruminations during her exposure to her cousin's dead body lend her death additional layers of meaning:

> When they lowered Sophie Mol's coffin into the ground . . . Rahel knew that she still wasn't dead. She heard (on Sophie Mol's behalf) the softsounds of the red mud and the hardsounds of the orange laterite that spoiled the shining coffin polish. She heard the dullthudding through the polished coffin wood, through the satin coffin lining. The sad priests' voices muffled by mud and wood . . . Inside the earth Sophie Mol screamed, and shredded satin with her teeth. But you can't hear screams through earth and stone. (8-9)

In Rahel's imagination, then, Sophie Mol's inability to breathe coincides with an inability to speak up. If her cousin's vigorous effort to increase the volume of her voice in order to be heard recalls the aural violence of falling rain, her violent gesture of "shredding satin with her teeth" accentuates the utter despair of someone who longs to speak and be heard yet lacks in both voice and response—her speech, after all, remaining muted by mud and stone.

At its most literal level, then, the dramatic scenario that Rahel imagines renders her cousin voiceless, while endowing the earth with expressive power; the very materials that block her speech emerge as active, sonorous substances whose sounds succeed in "spoiling the shining coffin polish" and muffling the "sad priests' voices." However, by extending the notion of nature beyond the sounds of mud and laterite to the (audible) memories associated with it, one may read the natural environment as both the receptacle and the bearer of silenced indigenous voices. The local dialect of Malayalam, for instance, is relegated to an inferior position in Roy's novel—Rahel and Estha being strictly forbidden to speak "the coarse Kottayam dialect of Malayalam" (9) and taught to favor English as their primary means of communication. When Rahel, therefore, imagines her cousin "shredding satin with her teeth," we cannot fail to notice the word's implications beyond the coming apart of the coffin's satin lining. What Sophie Mol, in Rahel's imagination, arguably tears into pieces is not so much the actual fabric enveloping her body than the words she attempts to utter. The narrator's continued emphasis on the polished luster of the satin coffin lining underscores a reading along those lines. Contrasting sharply with the supposedly rough, less refined, texture of the local dialect, it hints at the, if only perceived, desirable qualities of the English language: polished and melodious like the glistening, flowing folds of satin. If Rahel's capacity and willingness to project herself into Sophie Mol's position hence bespeak a sense of empathy—she, after all, hears the sounds emanating from the earth "on her behalf"—the image of shredded satin she conjures in her mind betrays a condescending, even hateful attitude towards her cousin's native language. Neither deafness nor the accidental blockage of sound, then, lies at the source of the congregation's limited aural perception. Going beyond a deliberate, conscious refusal to hear or listen, the limitation, instead, stems from the attempt to drown the very sounds of English.

Sophie Mol's limited appeals to her audience—transmitted solely via Rahel's unspoken thoughts—reflect the alienation between speakers and listeners throughout *The God of Small Things.* Only at first glance, for instance, does the verbal exchange between the twins and their uncle, Chacko, resemble true communication. To be sure, Chacko strives to educate them, to provide them, as he proudly puts it, with "a sense of historical Perspective" (52). Inspired by his readings of ancient myths, he tells them about Earth Woman and the creation of the world—his tale of parting oceans and rising mountains no doubt stirring the children's imagination. Were he attentive and responsive to his listeners whenever sharing these stories with them, we would indeed be justified in regarding him as someone eager to impart knowledge to future generations, in some sense, perhaps, as a genuine storyteller. His self-proclaimed role as the one lighting the path for his young niece and nephew, however, proves to be highly deceptive. As we learn, "He didn't care whether anyone was listening to him or not. And if they were, he didn't care whether or not they had understood what he was saying" (53). His "Reading Aloud voice" (52)—a disembodied voice imperviously reciting rather than telling stories of the past—casually unmasks his supposed storytelling as a solitary activity. Thus, while in the midst of philosophizing on human nature, he might suddenly talk to the darkness, utterly insensitive to whoever happened to be listening (112).

Ironically enough, Chacko himself turns into a seemingly invisible addressee during a visit to the home of Comrade Pillai, a member of the Communist Party and involved in various business relations with Rahel's family, where he listens to his colleague's niece, Latha, theatrically reciting English poetry. Notwithstanding Chacko's actual presence, Latha pretends to face an imaginary audience (257), "Her gaze . . . fixed unseeingly just above Chacko's head" (257). After she finishes her recital, she, furthermore, refrains from"[acknowledging] his applause with even a flicker of a smile" (258). Latha's recital equals a mere rehearsal, when it could have been a real performance; Chacko, after all, is attentively listening to her words even if initially mistaking her English for the local language, Malayalam. Only sadly amusing, Chacko's inability to recognize his mother tongue accentuates the aforementioned forced alienation of a formerly colonized nation from its own cultural heritage. At the same time, the linguistic confusion attests to the power of the local language to melodically infuse Latha's spoken English: "The words ran into each other. Like in Malayalam, the last syllable of one word attached itself to the first syllable of the next" (257). In rendering the rhythm and melody of the local dialect powerful enough to infiltrate and impose themselves on the English language, the lines arguably disclose an attempt to reclaim the former position of Malayalam as a site of cultural production. The attempt to rethink the role of Malayalam is crucial, given a perception of the English language as an expression of cultural and artistic refinement and as being, therefore, better suited for poetry recitals than the presumably less delicate Indian dialect—a view still pervasive in contemporary India.

The speech subsequently given by Comrade's Pillai's son, Lenin, reveals itself, similarly, as farce. Not merely indifferent to his audience, Lenin proves alienated from his own vocal utterances; if he shouted his lines "fluently," he "didn't understand a word of what he was saying" (260). The spoken word here loses, as Bakhtin would argue, its living power to mean (352). Conceived purely as an object, it suggests, instead, a passive receptive understanding of its meaning, an understanding that merely mirrors or reproduces that which is already given (281). Pre-determined and closed off from present, actual circumstances, both Latha's and Lenin's "recitals by heart" thus amount to what Bakhtin refers to as "authoritative discourse" whose "semantic structure is static and dead" and which "permits no play with the context framing it" (343). Differently put, they mirror a discourse in which verbal experience lies outside a living social dialogue oriented toward a listener's particular point of view, value judgments, and conceptual horizon. Crucially, this detachment of discourse from reality, as Bakhtin reminds us, "is fatal for the word itself as well: words grow sickly, lose semantic depth and flexibility, the capacity to expand and renew their meanings in new living contexts" (353-354). With their words' semantic and expressive nuances therefore failing to "sound," the children's recitals lack resonance both within and beyond their individual consciousnesses.

From a postcolonial angle, the lack of resonance of two young Indian voices raises the question of their very authority, even capacity, to speak. In a manner congruent with

Bakhtin's notion of a discourse that demands to be assimilated, Spivak, after all, reveals the voice of the colonized subject as always filtered through a hegemonic colonial discourse; as she herself answers her famous question "can the subaltern speak?," disempowered groups cannot speak for nor represent themselves but can only be spoken for on their behalf. Spivak's theoretical approach severely limits the possibilities of subaltern representation. Bakhtin's trust in the possibility of dialogue, by contrast, opens up a potential space of contact or conversation between colonizers and colonized; to invoke his precise words, "the signifying word lives beyond itself, that is, it lives by means of directing its purposiveness outward" (353-354).[77]

Sophie Mol's fate of being buried alive powerfully evokes the word's inevitable doom if separated from a resonant social background as mentioned above. Daughter of Rahel's uncle, Chacko, and his British ex-wife, Margaret, she arguably embodies the struggle between oral and written traditions, a struggle that involves above all the colonial suppression of India's oral languages; Rahel and Estha, as we will recall, are strictly forbidden to speak the local dialect, Malayalam. The oddly faint and wispy voices that emanate from the floors, ceilings, and walls of an eerie, old mansion, troped as the "History House" throughout *The God of Small Things*, equally point to the sickly condition and gradual deterioration of words no longer part of a living dialogic exchange; here, as Roy puts it, "waxy, crumbling ancestors with tough toe-nails and breath that smelled of yellow maps gossiped in sibilant, papery whispers" (52).[78] Whoever ventured into this haunted space would hence find himself/herself immersed in the gossipy, curiously scented sounds of a distant past. Barely audible whispers rather than clear voices, the ancestral, ghostly sounds lack resonance, their very source prone to collapse or disintegrate. As Roy's words further suggest, the whispers' fragile state is intimately tied to a hardening: a transition from a waxy, pliable fluidity to both the sibilant solidity of unvoiced fricatives and the firm, if temporary, stability of paper. At first glance only does Roy's implicit allusion to the evanescence of the printed or written word seem paradoxical; notwithstanding the word's literal inscription, its colors and contours, after all, fade and dissolve over time.

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[77] While Paul de Man unmasks Bakhtin's presumed dialogism as "a gesture of dialectical imperialism that is an inevitable part of any hermeneutic system of question and answer" (112) in his *The Resistance to Theory*, I highlight Bakhtin's notion of dialogue precisely as a potentially subversive negotiation rather than mere articulation of meaning in one of my later chapters.

Like the yellowing of old, unpreserved maps, the gradual withering of the words whispered in the History House seem to, similarly, result from years of neglect and inattention. No longer decipherable, the whispered sounds have indeed turned into an obscure if tangible presence that fails to incite a response on the part of those listening. As Chacko informs Rahel and Estha, "when we try and listen, all we hear is a whispering. And we cannot understand the whispering, because our minds have been invaded by a war . . . A war that has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves" (52). Chacko's speech dramatizes the conflict between the continuing presence of an imperial imaginary on the one hand, and an indigenous perspective on India's past, on the other. It unveils the West as a foreign, oppressive power that invaded the Indian mind and insidiously altered Indians' views and conceptions, leaving them, as he dramatically emphasizes, "unanchored on troubled seas" (52). The whispered words' unintelligibility hence seems to originate as much from the ancestors' apparent unwillingness or, perhaps, inability to loudly and unambiguously reveal the past as from Chacko's and his nieces' alienation from their historical heritage. Neither circumstance may come as a surprise given the challenges of developing a national identity in the aftermath of colonialism. A clash of different cultures, India's colonial experience, after all, defies the restoration of a historically continuous and allegedly "pure" pre-colonial heritage; and this notwithstanding, as Bhabha has emphasized, "the attempt by nationalist discourses persistently to produce the idea of the nation as a continuous narrative of national progress" (*Nation and Narration*, 1). What appears to be missing, then, is the sense of a larger, collective memory, one that resists the "Utopianism of a mythic memory of a unique collective identity" (*The Location of Culture*, 50) in favor of a reconfiguration of intercultural relations that acknowledges the fluid specificities of cultures and the variable complexity that governs their contact.

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[78] Originally belonging to Kari Saipu, an Englishman "who had 'gone native.' Who spoke Malayalam and wore mundus" (51), the History House eventually morphs into the Heritage Hotel, a space offering less a glimpse into local culture than "Toy Histories for rich tourists to play in" (120).

The absence of a genuine exchange of ideas in Roy's novel yet substantially impedes the passing on of the various, often divergent, facets of Indian life and experience from one generation to another. Voices of the past, after all, fail to "sound" in the present social and cultural landscape—their lack of resonance being due to a hardening as suggested above. Still, a closer look reveals their change in appearance not so much as a stiffening than as an inuring: a gradual accommodation to unfavorable circumstances including the deterioration and dulling of human sensory awareness. My earlier claims about the voices' lack of resonance, moreover, all proceeded out of an assumption that their hardening followed from their increasing resemblance to words written or imprinted on a hard, inflexible surface. However, insofar as writing in *The God of Small Things* increasingly displays multi-sensory qualities—we will recall the ancestors' breath exuding the smell of yellow maps—it does not even lend itself to a representation of fixity or lack of change. It is, therefore, nothing less than the resignation of those who speak and the inattention of those called upon to listen, rather than the words' concrete form, that finally account for a past simultaneously silent and silenced.

The silencing of voices and its larger social and cultural implications surface in Mammachi's forced withdrawal from violin lessons in spite of her undeniable passion and acknowledged musical talent. The opportunity to take lessons on the violin had initially arisen when she joined her husband during a six-months educational stay in Vienna many years earlier. Yet, as we learn, "The lessons were abruptly discontinued when Mammachi's teacher . . . made the mistake of telling Pappachi that his wife was exceptionally talented and in his opinion, potentially concert class" (49). Her husband's oppression hence overshadows Mammachi's musical ambitions from their very beginnings. If his nightly beatings of his wife leave visible, physical scars, his harsh treatment of her violin, "[breaking] the bow . . . and [throwing] it in the river" (47), causes wounds of an emotional and, perhaps, even more devastating nature. Up to this point, however, Mammachi's spirit remains unbroken and she courageously pursues her passion for playing the violin:

> Mammachi held a gleaming violin under her chin. Her opaque fifties sunglasses

> were black and slanty-eyed, with rhinestones on the corners of the frames. Her sari was starched and perfumed. Off-white and gold. Her diamond earrings shone in her ears like tiny chandeliers. Her ruby rings were loose. Her pale, fine skin was creased like cream on cooling milk and dusted with tiny red moles. She was beautiful. Old, unusual, regal. (158)

Roy's compelling portrait offers a look into Mammachi's sad courage and stubborn perseverance. What might at first blush appear as a gaudy spectacle reveals itself as a glimpse into a path violently denied, Mammachi curiously resembling an aging former stage diva. Alienated from a life that could have been, she resigns herself to playing her music in private—hidden from the public eye. Her performance thus resonates with a particular South Indian model of domesticity that views musicianship as both a spiritually uplifting domestic activity and a bonding agent between husband and wife (Weidman, 138). In concert with her apparent adherence to patriarchal standards of female domesticity, Mammachi tends to condone male oppression. While her husband successfully stifles her talents and creativity, her son, Chacko, proves equally domineering and disrespectful. Prone to disregard her advice, hardly ever "[listening] to what she was saying" (116) and never responding to, often thoroughly ignoring, the letters she would write him during his studies at Oxford (234), Chacko naturally takes over the supervision of Mammachi's profitable pickle production, turning her into a sleeping partner, right after his return. Mammachi hence emerges as a strong woman whose voice fails to resonate within a patriarchal vacuum of vocal oppression.

While Mammachi's position as a woman accentuates the ordeal of negotiating gendered voices, her home country's colonial heritage, similarly, leaves its mark. The color of her skin, "creased like cream on cooling milk," for instance, literalizes the dominant ideal of womanhood in postcolonial India: a light-skinned beauty. A somewhat subtler, if no less critical, silencing surfaces in her choice of music she plays on her violin. Although the instrument she learned to master originates in the West, she could have easily played pieces rooted in India's vast musical heritage. She yet favors pieces by composers such as Händel and Tchaikovsky (269): two of the towering figures of Western and Russian classical music—a preference possibly motivated by imperial ideals still lingering among the formerly colonized. If "the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (287), to invoke Spivak's firm feminist stance. In a colonial context, then, women in particular are denied a position that would allow their voices to be dialogically engaged with and thus heard.

Orality and Agency

However compromised her life may seem, Mammachi subtly resists dominant constructions of Indian femininity thanks to her independent-minded nature. Playing pieces of classical music while dressed in crisp ironed saris, she uses her violin as a means, indeed as an "instrument" in both senses of the word, of channeling her largely unacknowledged, silenced energies. Her choice of the violin as her favored instrument is central to her ability to do so. It bears particular resonance if seen against the backdrop of classical Indian music, in particular, South Indian Karnatic music: one of its two major forms. Without compromising its distinctive Indianness, Karnatic music adopted the violin, among other aspects of Western classical music, in the wake of colonialism. In its distinguishing ability to reproduce the singing voice, the violin rendered the voice more articulate, while at the same time emerging as a self-effacing, unobtrusive presence (Weidman, 56). The subversive power of the violin in Roy's novel stems precisely from the instrument's capacity to rival the human voice in range, depth, and timbric subtlety: it lends a voice to someone who, while silenced, is neither absent nor mute. The solemn, triumphant quality of Händel's "*Lentement*" (159) that Mammachi plays on her violin is therefore not incidental; an aural signal of her mood, it imbues her silence with a stately air of confidence and pride. In light of the literal domestication of Karnatic music as a sign of bourgeois respectability in the early twentieth century, her self-consciously stylized makeup and attire may, likewise, be read not as an attempt to meet dominant standards of expectation but, rather, as an act of resistance (Weidman 116). Cultural critic Amanda J. Weidman's analysis of the reorientation of Karnatic music away from its sensual aspects towards spiritual qualities considered essential to classical music (99) exposes the coincidence of this historical development with "the effacement of the female musician's body on the concert stage . . . accomplished not only by a lack of gesture but also by an implicit dress code" (132). The latter, as Weidman stresses, "makes female musician's bodies visible as a certain type: a respectable family woman" (132). Insofar as the dress code requirements contrast sharply with Mammachi's lavish attire, her physical appearance both mimics and subverts conventional styles of performance.

The aural element surges forth in further, often curious and unexpected, ways. "Smiling out loud," "listening with one's eyes" (20): Roy's experimental play with language results in semantic innovations that endow presumably mute facial expressions with aural qualities.[79] It encourages a perspectival shift that highlights, paradoxically at first glance, the aural dimension of visual experiences. A "fan-whirring, peanut-crunching darkness" (94), for instance, engulfs Rahel and her family during a visit to the movies. Roy here imbues that which is perceived through the eyes with aural qualities. What is more, the author refrains from rendering the movie theater's sonorous atmosphere in terms of abstract sonic qualities such as pitch or loudness. What the reader is made to hear, instead, are the fans whirring on the ceiling and the audience munching on peanuts—acoustic nuances that pertain to the source rather than nature of the sounds perceived. In similar fashion, Roy describes the scissors that Pappachi uses to violently shred Rahel's beloved gumboots as "[making] snicking scissor-sounds" (172), aiming, perhaps, to punctuate the cruelty of this act of punishment. By making present the physical actions that produce it, sound, then, turns from a purely material waveform into a palpable experiential presence; in other words, the whirring, crunching, and snicking sounds referred to above evoke textures, sights, and physical qualities the reader is made to "feel" through the ear.[80] Roy's peculiar evocations of sound invoke what Chion, in cinematic parlance, has called an audiovisual "synchresis, the forging of an immediate and necessary relationship between something one sees and something one hears" (5). By uniting sounds with images, the author, therefore, arrives at more than rendering the concrete, material presence of aural phenomena; rather, her particular narrative strategy succeeds in capturing the reader's ear in the first place. Roy's description of Comrade Pillai's "high, piping voice, frayed and fibrous now, like sugarcane stripped of its bark" (15), after all, accentuates and gives prominence to sonic qualities that might have otherwise sunk into the background. While her narrative approach hence incites an acute aural awareness, it also inscribes aural phenomena in a sensory continuum encompassing multiple senses simultaneously—the mesmerizing nature of the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man's teeth arising precisely from their ability to see, smile, sing, smell, and move at the very same time (98).[81] Sound thus conceived accounts, finally, for the pervasive synesthetic exchanges among different sensory modalities throughout *The God of Small Thing*, from the "magical *Sound of Music* smell that Rahel remembered and treasured" (94; original emphasis) to "History's smell" (54) accompanying the twins' crushing experience of witnessing the brutal beating of a friend.[82]

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[79] For an analysis of Roy's linguistic playfulness, in particular of the connection between the novel's oral syntax and the author's method of montage, see Richard J. Lane, "The Optical Unconscious: Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*," *The Postcolonial Novel: Themes in 20th Century Literature and Culture*. Cambridge, England: Polity, 2006. 97-108.

[80] As Chion argues in *Audio-Vision*, "the materializing indices are the sound's details that cause us to 'feel' the material conditions of the sound source, and refer to the concrete process of the sound's production. They can give us information about the substance causing the sound—wood, metal, paper, cloth—as well as the way the sound is produced—by friction, impact, uneven oscillations, periodic movement back and forth, and so on" (114).

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[81] In reference to sight and hearing, Chion argues that "eye and ear carry information and sensations only some of which are specifically and irreducibly visual or auditive." Chion's thesis on transsensorial perception decisively differs from intersensoriality or "correspondances" in Baudelaire's sense according to which each sense exists in itself yet encounters others at points of contact. In Chion's transsensorial/metasensorial model "there is no sensory given that is demarcated and isolated from the outset. Rather, the senses are channels, highways more than territories or domains . . . when kinetic sensations organized into art are transmitted through a single sensory channel, through this single channel they can convey all the other channels at once"(137).

[82] Steven Connor's reflections on aural technologies developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are worth mention here as still another contextual framework for evaluating Roy's narrative procedures: "Since traversal and transference are in the nature of sound, it also becomes the privileged figure of sensory interchange . . . The electrodynamic principles of the telephone, phonograph and

"So clear and precise in our perception of it, and at the same time so open-ended in all it can relate" (123), as Chion puts it, sound enacts a simultaneous promise and disturbance of meaning. Enthralled by Julie Andrews' singing voice, Estha, for instance, cannot keep himself from singing along with her during his family's visit to the movie theater—his voice coming "from outside the picture . . . clear and true, cutting through the fan-whirring, peanut-crunching darkness" (95). Unsettling the harmony between the image's and sound's figural natures (Chion, 37), his off-screen singing voice causes uneasiness, even anger, among the audience. The harsh, uneven, and irregular quality of Rahel's utterances, "jagged. Like a piece of tin" (29), causes a similar kind of disturbance. Vocal sounds without apparent form, directivity, or conscious control, finally, disrupt and inform the meaning of the words spoken during a meeting between Comrade Pillai and Chacko in charge, at the time, of the family's pickle factory. They provide a crucial sonic backdrop to a conversation that revolves around Velutha, one of Chacko's employees, whose manual dexterity, membership in the Communist Party, and lower class affiliation vie for prominence in both Chacko's and Comrade Pillai's judgment of him. While the two men find themselves in the midst of discussing Velutha's prospects as a factory worker, Comrade Pillai's mother, sitting on the edge of a high wooden bed, "stared vacantly at the wall opposite her, rocking herself gently, grunting regular, rhythmic grunts, like a bored passenger on a long bus journey" (255). On one level, the rhythmic grunts Comrade Pillai's mother emits suggest nothing more than deep short

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microphone were the scientific equivalents of the principle of synaesthesia, or the correspondence of the different senses" (207).

sounds without clear content or meaning. By creating a distracting sense of uncertainty and confusion, however, they tend to destabilize the meaning of the ongoing verbal exchange. Resembling the sounds of "a bored passenger on a long bus journey," they arguably signal the futility of her son's conversation with Chacko, more precisely, they hint at the inevitable fact that Velutha's fate has already been decided by circumstances seemingly beyond their control. If seen by the narrator as something reassuring, "Like the ticking of a clock. A sound you hardly noticed, but would miss if it stopped" (263), the steady, recurrent ticking sound resonates deeply with Roy's earlier portrayal of Rahel's mother, Ammu, as a bomb ticking away, ready to go off at any minute (113); in other words, it ominously hints at a greater threat looming on the horizon. Just these kind of aural clues keep the reader suspended in anticipation of highly explosive secrets to be revealed—the sense of an impending explosion of memories, as we shall see, coinciding with an impending explosion of sounds.

The secrets and mysteries of Rahel's childhood, after all, lie hidden in aural phenomena. Never articulated or verbally shared, the images of the past haunting her twin brother, Estha, for instance, images of "a swollen face . . . Of a bloodshot eye that had opened, wandered and then fixed its gaze" (32), are palpable only in the aural presence of his all-encompassing silence. Paradoxically, if only at first glance, his silence is audible throughout Roy's novel. Less "an accusing, protesting silence" than "a sort of estivation, a dormancy, the psychological equivalent of what lungfish do to get themselves through the dry season" (12), it forms a calm, non-intrusive backdrop to sonically perceptible actions and events: the ticking of a clock, a bird call, human speech.

Not merely the interval *between* sounds, Estha's silence suggests the very space *within* which sound occurs—each coexisting with and framing the other. As Chion argues in reference to silent moments in film, silence "does not simply come from an absence of noise. It can only be produced as a result of context . . . It is the negative of sound we've heard beforehand or imagined; it is the product of a contrast" (58). Precisely its (contextual) integration into the novel's aural narrative fabric, its frame, allows its significance to manifest itself. If emptied of words, Estha's silence, accordingly, reveals itself as a deeply expressive presence pregnant with meaning:

> Once the quietness arrived, it stayed and spread in Estha. It reached out of his head and enfolded him in its swampy arms. It rocked him to the rhythm of an ancient, fetal heartbeat. It sent its stealthy, suckered tentacles inching along the insides of his skull, hoovering the knolls and dells of his memory, dislodging old sentences, whisking them off the tip of his tongue. It stripped his thoughts of the words that described them and left them pared and naked. Unspeakable. Numb . . . Slowly, over the years, Estha withdrew from the world. He grew accustomed to the uneasy octopus that lived inside him and squirted its inky tranquilizer on his past. Gradually the reason for his silence was hidden away, entombed somewhere deep in the soothing folds of the fact of it. (13)

Estha's silence thus originates in the interior of his body where it "stayed and spread." Moving along the insides of his skull, across the undulating mounds and valleys of his memory, it evokes a tangible presence perceptible in the shape of the space it occupies.

Its way of enveloping a scene and inhabiting its space recalls the very dynamics inherent to sound: "the more reverberant the sound, the more it tends to express the space that contains it (Chion, 79). Although lying dormant, Estha's silence, too, reveals itself as an active force capable of "enfolding Estha in its swampy arms," while "rocking him to the rhythm of an ancient, fetal heartbeat." Its rigorous cleaning and forceful motions "dislodging old sentences, whisking them off the tip of his tongue" not only enhance its dynamic quality; they also induce a sonic experience that resonates with Roy's explicit allusion to the womb's primal waters marked by rhythmic movement and sound. Estha's silence finally allows him to reconnect with a space metaphorically inhabited by his native language—the womb reverberating with the sonic and rhythmic patterns of his mother's vocalizations and hence exposing him to his mother tongue even before birth. By accentuating the female voice as that which binds language to the body, Roy in fact accentuates one's mother tongue as the mother's foremost attribute. In the wider context of Indian history, then, it is India's swampy womb that arguably supplies the driving force in dislodging the colonizer's words and forcing them out of a presumably settled position.

Estha's musicality, surfacing in his eager singing during his family's visit to the movie theater mentioned above, subtly reinforces his connection to the womb's sonorous atmosphere. If devoid of words, Estha's silence indeed proves to be of a deeply sonic nature insofar as it prompts a heightened awareness of ubiquitous ambient sounds such as heartbeat and breathing. As we shall come to see later on in this chapter, ambient sounds yield decisive clues for unveiling that which Estha's silence condenses, namely the unsaid or, as the author poignantly puts it, the thoughts "stripped of the words that described them," left "pared and naked. Unspeakable. Numb."[83] With words failing to articulate thoughts and emotions, the past disperses and dissolves, instead, into an agonizing soundscape of dislocation and erasure. The latter is aurally perceptible in Roy's compelling image of the squirting octopus—the mollusk's act of numbing the past, of reducing the mental disturbance that the past appears to have inflicted on Estha, ironically (re)awakening the senses in both its tactile and sonic resonance.

Estha's retreat into silence is tied closely to his deeply disturbing experience of sexual abuse by a man selling refreshments at the movie theater and his later equally or, perhaps, even more unsettling exposure to the dying Velutha. Neither imposed nor intentional, his withdrawal of language involved a "gradual winding down . . . as though he had simply run out of conversation and had nothing left to say" (12). It hence ensued as a result of what seems an incidental escape from something no longer valued, useful, or meaningful: speech. Words would undeniably prove incapable of expressing the unthinkable extremity of violence Estha was forced to witness; they would not suffice or, rather, be inappropriate to convey the callous brutality of the police against the one who used to be an integral part of his life: his friend Velutha. Their inadequacy stems above all from Estha's continual awareness of the link between the "Yes" he unjustifiably uttered when asked to identify Velutha as a perpetrator of violence and the terror of the latter's unbearable disappearance: "And what had Estha done? He had looked into that beloved face and said: Yes. *Yes, it was him*" (32; original emphasis). His false verbal statement is matched by Baby Kochamma's equally unfounded accusations: when speaking to the police, she accuses Velutha of raping her niece and further insinuates his abduction of the children. It is she, too, who, in an attempt to save the family's honor, callously manipulates her grandnephew into betraying Velutha—Estha's response to the police both concealing and officially erasing the love between his friend and his mother. His silence hence bears witness to a deep despair at the possibility of meaningful conversation or dialogue: both his own untruth and the lies spoken around him invalidate speech as a means to convey meaning. By sealing his lips, he not only signals his refusal to open himself up to others but appears to negate his very right to occupy a place in the world, corporeally and spatially: "Over time he had acquired the ability to blend into the background of wherever he was . . . to appear inanimate, almost invisible to the untrained eye . . . Estha occupied very little space in the world" (12). Situated within the interiority of his body, Estha's silence suggests a retreat into what seems his last possible place of refuge, one shielding him, if only partially, from a shattered perception of the world.

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[83] The numbness may be read as indicating the traumatic nature of Estha's cognitive state. Trauma scholars such as Caruth have emphasized the prevalence of numbness and the delayed and fragmentary knowledge that characterize the experience of trauma (4-7). For a detailed analysis of trauma in Roy's novel, see Chris L. Fox, "A Martyrology of the Abject: Witnessing and Trauma in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*," *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 33.3-4 (2002): 35-60.

Still, the tenacious silence enveloping Estha suggests a loss of communication or, as Roy puts it, the presence of a "stranger" (22) only to those insensitive to the aural signals he emits. Highly responsive to "the rhythm of Estha's rocking, and the wetness of rain on his skin," Rahel "could hear the raucous, scrambled world inside his head" (22). His sister's aural receptiveness accentuates a humanity that Baby Kochamma's demeanor tends to put into question: indulging in her minute insights into someone who persistently forbears to verbally communicate his thoughts, the twin's aunt "had the air of a game warden pointing out an animal in the grass. Taking pride in her ability to predict its movements. Her superior knowledge of its habits and predilections" (86). If seen as part of an insensate, inhuman world in Baby Kochamma's eyes, Estha's silence appears in a very different light when the focus of his sister's attention. Then, his silence acquires significance to the extent that it is punctuated by the rhythm of his rocking and the lingering percussive sound of rain, "That lonely drummer" (279), as Roy tellingly portrays it elsewhere. The very rhythms and percussions that accompany Estha's silence subtly hint at the strident sonic elements that Rahel seems acutely attuned to, in other words, at aural fissures and dissonances pervading language as such. Given their curious resonance with what Roy suggestively refers to as "New York's deranged womb" (70), the constant rhythm and sense of discord his silence exudes may, ultimately, be read as bearing the imprint of a disturbed primeval motion.

Rahel's astonishing, at times inexplicable, capacity to read Estha's mind and decipher his mostly "frantic thought signals" (77) seems to originate from an intimate connection that began in the womb; as Roy stresses, "He was the one that she had known before Life began. The one who had once led her (swimming)" through their mother's body (89). Even before they were born, then, Rahel became acquainted with the sounds of his breathing and the rhythm of his bodily motions. Marked by repetition and, therefore, a discernible temporal pattern, the rhythmic movements of his body established a beat or pulse that Rahel felt both viscerally and sonically. By physicalizing rhythm aurally—

rhythm, after all, being sonic action in time—Estha was able to convey shifting moods, if through long, smooth, and sustained or rapid and violently irregular bodily motions. The depth of their relationship arises therefore less from a (telepathic) communication by extrasensory means, as critics have commonly argued, than an acute and in fact profoundly sensory awareness of each other's moods and emotions, an awareness Rahel was forced to refine in the wake of her brother's retreat into "stillness. As though his body had the power to snatch its sense inwards . . . away from the surface of his skin, into some deeper more inaccessible recess (89).[84] Turned inward, Estha's sensory perceptiveness thus manifests itself in signals or vibrations he palpably, if silently, emits into the air. Rahel's awareness of Estha's presence as he quietly joins her at a dancing performance may therefore come as no surprise: "Something altered in the air. And Rahel knew that Estha had come" (222). Changes in the air, that is to say, changes in the vibration of air molecules here aurally signal Estha's arrival. Atmospheric changes, similarly, account for Rahel's ability to sense both her brother's mistreatment at the movie theater (110) and his quiet presence outside the door of her hotel room—Chacko not even bothering "to wonder how she could have possibly known that Estha was at the door"(113). If uttered softly or wrapped in deceptive silence, the conversations between the twins hence "surfaced and dipped like mountain streams. Sometimes audible to other people. Sometimes not" (191). Dropping out of sight only to reemerge from deep below the watery surface, they subtly hint at the fragile sonic tapestry that lies beneath layers of cryptic shards of sound that work like a camouflage only an attentive listener can penetrate.

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[84] See Alex Tickell's "*The God of Small Things*: Arundhati Roy's Postcolonial Cosmopolitanism," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 38 (2003): 73-89 (65) and Sheena Patchay's "Pickled Histories, Bottled Stories: Recuperative Narratives in *The God of Small Things*," *Journal of Literary Studies* 17.3-4 (2001): 145-160 (147).

While Baby Kochamma and her maid Kochu Maria wade in the shallow pools of colorful noise, "locked together in a noisy television silence" (28), Rahel and Estha delve far deeper into the secrets of sonic phenomena during their regular excursions to the river: "Here they studied Silence . . . and learned the bright language of dragonflies" (194). Silence here emerges as the very brink of language. Lurking near its smooth, deceptively soundless surface are elements whose meaningful sonic nuances might easily escape those fully immersed in the noise prone to fill our daily surroundings. Baby Kochamma's and Kochu Maria's habitual exposure to a "noisy television silence" accentuates the shallowness of their aural perception. It takes, after all, a significant amount of time, effort, and delicacy to develop the kind of keen aural sensitivity that Rahel exhibits and that enables her to learn from silence rather than sounds. Only gradually does Rahel begin to aurally sense the words that lie in wait far below the smooth, compact surface of Estha's all-pervading silence.[85] As we have seen, Estha's silence reconfigures Rahel's and, by extension, the reader's act of listening as a highly discontinuous and irregular one capable of providing a glimpse into Estha's inner turmoil and the events and circumstances it ensued from.

Submerged in a watery, sonorous space, the past suggests a fluid, aurally tangible presence throughout Roy's novel. It subtly surfaces when Rahel contemplates the oil portraits of her great-grandparents hanging on the walls of the Ayemenem house, her former home, and notices her ancestors' peculiar bodily positioning and facial expressions:

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[85] The sense of sonic anticipation surfaces throughout Roy's novel: from "Rahel's new teeth . . . waiting inside her gums, like words in a pen" (37) over the waiting air in anticipation of Mammachi's musical performance (158) to the "Waiting Melody that hung over her like a shimmering temple elephant's umbrella" (164).

> Reverend Ipe smiled his confident ancestor-smile out across the road instead of the river. Aleyooty Ammachi looked more hesitant. As though she would have liked to turn around but couldn't. Perhaps it wasn't as easy for her to abandon the river. With her eyes she looked in the direction that her husband looked. With her heart she looked away. Her heavy, dull gold kunukku earrings . . . had stretched her earlobes and hung all the way down to her shoulders. Through the holes in her ears you could see the hot river and the dark trees that bent into it. And the fishermen in their boats. And the fish. (30)

Recalling Estha's swampy, watery silence enclosing an unspoken past, we cannot fail to associate the image of the river with hidden, inaccessible memories. Roy's portrayal of Estha as "a fisherman in a city. With sea-secrets in him" (14) powerfully cements this metaphoric linkage. Like the past hidden in Estha's silence, the river, too, lies outside the ancestors' field of vision. While the latter's particular point of view is consciously chosen by the one, it is imposed on the other: Reverend Ipe willingly and confidently faces the direction opposite to the river; Aleyooty, by contrast, seems to be denied the very glimpse she longs for—her eyes looking in one direction, her heart another. Her gaze drawn towards the one whose brush strokes help preserve her memory, she is yet hesitant to abandon the river, the fishermen in their boats, the fish—a world threatened to fade into oblivion if remaining unacknowledged. Ironically, Aleyooty's remembrance, her face being recorded on canvas, coincides with an abandonment of her own personal, favored view of that which lies behind her. Her hesitance to turn away from the river might suggest her reluctance to forget her own particular history. But if her eyes deny a glimpse into her heart, her ears surprise with a curiously paradoxical revelation. As the scene above suggests, the small holes in Aleyooty's ears make it possible for the reader to peer past her body into the landscape that lies beyond. If we read this *visual* view as in fact revealing Aleyooty's *aural* perception, the scene offers an alternative way of conceiving reality to help compensate for and, perhaps, transcend the limits imposed by mere vision; both the absence of anything like eyelids for the ears and the omnidirectionality of hearing, following Chion, tend to expand the listener's perceptual field.[86] The scene hence signals a turn away from vision as an exclusionary source of knowledge and, in doing so, confers power on a sense that has been suppressed beneath imperialism's ocular passion mentioned above. The scenery that finally meets the viewer's eyes through Aleyooty's ears conveys an image of peace and harmony: an image of humans and nature amicably coexisting. It appears to evoke a previously existing landscape unmarred by the tourism, souvenir stores, and truncated cultural performances that so strongly shape contemporary life in Kerala (218).[87]

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[86] As Chion elaborates,

> this aural field is much less limited or confined, its contours uncertain and changing. Due to natural factors of which we are all aware—the absence of anything like eyelids for the ears, the omnidirectionality of hearing, and the physical nature of sound—but also owing to a lack of any real aural training in our culture, this imposed-to-hear makes it exceedingly difficult for us to select or cut things out. There is always something about sound that overwhelms and surprises us no matter what—especially when we refuse to lend it our conscious attention; and thus sound interferes with our perception, affects it. Surely, our conscious perception can valiantly work at submitting everything to its control, but, in the present cultural state of things, sound more than image has the ability to saturate and short-circuit our perception. (36)

If Aleyooty waxes nostalgic for times long preceding the children's traumatic experiences, these times prove equally ruptured. Marked by an increasing emphasis on commerce and a neglect of the environment, the past decades had witnessed the demise of an entire way of life. Modern development alone is sufficient to explain why the river in the scene above recedes into the background, the ancestors' glances directed mainly towards the road: a symbol, perhaps, of the region's progress.[88] It may come as no surprise that the beautiful scenery of Rahel's childhood has turned into a landscape marred by commercial development, muddy waters, and ravaged ecosystems:

> Years later, when Rahel returned to the river, it greeted her with a ghastly skull's smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed . . . Downriver, a saltwater barrage had been built . . . So now they had two harvests a year instead of one. More rice for the price of a river. Despite the fact that it was June, and raining, the river was no more than a swollen drain now. A thin ribbon of thick water that lapped wearily at the mud banks on either side, sequined with the occasional silver slant of a dead fish. It was choked with a

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[87] For an analysis of corporate globalization and the erosion of local art and culture in Roy's novel, see Chitra Sankaran, "Ethics, Aesthetics, and the Globalized Other in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*," In *Global Fissures, Postcolonial Fusions.* Clara A. B. Joseph and Janet Wilson. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 2006. 102-119.

[88] The scene resonates with Roy's thoughts on modern development in India which she expresses in "The Cost of Living." Here, while lamenting the gradual unraveling of "the fabric of an ancient, agrarian community, which depends on its lands and rivers and forests for its sustenance," she somewhat cynically wonders why it is "that the first sign of 'development' - a road - brought only terror, police, beatings, rape, murder" (para. 71).

> succulent weed, whose furred brown roots waved like thin tentacles underwater. (118)

Roy thus lures her readers into an illusion of beauty only to assault them with the shocking image of an uncompleted, living death—her readership held captive by the river's ghastly skull's smile and horrifying wounds. Tooth- and spineless, the river seems indeed lifeless, its waves moving mutely and wearily along the shore. Lying as if abandoned after an act of violation, it bears witness to the painful experience of having been strangled and denied access to elements vital to its survival; as the scene indicates, it had been ruthlessly robbed of moisture and air by succulent weeds—their strangling roots recalling the octopus's tentacles possessively spreading in Estha's skull.

The analogy between Estha's mental distress and the river's lifeless countenance deepens if we reconsider Estha's act of numbing himself to the overwhelming experience of seeing a close friend battered to near death. The river had sunk into a state of lifeless inanity as a consequence of a similarly traumatic event: the indiscriminate misuse of natural resources, such as water, in the name of economic development and in blunt disregard of ecological implications. Both, in other words, had been witnessing the deterioration of bodies. The particular resonance between Estha's skull and the river's "ghastly skull's smile" is, therefore, surely not a coincidence. Reduced to mere bones of the body, both Estha and the river evoke the death of conscious remembering, a remembering that, as noted earlier, presupposes the assimilation of experience into associative patterns of meaning. Given that death in Roy's novel involves first and foremost an inability to breathe—we will recall that Sophie Mol, too, suffocated to death—both Estha's and the environment's condition in fact signal the death of a larger, collective memory. What returns in both, after all, is, in the words of trauma scholar Cathy Caruth, "an event that is itself constituted, in part, by its lack of integration into consciousness" (152) and that, therefore, resists being comprehensibly shared with others. With the victims' breath and voice thus decisively subdued, readers find themselves primarily confronted with the bodily, visual manifestations of their pain.

Aural Traces of the Past

And still, the river as it flows coyly through Rahel's hometown exerts a force that extends well beyond the visual. A "muffled highway" in the wake of Sophie Mol's accidental drowning, it bears silent witness to the tragedy; as we learn, "There was no storm-music. No whirlpool spun up from the inky depths of the Meenachal . . . Just a quiet handing-over ceremony" (277). Yet an "old river silence" (190) is not the only witness to the events of the past. Whispers and gurgling sounds (195) equally hint at the "subterranean secret" (195) that so deeply pervades Roy's novel. Given the author's continued reiteration of aural, if voiceless, clues to the past, the act of reading increasingly transforms into an act of listening that probes beneath the visual surface to reveal the struggle that audibly rages inside. When not masked by silence, this inner turmoil tends to be marked by sudden, aurally jarring flourishes: "Heaven opened and the water hammered down, reviving the reluctant old well, greenmossing the pigless pigsty, carpet bombing still, tea-colored puddles the way memory bombs still, tea-colored minds" (11). Like the Meenachal as it rises after heavy spells of rain, its waters temporarily thick and muddy, insights into the past deepen with spell-like moments of remembrance in which the past mirrors itself in the present—snatched up violently and unexpectedly. Whenever memory emerges in Roy's novel, it bears, indeed, the stigmata of violence, rupture, and discontinuity: "Memory was that woman on the train. Insane in the way she sifted through dark things in a closet and emerged with the most unlikely ones—a fleeting look, feeling. The smell of smoke. A windscreen wiper. A mother's marble eyes" (69-70). Memory here indicates an unsettled, even deranged, mental state marked by sudden and most surprising disclosures.[89] Yet, as Roy further stresses, "Quite sane in the way [it] left huge tracts of darkness veiled. Unremembered" (70). On one level, the calculated, purposeful suppression of the past recalls the deliberate muffling of voices detailed earlier. On another, subtler level, it suggests the protective mechanism of human consciousness as it integrates newly perceived, often overwhelmingly disordered and miscellaneous, experiences into ordered, existing cognitive schemes. And yet, the "Unremembered" extends beyond the latent presence of experiences that escaped consciousness during their occurrence. Rather, it signals the inaccessibility of unassimilated traumatic events that return to haunt Rahel and her brother throughout Roy's novel—an inaccessibility narratively conveyed in aural, fragmentary, and enigmatic clues to the past.

If the reader is tempted and frustrated by the sense of an impending unveiling of the past throughout *The God of Small Things*, it holds especially true with respect to the

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[89] Roy's words further suggest the fleeting, transitory nature of *mémoire involontaire*. The latter, after all, entails a mere momentary reexperiencing of the past, more precisely, it involves the reflection of a past impression within the present instant that lacks permanence and is bound to vanish—like "things that normally just fade and slumber consume themselves in a flash" (Benjamin, "The Image of Proust," 211).

Meenachal's sudden, unexpected revelations and their capacity of inspiring hope and fueling curiosity: "No one knows the Meenachal. *No one* knows what it may snatch or suddenly yield. Or when. That is what makes fishermen pray" (245; original emphasis). Precisely the suddenness of the river's mysterious disclosures aligns it, once more, with audibly present memories whose sonic nature accounts for their very ability, following Chion, "to saturate and short-circuit our perception" (36). As Chion further argues, "There is always something about sound that overwhelms and surprises us no matter what—especially when we refuse to lend it our conscious attention" (36). The ear hence detects and records traces of disruptive experiences first and foremost in acoustic elements that defy being integrated into familiar or common frames of understanding, elements compellingly brought to the surface in Rahel's impressions of her hometown after twenty-five years of absence:

> She had forgotten just how damp the monsoon air in Ayemenem could be. Swollen cupboards creaked. Locked windows burst open. Books got soft and wavy between their covers. Strange insects appeared like ideas in the evenings and burned themselves on Baby Kochamma's dim forty-watt bulbs. In the daytime their crisp, incinerated corpses littered the floor and windowsills, and until Kochu Maria swept them away in her plastic dustpan, the air smelled of Something Burning. (11)

Exposed to the moisture-laden monsoon air in Ayemenem, Rahel absorbs her hometown's atmosphere in the most literal sense. Her renewed awareness of the dampness in the air stems mainly from sonic impressions: the creaking of cupboards, the sudden opening of windows. Insects appear as an equally aural presence, one tied as much to their flying, humming sounds as their intimate association with air—their primary medium. Filled with the olfactory traces of the insects' death after they burn themselves on Baby Kochamma's dim light bulbs, the air as such metaphorically connects the insects' oddly incongruent qualities with violent, explosive eruptions of memory, of images that seem indeed strange or unfamiliar, prone to leave behind the scent of "Something Burning."

Whether suffused with Rahel's unverbalized fear or filled with "the impatient sound of idling engines" (59), the air bears witness, via its transfer of energy in the form of sound waves, to the characters' experiences throughout Roy's novel.[90] While the images that continue to haunt Rahel and Estha, including the one "of a swollen face and a smashed, upside-down smile" (32), pertain to events that *followed* the twins' disruptive experiences, the sounds that subtly suffuse Roy's narrative, ranging from the hollow knocked-on sound of a wooden boat (192) to the grunting, crunching, and gurgling sounds mentioned earlier, tangibly attest to the traumatic events and experiences themselves. One need only consider that Rahel and Estha "woke to the shout of sleep surprised by shattered kneecaps . . . They heard the *thud of wood on flesh. Boot on bone. On teeth.* The *muffled grunt* when a stomach is kicked in. The *muted crunch* of skull on cement. The *gurgle of blood* on a man's breath when his lung is torn by the jagged end of a broken rib" (292; emphasis mine). Surely, one cannot fail to notice the undeniable resonance between the sonic nuances that pertain to the moment of Velutha's beating and the sounds that (often curiously) pervade Roy's novel as a whole. In other words, the past intrudes aurally into the twins' experience of the present moment, the air providing the very space in which sounds of the past appear—not in identical but in similar guise. As Benjamin would argue, it "[reaches] us like an echo awakened by a call" or, to recall his more graphic description, as "a word, tapping, or a rustling that is endowed with the magic power to transport us into the cool tomb of long ago, from the vault of which the present seems to return only as an echo" ("A Berlin Chronicle," 59).[91] Roy's apparently random evocation of the act of knocking on the twins' wooden boat, the object implicated in both their cousin's drowning and their nightly travels to the History House where they are forced to witness Velutha's beating, suggests precisely the attempt to awaken an echo of the past by a call emitted in the present moment. What is more, a gesture rather than voice is aimed at inciting the response. As Roy stresses, "Knock on it and it made a hollow knocked-on sound" (192).[92]

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[90] Rahel's unverbalized fear, for instance, suffuses the air during her visit to the doctor: "The slow ceiling fan sliced the thick, frightened air into an unending spiral that spun slowly to the floor like the peeled skin of an endless potato" (126).

Experienced through the senses, memory in *The God of Small Things* evokes a Benjaminian approach to the past. Not unlike Roy, Benjamin highlights the air as one of the two media of remembrance, the other being light. A vivid recollection of the air, as he notes in "A Berlin Chronicle," always accompanied his memory of gazing into courtyards as a child, "a whiff of this air," as he nostalgically states, "still present in the vineyards of Capri where I held my beloved in my arms" (39). Sounds transmitted through the air, from the carpet-beating rocking him to sleep to the rustling of branches brushing up against his parents' house, would trigger memories of a sensuous, bodily nature. For Benjamin, it is forgetting that allows for past impressions to appear in their sensuous immediacy; only a severance of the past from the present and ensuing rupture of the linear flow of time yield the striking, if merely perceived, correspondence between temporally distant impressions.[93]

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[91] The immediacy of (both spatially and temporally) distant voices surfaces in Ammu's "listening to a tangerine. To a voice from far away. Wafting through the night. Sailing over lakes and rivers. Over dense heads and trees. Past the yellow church. Past the school. Bumping up the dirt road. Up the steps of the verandah. To her" (313).

[92] I thank Elissa Marder for pointing out the intimate connection between Roy's image and the core arguments of this dissertation.

Estha's actions during a visit to Mammachi's pickle factory gain particular significance when read against the backdrop of a memory operating through bodily experience. When Estha comes across Mammachi's slowly cooling, freshly boiled banana jam and begins stirring the thick, fresh jam, his act of jam-stirring "became a boat-rowing. The round and round became a back and forth. Across a sticky scarlet river" (187). Estha's bodily movements thus gradually transform into those he performed during the moments framing the tragic events in the past; both share the same aurally perceptible rhythm—the ear extracting periodic patterns from the body's motions. An unconscious, motoric memory seems to preserve the aural traces of events that, if witnessed by Estha, remain hovering just beyond his grasp. Although Estha is presented to us readers as a "Keeper of Records" (157), "the natural custodian of bus tickets; bank receipts, cash memos, checkbook stubs" (156), he yet fails to consciously record the events that will profoundly affect his perception of the world. In his view, "meaning had slunk out of things and left them fragmented. Disconnected . . . As though the intelligence that decodes life's hidden patterns—that connects reflections to images, glints to light, weaves to fabrics, needles to thread, walls to rooms, love to fear to anger to remorse—was suddenly lost" (215). Trauma interferes precisely with the mind's ability to translate otherwise inchoate fragments of experience into a coherent image of reality—consciousness warding off those aspects that lie outside familiar conceptual schemes. Both the mind's desire for cohesion and its incapacity to grasp several configurations of experiential elements simultaneously, finally, account for an always partial assimilation of sensory impressions that constitute a particular moment.[94]

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[93] As Benjamin emphasizes in *Berlin Childhood around 1900*:

> The air . . . is today wholly imbued with a word—one that has not reached my ears or crossed my lips for decades. This word has retained that unfathomable reserve which childhood names possess for the adult. Long-kept silence, long concealment, has transfigured them. Thus, through air teeming with butterflies vibrates the word 'Brauhausberg,' that is to say, 'Brewery Hill.' It was on the Brauhausberg, near Potsdam, that we had our summer residence. But the name has lost all heaviness, contains nothing more of any brewery, and is, at most, a bluemisted hill that rose up every summer to give lodging to my parents and me"(52).

The loss of stable meaning formerly anchored in visible connections among elements may explain the twins' aforementioned attention to sonic aspects of experience. Their effort to make sense of the past tends to coincide with attempts to fathom aural phenomena—to capture, record, and archive them for future reference—throughout Roy's novel. Consider how "Twenty-three years later, Rahel . . . turns to Estha in the dark . . . She whispers. She moves her mouth. Their beautiful mother's mouth. Estha . . . takes his fingers to it. To touch the words it makes. To keep the whisper. His fingers follow the shape of it. The touch of teeth. His hand is held and kissed. Pressed against the coldness of a cheek, wet with shattered rain (310). While Rahel's whispers will inevitably fade, the sounds' very source remains tangibly present: her mouth—Estha's fingers following its shape, tracing its every movement. Estha's touch is all the more important as the shape and position of Rahel's lips silently suggest the nature of the soft, hushed, and almost inaudible sounds she emits; it captures her speech in its embodied concreteness.[95]

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[94] See Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past*. New York: Basic Books, 1996; Thomas Wägenbaur, *The Poetics of Memory*, Tuebingen: Stauffenburg, 1998.

Embodied Memories

Rahel's mouth proves no less expressive without any words being uttered. Given her apparent physical resemblance to her mother, for example, her mouth not merely preserves certain facial features but also, and more surprisingly perhaps, bears the imprint of Ammu's past experiences: "full-lipped. Something wounded-looking about it. As though it was flinching from something. As though long ago someone—a man with rings—had hit her across it. A beautiful, hurt mouth . . . That had kissed [Estha's] hand through the barred train windows. First class, on the Madras Mail to Madras" (284). The stream of impressions flowing through Estha's mind as he contemplates the features of his sister's mouth allude to their mother's painful experiences of having been married to a man who would hit his wife and children, and later been forced, as a divorcée in search of employment, to send her son back to his father. The traces of Ammu's past visible in the contours of her daughter's mouth evoke the very "memories," as Roy stresses, that

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[95] Estha's relationship with Ammu, similarly, reflects his profound aural sensitivity. When his sister broaches the topic of their father, "Just a hint of a pause in the rhythm of Ammu's breathing made Estha touch Rahel's middle finger with his. And middle finger to middle finger, on their beautiful mother's midriff, they abandoned that line of questioning" (211).

Rahel "has no right to have" (5), memories, perhaps, one may not expect her to have. Invested with Ammu's concrete emotions, they give material, tangible form to experiences and become a site for tactile recognition. When Estha gently runs his fingers across the surface of his sister's skin, he thus not only infers the words she silently utters but also gains a felt sense of his mother's past experiences.

The crucial role of touch in the transference of memories from one body to another should hardly surprise given that "Porosity, and its fullest responsiveness," in the words of French feminist critic Luce Irigaray, "can occur only within difference. A porosity that moves from the inside to the outside of the body" (159). While the surface of the skin functions as the very connection between self and other, the "evanescence of the caress" links embodiment with temporality and hence signifies an opening towards the future, a future "that differs from an approach to the other's skin here and now" (Irigaray, 157).[96] The ensuing ability of Estha's touch to "bring a new awareness of life into previously forgotten, silenced, or deadened areas of the body" (262), in the words of Vietnamese writer, filmmaker, and composer Trinh Minh-ha, finally allows his sister to "experience writing/the world differently" ("'Write Your Body' and 'The Body in Theory,'" 258). For inscribed in her body we find not only a legacy of domestic violence but also a sense of sexual, mental, and emotional liberation. "There is very little that anyone could say to clarify what happened next," as Roy comments on the events that follow the long embrace that Rahel shares with her brother, "Nothing that . . . would separate Sex from Love . . . Only that there were tears . . . Only that there was a snuffling in the hollows at the base of a lovely throat. Only that a hard honey-colored shoulder had a semicircle of teethmarks on it . . . Only that what they shared that night was not happiness, but hideous grief" (310-311). At one level, Rahel's incestuous union with her brother constitutes a narrative occasion for crossing the threshold that separates "self" from "other;" Estha is, after all, repeatedly designated in relation to other members of the family as the "unknown" or the "stranger" and occupies a position on the margin or periphery of social life throughout the novel. At another, it functions as a figure for female freedom from absolute paternal authority.

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[96] As Irigaray muses in her *Ethics of Sexual Difference*: "How to preserve the memory of the flesh? Above all, for what is or becomes the site that underlies what can be remembered? Place of a possible unfolding of its temporality? Burial ground of the touch that metabolizes itself in the constitution of time" (159).

The imprints on Rahel's body—from a "wounded-looking mouth" to "a semicircle of teethmarks"—hence ensure a position of speaking/writing from beyond a masculine monopoly on the formation of female subjectivity. Bearing witness to a woman's silenced past and a transgression of the limits imposed on female desire simultaneously, they evoke what French feminist critic Hélène Cixous terms *écriture feminine*, a practice of writing grounded in women's experience of the body. "If woman has always functioned 'within' the discourse of man," Cixous argues, "it is time for her to dislocate this 'within' . . . to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of" (257). When Rahel as a child, therefore, "put her mouth on Ammu's stomach and sucked at it, pulling the soft flesh into her mouth and drawing her head back to admire the shining oval of spit and faint red imprint of her teeth on her mother's skin" (211), her actions may well be seen as more than an expression of her "proprietary handling" of her mother, as Roy puts it. Rather, they may suggest a struggle for liberation on her mother's behalf. The snuffling sound of Rahel's breath as she lovingly holds on to her brother years later marks her vehement pursuit of this struggle despite constrictions of the lived body. Although her struggle to escape the weight of patriarchal language thus situates itself in a female genealogy, it yet implicates both male and female voices: not by coincidence does the "semicircle of teethmarks" Estha leaves on his sister's shoulder recall the imprint of Rahel's teeth on her mother's stomach as mentioned above.

Rahel thus lays claim to experiences that were never granted to her mother. While denied a college education when young—"an unnecessary expense for a girl" (38) in her father's eyes—Ammu, divorced and recklessly daring to love a lower-caste dalit or "untouchable" in later years, continued to abstain from freely expressing herself; her singing along with radio songs whose evocative strains of hope resonated with her own longings and desires presented the only venue to give voice to her thoughts and emotions (313-314). A stifled voice would mar Ammu's life until her very death: while she was persistently plagued with the feeling "that Life had been Lived . . . That the air, the sky, the trees, the sun, the rain . . . were all slowly turning to sand. That sand would fill her nostrils, her lungs, her mouth" (212), a severe illness eventually forces her to "[carry] her breath in a glass inhaler" (153);[97] as Cixous reminds us, "Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time" (250). Rahel's bodily features and expressions hence commemorate the silenced past of someone who had been denied the very breath of life.

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[97] Even her cries are muffled: seeing their mother cry, the twins noticed that "She wasn't sobbing. Her face was set like stone, but the tears welled up in her eyes and ran down her rigid cheeks" (10).

Largely transferred at the level of the body, Rahel's memories recast Ammu's (official) image as a publicly shunned "*divorced* daughter from an *intercommunity love* marriage" (45; original emphasis) in the redeeming light of personal, deeply intimate impressions. We are made to see Ammu as a tender, loving mother who would eat fruit and chat with her children all night long. At the same time, we bear witness to Ammu's yearnings and desires as a woman, in particular her gradually intensifying passion for Velutha. While postcolonial critic Aijaz Ahmad reduces the love that develops between her and the lower-caste dalit to an inexorable sexual attraction that "overcomes them without a word spoken or any indication passing between them" (39), I read it, instead, as an expression of values and beliefs that Ammu secretly cherishes. Based on a brief but memorable glimpse into the "tactile world of smiles and laughter" (167) that Velutha shares with her daughter, her initial attraction to him, I would argue, betrays her deep admiration for people open and responsive to the world around them and, therefore, capable of forming caring and respectful relationships with others.[98]

Memory, Orality, and the Feminine

Although sexual desire is not the primary motivation for Ammu's love affair with Velutha, it serves to reinscribe the female body as a source of resistance and selfempowerment. Its subversive power emerges most conspicuously in the twins' peculiar and somewhat surprising prenatal swim through "their lovely mother's cunt" (89). Resonant with Roy's erotic portrayal of Ammu and Velutha engaged in lovemaking—"She was as wide and deep as a river in spate. He sailed on her waters" (318)—their swim yet differs sharply from the encounter between the two lovers. It does so not only on account of the children's shameful intrusion into the privacy of their mother's genital area but also in light of Roy's choice of the term "cunt" to describe it. Firmly ensconced in obscenity in earlier decades, the use of the term still remains somewhat shocking, and this notwithstanding its gradual inclusion into dictionaries in the late twentieth century. Yet precisely Roy's blatant allusion to a part of the female body largely associated with shameful and unspeakable experiences is what renders the scene so subversive. In its forceful conflation of prenatal experience with female pleasure, it collapses the patriarchally constructed split between motherhood and sexuality in favor of a maternally inspired expression aimed to endow the female voice with autonomous agency. Set against the backdrop of anti-colonial nationalism in India during the 1930s and 1940s that mobilized women mainly in their symbolic capacity as mothers (Tickell, 36), female desire in Roy's novel thus both challenges notions of femininity that envision the female body primarily as a site of procreation (if as a symbol of maternal endurance or as a source of national regeneration) and elevates the personal beyond a mere arena of public transgression to a realm that forms an intrinsic part of a broader socio-political context.

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[98] Velutha's attentive nature also surfaces in his sensitive response to the children's play: "Instinctively colluding in the conspiracy of their fiction, taking care not to decimate it with adult carelessness. Or affection" (181).

Memory and Performance

While Rahel's orally conveyed memories communicate deeply personal aspects of her mother's past experiences, the Kathakali performances in *The God of Small Things* cast the intercorporeal transmission of the past into the realm of a wider collectivity; that is to say, they allow for the remembrance of an ancestral history that spans generations. Fashioned by specific patterns of acting out ancient Indian epics, the dancers' bodies partake, through a codified language of gestures and facial expressions, of a communal, corporeal memory: "To the Kathakali Man these stories are his children and his childhood. He has grown up within them. They are the house he was raised in, the meadows he played in. They are the windows and his way of seeing" (219). Hence, the stories the dancers *enact* in fact *form part* of their own physical development, their bodies literally carrying the imprint of each and every telling performed as dance. Sedimented in the living body, the stories influence and shape the dancers both mentally and physically. The dancers, in turn, leave their mark on the stories, "their children," by infusing them with their own particular attitudes and styles with each new performance. While their bodily movements might suggest an informal, spontaneous ease to the untrained eye, it takes an enormous effort and devotion on the part of the dancers to develop the skill of "telling" stories through mere bodily movement. As Roy stresses, "The Kathakali Man is the most beautiful of men. Because his body *is* his soul. His only instrument. From the age of three it has been planed and polished, pared down, harnessed wholly to the task of storytelling" (219; original emphasis). Arduous apprenticeship, possibly involving years of attentive observation and responsive imitation of movements performed by other, more advanced dancers, hence accompanies the path towards becoming a genuine artist in the Kathakali dance tradition. Reminiscent of Benjamin's figure of the storyteller who passes on experiences or, rather, a particular form of communicating experience through bodily action, the Kathakali dancer turns into a living link in the intercorporeal transmission of techniques, a process strongly reliant on his/her sensibility to interact with other performers.[99]

By thus projecting the individual into a larger collective past, Kathakali performances create a deeply communal memory in which, as Benjamin puts it in reference to rituals more generally, "voluntary and involuntary recollection lose their mutual exclusiveness ("On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," 159-160); conscious and unconscious remembering here merge within a framework of stories that, in Roy's words, "*have* no secrets. The Great Stories are the ones you have heard and want to hear again. The ones you can enter anywhere and inhabit comfortably. They don't deceive you with thrills and trick endings. They don't surprise you with the unforeseen. They are as familiar as the house you live in" (218; original emphasis). The author's architectural imagery suggests the topographical nature of stories that, structured by particular relations among elements, commemorate not so much a specific factual content as a formal structure of narratability yielding an infinite chain of narrative retellings. At the heart of the cultural dance performances in *The God of Small Things* lies, therefore, as Benjamin would argue, less the remembrance than the rememberability of the past.[100]

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[99] As Andrew Benjamin has emphasized, the tradition of oral storytelling in a Benjaminian sense is intimately tied "to a specific conception of action—a conception that is exemplified by the figure of the storyteller; who by telling a story (that is by acting) takes over and hands on" (167). It is precisely this form of action in which, as Benjamin himself puts it, "soul, eye, and hand are brought into connection. Interacting with one another, they determine a practice" (108). As the latter crucially adds, "in genuine storytelling the hand plays a part which supports what is expressed in a hundred ways with its gestures trained by work" ("The Storyteller," 108).

Notwithstanding the commemorative potential inherent in the Kathakali dance performances, an official historical recording of the past never materializes in Roy's novel. As the author stresses, the dancers would privately perform in the spirit of tradition only to "jettison their humiliation" of "truncated swimming-pool performances. Their turning to tourism to stave off starvation" (218). Since an "audience was welcome, but entirely incidental" (218) within the private space of a temple, their modest apology to the gods (218) largely remains hidden from the public eye—secret—and only those familiar with "the sound of the chenda . . . announcing a Kathakali performance" (183) would partake in the commemorative experience. The twins curiously mirror this split between a private and public existence. While Estha closely guards the secrets of the past, it takes his sister to "read" her brother's thoughts and emotions, to decipher the aural signals he voicelessly emits. The twins' bodies combined arguably evoke a living archive in a Derridean sense: one functioning as both guardian and interpreter of the past.[101] It is surely not incidental that Rahel's return to Ayemenem entails the flooding in of the public sphere into the private interiority of her brother's body: "Trains. Traffic. Music. The stock market" (16). The archive, following Jacques Derrida, marks the very "passage from the private to the public" (2). Yet if the past resides in Estha's body, its recording or, rather, its archive in Derrida's sense, "will never be either memory or anamnesis as spontaneous, alive, and internal experience" (11);[102] the fragmented and meandering quality of Estha's unverbalized memories indeed contrasts starkly with the apparent order and coherence of more permanent, exteriorized records of the past. What initiates the process of archivization, instead, is Estha's aural/oral transmission of past experiences, a transmission precluding neither change nor evaluative elements. Just as the "structure of the *archiving* archive," in Derrida's words, “determines the structure of the *archivable* content” (17; original emphasis), so, too, does the structural framework of an oral transmission of the past shape the nature of events and circumstances portrayed in Roy’s novel. As the author emphasizes in reference to the twins’ traumatic experiences,

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[100] Benjamin's distinction between remembrance and rememberability, more precisely, his focus on the transmission of a particular narrative *form* rather than *content* is crucial given the patriarchal violence, the justification of caste divisions, and the colonial undertones that characterize the Hindu epics performed by the Kathakali dancers. As literary critic Alex Tickell emphasizes, "we must not assume that Roy's embedded presentation of the 'Great Stories' is wholly positive, or that it represents a simple nostalgia for the cultural coherence of epic narrative forms." Rather, it risks repeating "a colonial tendency to equate non-European cultures, and their pre-modern narrative forms, with the primitive and the irrational. As well as recognizing and playing on this colonial imaginary . . . Roy's condemnation of untouchability, and her awareness of the politics of Hindu nationalism, make her choice of episodes from *The Mahabharata* potentially very problematic, since gender- and caste inequalities are often naturalized and justified in the hierarchical orders of epic and myth" (113-114). After their performance, the Kathakali dancers themselves, as Roy stresses, "took off their makeup and went home to beat their wives. Even Kunti, the soft one with breasts" (224).

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[101] As Derrida stresses in his *Archive Fever*,

> the archive, as printing, writing, prosthesis, or hypomnesic technique in general is not only the place for stocking and for conserving an archivable content of *the past* which would exist in any case, such as, without the archive, one still believes it was or will have been. No, the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event. (17; original emphasis)

He crucially adds that "*There is no archive without a place of consignation, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside*" (11; original emphasis). The secrets which lie hidden in Estha's body, therefore, run counter to the process of archivization. "[Of] the secret itself," Derrida concludes, "there can be no archive, by definition. The secret is the very ash of the archive" (100).

[102] "On the contrary," Derrida argues, "the archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory" (11). Roy's evocation of rain as "rushing, inky water" (32), suggestive, as we have seen, of the continuous flow of memory, conjures the in-between state of words—hovering between fluid evanescence and fixed solidity—preceding what Derrida considers the moment proper to the archive. As Derrida inquires:

> Was it not at this very instant that, having written something or other on the [computer] screen, the letters remaining as if suspended and floating yet at the surface of a liquid element, I pushed a certain key to 'save' a text undamaged, in a hard and lasting way, to protect marks from being erased, so as to ensure in this way salvation and *indemnity*, to stock, to accumulate, and, in what is at once the same thing and something else, to make the sentence available in this way for printing and for reprinting, for reproduction? (25-26; original emphasis)

Indicatively, Roy's reference to this in-between state accompanies her description of Estha's fragmentary recollections followed by her urgent call to commemorate the past.

> those few dozen hours, like the salvaged remains of a burned house—the charred clock, the singed photograph, the scorched furniture—must be resurrected from the ruins and examined. Preserved. Accounted for. Little events, ordinary things, smashed and reconstituted. Imbued with new meaning. Suddenly they become the bleached bones of a story. (32)

De-and recontextualized within a continuous cycle of destruction and renewal, fragments of the past, neglected or potentially forgotten, thus gain forever new meanings. In a manner reminiscent of a notion of the archive as rendered above, the very possibility of knowledge remains forever suspended; it remains, in Derrida’s words, “a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise, and of a responsibility for tomorrow” (36).[103] The last word of Roy’s novel encapsulates this directedness towards future possibilities: “Tomorrow” (321). As what seems to be a mere afterthought, it follows (and translates) the Malayalam word “Naaley” uttered by Ammu upon leaving Velutha after a passionate night of lovemaking. Not incidentally, too, Roy grafts an expression of temporality onto the representation of bodies engulfed by the intimacy of touch; we will recall the latter's temporal function. While the trope of touch thus holds out the promise of a new dawn, Ammu's emphatic orientation towards the future suggests a call to cultivate this promise of intimacy—a promise offered by and to the other.

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[103] Rahel’s reading of her brother’s silence confirms Derrida’s words when he states that “new archives can still be discovered, come out of secrecy or the private sphere, so as to undergo new interpretations” (52)—Derrida’s distinction between revelation and revealability (or possibility of manifestation) to some extent echoing, I would argue, Benjamin’s distinction between memory and memorability.

Memory, Orality, and the Environment

Both Velutha's brutal murder and Ammu's social humiliation ensuing from and sadly overshadowing their love affair cast a sinister shadow over hopes for a new dawn. Both events unmask the pervasive futility of efforts aimed at unearthing voices silenced and marginalized by dominant (colonial and patriarchal) discourses—voices buried and unheard like Sophie Mol's, unsung like Mammachi's, or unspoken like Ammu's.[104] Yet notwithstanding their absence or distortion in (official) versions of the past found "in the papers" (307), the stories they strive to tell simmer tangibly just beneath the surface. Sharing women's marginal position in India's society, Velutha in this context emerges as a figure of subtle rebellion due largely to his manual dexterity. Only eleven years old, he displays a talent for miniature craftsmanship that borders on the artistic: "It was Mammachi . . . who first noticed little Velutha's remarkable facility with his hands . . . He was like a little magician. He could make intricate toys—tiny windmills, rattles, minute jewel boxes out of dried palm reeds; he could carve perfect boats out of tapioca stems and figurines on cashew nuts" (71). Rahel, similarly, enthuses over "her luckiest fishing rod that Velutha had made for her. Yellow bamboo with a float that dipped every time a foolish fish enquired" (141). Nature thus provides the raw material in Velutha's artistic endeavors. By the work of his hands, plain bamboo magically transforms into intricate, distinctively-shaped objects with subtle textural nuances. In his lifetime, his crafts serve as a tender reminder of his friendship to the twins and his love to Ammu. Both the hand-crafted rosewood dining table he built for Mammachi and the wire-framed angels' wings aimed to supplement Baby Kochamma's annual Nativity plays (71-72) gain particular value long after his death, investing their surroundings with memories of him, willed at times, unwilled at others.

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[104] If we follow the path indicated by Roy's extensive portrayals of figures such as Ammu and Mammachi, we will indeed notice a commitment to reveal primarily the voices of women. If the reader catches a glimpse of Pappachi's violent discontent and Chacko's self-absorption, it does not match the depth of insight we are given into the feelings and motivations of women. Moreover, as a radical feminist gesture, Roy's narrative approach highlights the gendered division between "public" and "private" social spheres: the sharp split between the personal, intimate domain of family, love, and friendship on the one hand, and the public sphere of formal institutions on the other. The author's portrayal of her male characters hence mainly revolves around political, economic, and cultural affiliations, while the shattered dreams and aspirations of women situate themselves primarily within the private, domestic realm.

Despite his tendency toward silence, Velutha thus embodies a main link between the past and the present. His skillfully crafted creations leave traces in ways resembling those left behind by a storyteller whose narrative performance, following Benjamin, always involves, after all, gestures of the hand (108).[105] Velutha's creations fashioned by hand, too, physicalize inanimate objects around which stories commonly revolve. In other words, they suggest the tangible presence of the past "in some material object (or in the sensation that such an object arouses in us" ("On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," 158). Thus, if stillness closes in on Velutha after his brutal beating by the police, sadly punctuating the finality of his doom, the natural environment—his very source of inspiration—tangibly keeps his memory alive. By commemorating Velutha not as an officially classified "Other" but as someone displaying distinctively unique qualities and talents, it finally counters discursive romanticizations of the marginalized hero, one prone to become "tainted", in the words of postcolonial feminist critic Chitra Sankaran, "with neocolonialist fantasies of power" (118).[106]

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[105] We will recall that Benjamin considers storytelling "an artisan form of communication" ("The Storyteller," 91). Implicit in these words is Benjamin's conception of storytelling as both a practice aimed to ensure the communicability of experience and a craftsmanship that requires not only verbal but also manual skills.

While Velutha's crafts fashioned from material found in nature bear his distinctive imprint, the natural environment as such leaves its mark on him as Ammu's engaging portrayal of Velutha testifies:

> As he rose from the dark river and walked up to the stone steps, she saw that the world they stood on was his. That he belonged to it. That it belonged to him. The water. The mud. The trees. The fish. The stars. He moved so easily through it. As she watched him she understood the quality of his beauty. How his labor had shaped him. How the wood he fashioned had fashioned him. Each plank he planed, each nail he drove. Each thing he made had molded him. Had left its stamp on him. Had given him his strength, his supple grace. (315-316)

Roy's words situate themselves within an environmental aesthetics aimed at challenging the binary between human and nonhuman realms of existence. "A physical interaction of body and setting, a psychological interconnection of consciousness and culture, a dynamic harmony of sensory awareness," following philosopher Arnold Berleant, "all make a person inseparable from his or her environmental situation" (106).[107] In the context of an environmental aesthetics, the human body no longer positions itself in opposition and, even more crucial, as superior to but seamlessly blends into its environmental surroundings.[108]

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[106] In "Dangerous Artisans: Anarchic Labour in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*," Devon Campbell-Hall explores the ways in which the individualism of fine craftsmanship, encompassed in the figure of the highly skilled artisan, counters the "ideology of globalization, with its focus on homogenizing disparate cultures and products" (46).

The mingling of human and non human worlds proves particularly crucial given what literary critic Divya Anand describes as "the tenuous relation of the environment and the exploited figures in contemporary creative and critical literatures" (95). Anand's words may account for Velutha's close alignment with nature as rendered above;[109] the mistreatment of the one going along with the abuse of the other. Only an awareness of the environment as a field of forces continuous with the body, following Berleant, can ultimately impede or reduce both human and environmental violations. As he writes:

> A participant rather than a spectator, the human person joins in the movement of things very much as a performer does in theater or dance, activating the materials with which one deals, integrating them with one's body, and leading them to one's ends by responding with sensitivity to their

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[107] "Human space," as Berleant elaborates in *The Aesthetics and Environment: Variations on a Theme*, "is always known through the body's capacities for seeing, moving, touching, hearing—the multidimensional world of sensory awareness" (25). "Place," therefore, "is not a physical location, nor is it a state of mind. It is the engagement of the conscious body with the conditions of a specific location" (84).

[108] The connection between humans and the natural environment also surfaces in Ammu's instinctual anticipation of her lover's arrival, her body moving through the darkness "like an insect following a chemical trail" (314). Estha's frequent walks in the rain suggest most forcefully a sense of union between the human body and nature. Raindrops would forever glisten on the end of his earlobes (89) and "[stand] out on his oiled skin like studs (225); like spider webs that withstood the rain (289), he seemed indifferent to the wetness of the rain (16). Finally, we will recall Estha's inanimate appearance, him being prone to "blend into the background of wherever he was—into bookshelves, gardens, curtains, doorways, streets" (12).

[109] A further sign of Velutha's closeness to nature is the birthmark on his back, "shaped like a pointed dry leaf. He said it was a Lucky Leaf, that made the Monsoons come on time. A brown leaf on a black back. An autumn leaf at night. A lucky leaf that wasn't lucky enough" (70). The sad truth of those lines manifests itself in the mistreatment of both dalits and the natural environment in Roy's novel.

> requirements. (22)

An environmental consciousness thus coincides with an abandonment of a primarily visual approach to the environment in favor of a multidimensional perspective that integrates all the senses. Surely it is not a coincidence that the ability to more broadly and sensitively discern the value and meaning of places in relation to the lived body—"perceiving and acting . . . and being formed by the creative influence of the environment" (Berleant, 22)—finds embodiment in another character at once marginalized and connected to the acoustic realm: Ondaatje's Kirpal Singh who "moves always in relation to things, beside walls, raised terrace hedges . . . sees a fragment of [Hana's] lean cheek in relation to the landscape behind it . . . watches the arc of a linnet in terms of the space it gathers away from the surface of the earth" (Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, 218).

An intimate connection between the environment and those sensitive to its demands results in a form of memory anchored not in the human body alone but, rather, transposed onto the material world enveloping it. If the twins fail to keep a tangible record of the traumas of the past, nature, indeed, does. The devastation of the Meenachal, for instance, graphically dramatizes nature's marginal status and unveils the oppression, cruelty, and injustice unleashed by powerful capitalist forces. It alerts the reader to the environmental costs of what Nehru had famously called the Temples of Modern India: dams aimed to irrigate the land and generate power yet resulting tragically in submerged forests, ravaged ecosystems, and millions of hectares of land either water-logged or salt-affected, instead. A strangely resonant bond between the natural environment and those most disadvantaged in the wake of dam constructions and the subsequent displacement of entire communities, the dalits among them, develops during the night of Velutha's brutal beating. Then, as the policemen wade through thickets of vines and unbending grass, "giant spider webs . . . spread like whispered gossip from tree to tree (289), while "Gray squirrels streaked down mottled trunks of rubber trees that slanted towards the sun. Old scars slashed across their bark. Sealed. Healed. Untapped" (290). As if imbued with a sense of solidarity, nature reveals itself as a silent yet vigilant witness of the tragic events that unfold.[110] It starkly contrasts with Roy's portrayal of "The History House. Whose doors were locked and windows open" (290)—official history apparently aware of the happenings yet unwilling to "let them in."[111] Again, the author's words resonate with politics in contemporary India where, as Roy puts it in "The Cost of Living," neither the social nor the environmental costs of dams and irrigation schemes ever appear on the official balance sheet. Rather, there is a deafening silence on both the ecological impact of dams and on peoples' forced displacement.

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[110] As Deepika Bahri posits in "Geography is not History: The Storyteller in the Age of Globalization," a notion of nature as the repository of memory accounts for the peculiar mode of narration in Roy's novel: a mixture of omniscient narration, editorial description, and excessive focalization (55). "The tarrying smell of old roses on a breeze," Bahri argues, "remains long after the work of history through man has completed its dire purpose, confined to no one memory but to geography and place itself as abiding history" (58). Ultimately, Bahri's reading of *The God of Small Thing* reveals a "remembrance—not so much as a universal principle but as a doubling of *locus* within and without, of reading local signs for the commonplaces of collectivized remembrance" (62; original emphasis). While Bahri situates the power of recall within local geography and landscape, my own emphasis lies with objects in a larger sense, objects that, in Benjaminian fashion, encompass not only materials found in nature (and possibly shaped and fashioned by human hands) but also sounds (and silences) tangibly passed on from one generation to another.

[111] For a detailed analysis of spatial locations as tropes of history in Roy's novel, see Susan Stanford Friedman, "Spatial Poetics and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*," In: *A Companion to Narrative Theory*. James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005. 192-205.

A more inclusive history emerges only in the novel's final pages, a history that, if presumably "built" by human hands, ends up blending with, even originating from its natural surroundings: "White-walled once. Red-roofed. But painted in weather-colors now. With brushes dipped in nature's palette . . . Like sunken treasure dredged up from the ocean bed" (290-291). "Swaddled in silence. Breathing bubbles through its broken window" (291), as Roy further stresses, the History House emanates acoustic signals, via the bubbles it breathes, that serve as only record of the night's events and circumstances; released during breathing, bubbles, after all, tend to be transparent (unless artificially colored). Their very existence, too, utterly relies on the ability to breathe—the breath constituting the very space in which meaning occurs. Roy's portrayal of Estha as a "quiet bubble floating on a sea of noise" (13) captures the precarious nature of memories that remain (consciously) unacknowledged. Sealing a silent, unspoken past within the interiority of his body, Estha evokes the fragility of memories lingering in the unconscious yet likely to explode or dissolve whenever met with force or vibration. Roy's recurrent allusions to explosives prone to detonate and the weightless fragility of floating bubbles subtly evoke the presence of voices that alternately advance and recede without ever exploding into revelation. They point to memories forever suspended—if in the percussion of the rain or the rhythm of Estha's rocking. The images they finally incite in the reader's mind tend to be vague; what prevails, instead, are utterly distinct sonic impressions.

An alternative, aurally perceivable memory therefore lies just beneath the cracks and crevices of presumably transparent and coherent constructions of the past. If not yet fully "heard," it emerges as a potential witness of a past whose aural signals deeply pervade the very air we breathe. By placing silenced voices, ranging from a woman's stifled expression to the strangled breath of nature, in the perspective of the future, *The God of Small Things* affirms the subversive, invigorating flux of possibility inherent in a memory anchored in collective sensitivity, practice, and experience. It entails an implicit call to leave behind dominant, both patriarchally and colonially shaped, constructions of India's past in favor of a history able to connect private and public realms within a more inclusive and malleable form of remembrance. To be sure, the novel prompts us to locate the forces of oppression. Yet at the same time, it points to the seeds of resistance by constructing the suppressed as victims and agents simultaneously. The novel's final word, then, may suggest a call, if not to the immediate, then at least to a more distant future, one aimed to bring a hidden, private history out into the open.[112] The question of the future hence ultimately reveals itself as a question of aural receptivity. To conclude with Roy's own most fitting views she expresses elsewhere, "Another world is not only possible, she's on her way. Maybe many of us won't be here to greet her, but on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing" (*War Talk*, 75).

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[112] In "After Postmodernism: Performatism in Literature," *Anthropoetics: The Journal of Generative Anthropology* 11.2 (2005-2006), Raoul Eshelman speaks of the novel's last word in terms of a promise: "it marks the possibility of projecting love's presentness into the future. The novel's *story* shows that this projection doesn't work (it ends with the act of grievous incest); the novel's *plot* that it does (it ends with an act of sublime love)" (no pagination; original emphasis). Opting neither for the one nor for the other, I read the word as signaling the fullness of future possibility (even if it has not yet materialized) on one level, and an address to the reader, on another. To borrow Shoshana Felman's words in reference to Albert Camus's use of silence in *The Fall*: Roy succeeds in giving to the novel's final word "the power of a *call*: the possibility, the chance, of our *response-ability*" (203).

Chapter Three

The Pulsing Tapestry of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

> Each thing you hear determines the direction that you go. You just follow the music, and if you follow the music you can go anywhere.
>
> —Steve Lacy
>
> "The Man with the Straight Horn"

A man spreads his blue wings. This he had promised. A woman drops her covered peck basket, spilling red velvet rose petals that get blown about by the wind. Her daughters try to catch them, men join in, all striving to save the delicate pieces of fabric from disappearing into the snow. With this scene of sudden revelation and dispersion occurring in the opening pages of *Song of Solomon*, Morrison metaphorically introduces the multiple, often slippery layers of recollection and speculation that constitute her novel: while the scattered rose petals resemble the disconnected vignettes of the past dispersed throughout her text, the bystanders' attempt to save the delicate pieces of fabric anticipates her protagonist's ambition—in seeming answer to Roy's call to unveil a hidden past—to preserve and (re)collect the fragments of his largely silenced and distorted family history. The extreme delicacy of the woven material and its need for careful handling finally capture what Schacter refers to as "memory's fragile power" (7), a power arising from the finely-tuned interplay of multiple, functionally and anatomically distinct, neural networks each responsible for processing and storing information for different types of memory.[113] By examining the traces of a neuroscientifically conceived memory in Morrison's novel, we shall uncover an intricate and fluid pattern of relations that is both motivated by Relation in Glissant's sense and embedded in the acoustical realm of rhythm. More specifically, we shall focus our attention on the (relational) processes by which the brain/the text entrains its internal neuronal/narrative oscillations to a particular rhythmic structure of incoming data. As a trope of memory, the novel's protagonist, Milkman, will hereby function as a mediator between the continuous revelations pertaining to his family's past and the periodically changing direction of Morrison's narrative.

In his *Searching for Memory,* Schacter elaborates on the multitude of factors contributing to memory's construction, ranging from the nature of retained sensory fragments of experience (the so-called engrams monitored as distinct patterns of neural activation) over the way in which the brain encodes and stores these fragments to the specific cue that arouses or activates a dormant memory—encoding here suggesting the process of linking incoming pieces of information to both one another and preexisting knowledge.[114] Since past experiences as well as current aspirations or goals, following

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[113] In *Neuropsychology of Memory*, Schacter and Larry R. Squire argue that

> Sensory systems are now known to comprise a large number of separate cortical areas with complex interconnections . . . One class of memory systems supports declarative memories, which are the memories of specific facts and events. Within this category, working memory has been distinguished form long-term memory and recognition has been distinguished from recall. Additional distinctions have been made between various material-specific processes, such as memory for faces, words, objects, spatial locations, and so on. A second class of memory systems supports nondeclarative, or implicit, memories. These include stimulus-response habits, perceptual learning, conditioning, various types of priming, and habituation. (311)

[114] Schacter elaborates on the processes of encoding, storage, and retrieval in his *Searching for Memory:*

> Connectionist or neural network models are based on the principle that the brain stores engrams by increasing the strength of connections between different neurons that participate in encoding an

Schacter, influence the encoding, storage, and retrieval of memories, the brain's record of an event ultimately consists of a mere temporary pattern of neural connections.

Schacter's understanding of memory as "a temporary constellation of activity in several brain regions—a construction with many contributors" (66) resonates with Glissant's poetics of Relation. Guided by the principle of rhizomatic thought as proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Glissant's poetics abandons notions of the root—"unique, a stock taking all upon itself and killing all around"—in favor of "a network . . . with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently" (11). Just as memories, in Schacter's estimation, are always inevitably influenced by both past and momentary experiences (*Searching for Memory*, 104), so elements partaking in Glissant's Relation are forever "extended through a relationship with the Other" (11). Relation, as Glissant reminds us, "relinks (relays), relates" (173). In other words, it creates connections among the most heterogeneous aspects of experience; it passes on, it tells.

While Glissant's attempt to forge a collective historical consciousness by establishing a unity based on Relation situates itself within the context of cultural fragmentation and diversity in the Caribbean, it is equally rooted in the traumatic experience of the Middle Passage that Africans had been subjected to: the experience of being thrown into the holds of slave ships, "wrenched," as he writes, "from their everyday, familiar land, away

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experience. When we encode an experience, connections between active neurons become stronger, and this specific pattern of brain activity constitutes the engram. Later, as we try to remember the experience, a retrieval cue will induce another pattern of activity in the brain. If this pattern is similar enough to a previously encoded pattern, remembering will occur. The 'memory' in a neural network model is not simply an activated engram, however. It is a unique pattern that emerges from the pooled contributions of the cue and the engram. A neural network combines information in the present environment with patterns that have been stored in the past, and the resulting mixture of the two is what the network remember" (71).

from protecting gods and a tutelary community," and all facing—despite their diverse cultural and linguistic heritages—an unknown future (5). For Glissant, precisely the experience of a rupture with the past holds the possibility of a new beginning. And yet, the necessity of moving into the future does not preclude a (re)connection with what he lyrically describes as "the blue savannas of memory or imagination" (7); the past Glissant envisions—hidden, subterranean—suggests a deeply intuitive and imaginative mnemonic resource. From a different but no less evocative angle, then, Glissant, like Schacter, evokes memory's highly subjective components. Both understand memory as being shaped by an individual's constantly evolving views, moods, and emotions—by an "unconscious rhythm," as Glissant would argue, "that has not yet been structured into a conscious and collective" form of expression.[115] The analogy between memory and the woven fabric threatened to vanish referred to above, thus, extends beyond their dispersion and (re)collection to encompass their simultaneous evocation of an interlacing pattern, fragile evanescence, and artificial construction.

Sharing with Glissant a historical legacy of enslavement, colonialism, and diaspora, Morrison, too, strives to assemble, reconstruct, and display the divergent elements of the past within the frame of a larger, forever evolving, cultural history. Glissant's poetics of Relation may have indeed provided the very template for her novel's unfolding. Set during the 1950s and 60s, *Song of Solomon* chronicles Milkman's journey from an unnamed town in Michigan to his grandfather's ancestral home in Shalimar, Virginia. The young man had been easily lured to embark on an illusory search for gold, shackled, as he was, to the suffocating standards of his father's bourgeois materialism compounded by the absence of any familial emotional warmth and sociability. *Song of Solomon* reveals the true nature of his apparent pursuit of material goods in ways that reflect the force of Relation in all its senses. Turning to oral practices, to both storytelling and jazz, as sites of memory, the novel reconnects, passes on, and tells.[116]

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[115] Discussing Martinicans' ambiguous relation to language (to both the mother tongue, Creole, and the official language, French, imposed by the colonizers), Glissant links the (im)possibility of a language [langue] with which a speaker can fully identify to what he refers to as self-expression [langage]: "a shared attitude, in a given community, of confidence or mistrust in the language or languages it uses" (*Caribbean Discourse*, 120)—an attitude, in other words, which does not yet have words and manifests itself solely in the unconscious rhythm of everyday speech.

The dynamic fluidity inherent to an interpersonal exchange as envisioned by Glissant's poetics of Relation and so valorized in jazz (of which more below) stands in stark contrast to the bleak, static existence that Milkman, raised in an African American middle-class family, finds himself locked in. Accustomed to parents and siblings each inhabiting their own sphere of solitude and resignation, he feels alienated from those closest to him. When his father shares with him his innermost thoughts and emotions, it seems "as though a stranger that he'd sat next to on a park bench had turned to him and begun to relate some intimacy" (74).[117] Distance also shapes his relationship with his mother. A "dulled ear" (124) is all he is willing to lend to her lamentations, appalled by each and every word she utters (126). His dreams graphically convey his cold-hearted apathy towards her. Mindlessly watching her digging in the garden,

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[116] My argument, therefore, contrasts with Joyce M. Wegs's analysis of *Song of Solomon*. As she stresses in "Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*: A Blues Song:" "Morrison provides several clues that the black music she emulates in this novel is the blues and not, for instance, jazz" (*Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon: A Casebook* 167). The lines between the blues and jazz, after all, cannot be drawn as easily, the latter having evolved from the former. More in line with my own reading, Anthony J. Berret responds to Weg's exclusionary emphasis on the blues theme throughout the novel by stressing jazz over the blues: "It is modern, urban, progressive, and individualistic, but like blues it also creates community and preserves a heritage" ("Toni Morrison's Literary Jazz" 275). For the role of music in more general terms, see Deanna M. Garabedian's "Toni Morrison and the Language of Music."

[117] All further references to *Song of Solomon* that occur in the text proper are taken from Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, New York: Signet, 1977.

> tulips began to grow out of the holes she had dug . . . Milkman thought she would jump up in fear—at least surprise. But she didn't . . . The flowers grew and grew, until he could see only her shoulders above them . . . They were smothering her, taking away her breath with their soft jagged lips. And she merely smiled and fought them off as though they were harmless butterflies. (105)

Notwithstanding Milkman's seeming indifference toward his mother's fate, the dream unveils his insight into the nature of her emotional ailments. It accentuates the suffocating quality of her surroundings, the eerily lush foliage keeping her from taking in air, from breathing and speaking. Oblivious to any potential dangers, she appears to endure and cope with a discomfort not worth heeding. Many years, after all, have passed since the loss of her father and her husband's cruel withdrawal of love and affection. She yet refrains from voicing her unhappiness, never considering a radical break with the past and pathetically content with whatever affection she can receive, instead. The mark of water left by a vase holding fresh flowers during her father's lifetime and her seemingly accidental, if stubborn, act of breastfeeding her son far longer than deemed appropriate by the standards of her local community both create a sense of liveliness within the bleak, dried up emotional landscape she inhabits.

Milkman thus proves to be deeply aware of the lack of warmth and intimacy among family members who evince little that is loving in their reciprocal relations. And still, he resembles his mother in never expressing or verbalizing his latent discontent; like her, he fails to envision any alternatives to his current life. An acute awareness of that which seems amiss develops only with his immersion into a world drastically different from his own, if still within the bounds of kinship. Largely prompted by his father's explicit proscription of any contact with his sister insofar as it in fact enhanced Milkman's curiosity, his visit to his aunt Pilate allows him a first glimpse of another, possible way of living. Pilate's home in many ways reflects the family's African heritage, traces of which seem utterly absent from his own. Equipped with neither gas nor electricity, it evokes, as literary critic Gay Wilentz argues, life in a traditional African village where candles and kerosene serve as the only sources of heat and light and a three-stone fireplace recalls Central African cooking practices. Pilate's habit of chewing on things, too, following Wilentz, suggests a custom common among West African market women often seen with a chewing stick between their lips (130). The critic finally traces the music, warmth, and sense of comfort that permeate Pilate's home, similarly, to her African roots—the three generations living harmoniously under one roof, Pilate, her daughter Reba, and her granddaughter Hagar, being all connected through a deep consanguineous bond illustrative of "the dominant role the female ancestor/mother plays in passing on cultural knowledge" (146). A place where hospitality melds with familial harmony, then, Pilate's home provides those who enter it with the opportunity to temporarily step outside the bustle of day to day life; no ticking clocks reminding them of schedules to be met.

The Realm of Jazz

And yet my own reading situates the particular atmosphere of Pilate's home largely within the context of African American lived experience, more precisely, within the context of a social and cultural experience that epitomizes mutual awareness and exchange: jazz. As we have seen in chapter one of this dissertation, instances of dialogue strongly shape musical practices in jazz. While individual musicians here may play and improvise on a tune of their own choice, they never lose sight of the shared rhythmic feeling or groove which tends to imbue a performance with a sense of wholeness (Monson, 26). Individual performers, too, continually heed a participatory musical framework, simultaneously responding to and eliciting responses in other musicians. Jazz musicians, therefore, commonly liken improvisational processes to conversations, conversations that operate, on one level, as the face-to-face interaction among individual performers, and, on another, as the recognition of familiar musical ideas (Monson, 129). The successful interplay among jazz musicians, as Berliner argues, "depends in the first place upon the improviser's keen aural skills and ability to grasp instantly the other's musical ideas" (362). Both the common use of linguistic metaphors among jazz musicians to capture the essential features of an improvisational aesthetics and Berliner's emphasis on the interactive, sociable dimension of jazz suggest structural and textual affinities between music and language that extend beyond their linkage through sound (Monson, 77).

Pilate orchestrates her household in the spirit of jazz insofar as she creates an environment conducive to dialogue and conversation. Her sensitivity to language surfaces early on in her response to Guitar's peculiar way of initiating their conversation. Amusingly shocked by his outright "Hi," she "looked up. First at Guitar and then at

Milkman. 'What kind of word is that?' Her voice was light but gravel-sprinkled . . . Guitar grinned and shrugged. 'It means hello.' 'Then say what you mean'" (36). As if participating in a jazz session, Pilate expects her interlocutors to signal and initiate (musical) ideas in ways that allow her to anticipate and pick up on the (harmonic and rhythmic) direction another participant (or player) wishes to go—abilities crucial to the success of any jazz performance (Monson, 51; 94). Attentive listening and an ability to sustain genuine interest in what someone else has to say seem to come naturally to Reba and Hagar. While intuitively absorbing each and every aspect of Milkman's speech,

> They took him seriously too. Asked him questions and thought all his responses to things were important enough to laugh at or quarrel with him about . . . The women in the wine house were indifferent to nothing and understood nothing. Every sentence, every word, was new to them and they listened to what he said like bright-eyed ravens, trembling in their eagerness to catch and interpret every sound in the universe. (79)

The scene resonates with a Bakhtinian emphasis on a listener's active, responsive attitude toward another's speech (*Speech Genres*, 68). Not merely *perceiving* Milkman's speech, the women *answer* his words with amusement and resistance, positioning themselves in relation to, even acting upon them. The particular positioning of speaker and listener arguably accounts for the perceived novelty of the words spoken. For, to invoke Bakhtin, each new situation in which a word occurs allows us to "wrest new answers from it, new insights into its meaning" (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 346).[118] Given its semantic openness, a word's meaning is never finished or complete, its tentativeness allowing for only provisional answers and conclusions. Still, the apparent novelty of Milkman's speech arises equally from the women's naïve incomprehension of a world that lies beyond the borders of their own existence. While they attend closely to the sonic facets of Milkman's utterances, they, after all, fail to grasp his words' precise meaning. Curiously, they engage with mere sound, with that which may to some extent appear as meaningless noise yet encompasses the very texture of Milkman's speaking voice: its volume, pitch, and timbre.

Precisely the unique textural quality of Pilate's voice is what incites Milkman to immerse himself in the details of another person's stories in ways he had never done before or, rather, had never been capable of doing. To be sure, Milkman's first steps into the interior of Pilate's house coincide with a visceral assault on multiple senses simultaneously: both Milkman and Guitar who accompanies his friend on this venturesome visit are overpowered by the intense sunlight flooding the room as well as the pervasive odor of pine and fermenting fruit. Yet that which arguably most strongly affects the boys is Pilate's voice, a voice sounding like "Little round pebbles that bumped up against each other" and causing Milkman to speculate as follows: "Maybe she was hoarse, or maybe it was the way she said her words, with both a drawl and a clip" (40). Milkman's perception of the concrete materiality of Pilate's spoken words hence subtly shifts to an awareness of their concrete production. His thoughts point to his aunt's ability to manipulate and personalize the pitch and timbre of the sounds she emits much like a jazz musician whose distinct way of blowing into a horn or moving along the strings on a bass lends nuance to a any given tune or melody. Whatever Pilate shares with Milkman, her attentive interlocutor appears to never loses sight of the personal impulses, motives, and attitudes that underlie and direct her verbal utterances.

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[118] I, therefore, read Pilate's misunderstanding of her father's posthumous utterances—taking his "Sing, Sing" as a request to sing rather than as a revelation of his wife's name—less as indicating, as Jeanne Rosier Smith notes, "Pilate's lack of access to her own family's past" (127) than as pointing to the always contextually determined meaning of language. Remembering her father as a loving, compassionate man, Pilate arguably inferred his request to sing from situational circumstances; "To sing," after all, "relieved her gloom immediately (147)."

A conspicuous voice and manner of speech combine with equally distinctive gestures. Milkman's father vividly remembers Pilate as a girl, "her face . . . animated by her constantly moving lips. She chewed things . . . She kept things in her mouth—straw from brooms, gristle, buttons, seeds, leaves, string, and her favorite . . . rubber bands and India rubber erasers. Her lips were alive with small movements" (30). Pilate resolutely carries her childhood idiosyncrasies into adulthood; prone to "[hum] and [chew] things all the time" (135), she would "[play] an orange seed around in her mouth" (42) while cooking or, wrapped in astonishment at something awesomely mysterious, "[pick] at the window sill until she had a splinter of wood and put it in her mouth" (186). A backdrop to each and every action she performs, the sound of Pilate's rhythmic chewing forever marks her place, drawing the attention of others. Silent only to a casual, non-discerning observer, her lips emit a steady audible pulse curiously reminiscent of what is known as the "walking bass" in jazz parlance: the rhythmic-harmonic foundation outlining the pulsative path in a performance.

Like the jazz bassist who provides a regular, almost heartbeat-like, rhythmic framework, guiding the band through interactively evolving chord progressions, the steady movements of Pilate's lips anchor the often unpredictable turns her actions and conversations with others may take. As if seamlessly infusing her personality, they reflect her inner calmness and equilibrium known to overshadow all her eccentricities (138). A mediator of interpersonal relations, Pilate, after all, offers her balanced views to whoever seeks her advice (150). Her stabilizing role literally manifests itself when she encounters a man who believes himself falling off a cliff while standing firmly on his own kitchen floor.[119] Much like the solid road many jazz musicians imagine themselves to travel on during a bass-oriented performance, Pilate grounds the man by holding on to him, calming his agitated heart (41). With the solidity of her grip withdrawn, the man "fell dead-weight to the floor" (41-42). Similarly, to return to the realm of jazz, "If the bass line falters or stops, the soloist can feel like a driver who hits a pothole or—in more extreme cases—drives off a cliff" (Overthrow and Ferguson, 122), the imagery of those lines resonating tellingly with the terrified man's apparent delusion.

The subtle affinity between Pilate's nature and musical expression surfaces throughout the novel. During her conversation with Milkman and Guitar, for example, she clearly operates musically: intent to shift attention away from a subject at which

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[119] As David Overthrow and Tim Ferguson state, "When playing walking bass lines, the bassists outlines the harmony (chord progression) and grooves with the drums while being the time keeper and playing predominantly quarter notes (47) . . . Musicians often say that the bass is like the 'road' that the other musicians travel on or that it's the 'heartbeat' of the band . . . The bass needs to have the consistency of a heartbeat and the solidity of a road, and it's true that the other musicians need the road to travel on" (*The Total Jazz Bassist: Book & CD* 122).

Milkman appears to take deep offense, she "changed rhythm on them" (39) by offering them a soft-boiled egg. Perhaps only though Pilate's influence, too, are Milkman and Guitar able to sense the underlying rhythmic connection between the two near the end of the novel: "They looked at each other for a minute. No, less. Just long enough for the heart of each man to adjust its throb to the downbeat of the other" (295).

Just as crucial to Pilate's ability to draw her listeners in as her personal vocal style, then, are gestures paced in ways that accommodate an awareness of present sensory impressions. Up until Milkman's encounter with his aunt, his attention had been largely focused on the past and often forcibly so as when riding in the family's car as a child and having to face backward which "was like flying blind, and not knowing where he was going—just where he had been" (32). Apathetic toward the future, to follow Morrison's metaphor further, Milkman yet fails to truly contemplate even the past. After all, he merely witnesses the scenery in passing—like the "trees . . . houses and children slipping into the space the automobile had left behind" (32), the past, too, speedily sliding away from his grasp. Pilate's vocal rhythms arguably counteract the fragmented attention characterizing the modern urban milieu Milkman inhabits. Like the walking bass in jazz keeping time and thus grounding the players' varied musical flourishes, they incite a perceptual move away from distracting or lingering thoughts towards experiences in the here-and-now, experiences ranging from Pilate's sensual enjoyment of the taste and texture of the things she chews to Milkman's exhilaration of walking the earth to which we shall return shortly.

Pilate's power to engage her listeners makes her first and foremost a mediator between generations.[120] While Milkman's parents fail to incite their son's interest in the stories they tell, Pilate captures his attention without any apparent eagerness to do so. Inviting him and Guitar to share one of her culinary specialties, a soft-boiled egg, she instantly draws them into what seems a step-by-step cooking demonstration by someone seasoned in the profession. Both the bizarreness of the occasion and the boys' eagerness to "be with her, to go inside the wine house of this lady who had one earring, no navel, and looked like a tall black tree" (39) seem to account for their willingness to indulge her wishes. Born, indeed, without a navel and posthumously communicating with her father, Pilate emits an air of mystery and magic throughout the novel. Pilate's supernatural qualities notwithstanding, her magical presence stems mainly from her mastery of the art of storytelling. If Pilate's ease of pulling her audience in provides a glimpse of her highly developed communicative skills, it is also worth mention as a curious survival of something long deemed lost. For with the advent of modernity, as Benjamin put it so famously, "the art of storytelling is coming to an end" ("The Storyteller," 83). Following Benjamin, "storytelling is always the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost . . . when there is no more weaving and spinning to go on while they are being listened to" (91). According to Benjamin, then, only those seized by the delicate rhythms of artisan labor truly absorb and retain stories told; utterly self-forgetful, they let go of conscious, purposive thoughts and emotions. Precisely the ensuing mental relaxation is what ultimately allows for the unmediated integration of orally conveyed experiences.

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[120] For portrayals of Pilate as a traditional storyteller, see Joseph T. Skerrett's "Recitations to the Griot: Storytelling and Learning in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*" and P. Gabrielle Foreman's "Past-On Stories: History and the Magically Real, Morrison and Allende on Call."

Pilate's pebbly voice creates an almost hypnotic state of mind among her audience that curiously resembles the state of self-forgetfulness detailed above—unsurprisingly perhaps, given the resonance of its rhythmic sound of colliding pebbles with the rhythms of pre-modern artisan labor. Mingling with the narcotic, strangely comforting smell of wine and the blinding sunlight at her home, it contributes to the boys' "pleasant semi-stupor, listening to her go on and on . . . " (40). What may at first glance register as a dulled or suspended sensibility in fact approximates an act of self-forgetful listening in Benjamin's sense, one that facilitates, indeed allows for the immediate assimilation of stories into lived experience ("The Storyteller," 91). Neither weaving nor spinning, Pilate still displays the skills of an artisan. She is, after all, engaged in activities, ranging from cooking over traditional wine making to the fashioning and design of an earring, that require manual dexterity, even artistic skill. Like weaving and spinning, her occupations form part of the daily rhythms of a communal life marked by the lively exchange between generations. Pilate's extensive travels no doubt enhanced her interest in the past, while simultaneously opening new horizons. The knowledge and wisdom she thus gained turned her into the very incarnation of Benjamin's figure of the storyteller, one that "combined the lore of faraway places . . . with the lore of the past" (85). In a slightly different but no less relevant sense, then, Pilate emerges as an artisan of words, shaping and molding past events and circumstances the way her lips are shaping and molding objects of her immediate surroundings.

A Poetics of Relation

Pilate’s oral skills and playful engagement with her listeners both reawaken and set out to restore that which Benjamin laments to have vanished. They create an environment that seamlessly integrates each and every piece of information into the vibrant space of human encounters, an environment that weaves relations between objects, situations, and personal experiences. When Pilate begins to share her stories of the past, of how she took pleasure in cooking for her father and was lovingly cared for by her brother when young, she instantly incorporates Milkman into her tale: “Macon was a nice boy and awful good to me. Be nice if you could have known him then. He would have been a real good friend to you, too” (40). Quite unexpectedly, the withdrawn, cold, and strict father known too well to Milkman and his family becomes the emotionally engaged brother, his watchful eye forever fixed upon his sister. By imagining her nephew right alongside this kind and caring young man, Pilate adds a new dimension to her past experiences; she slightly changes her image of the past, Milkman’s presence a crucial part of it now. That which, therefore, matters most to Pilate whenever immersed in thoughts of the past is less the specific time and place than the actual experience of the occurrence. Her efforts to render the situational circumstances that profoundly shaped her experiences in the past, however, seem utterly lost on Guitar as the following passage indicates:

> “Who shot your daddy? Did you say somebody shot him?”
>
> Guitar was fascinated, his eyes glittering with lights.
>
> “Five feet into the air . . . “

> “Who?”
>
> “I don’t know who and I don’t know why. I just know what I’m telling you: what, when, and where.”
>
> “You didn’t say where.” He was insistent.
>
> “I did too. Off a fence.”
>
> “Where was the fence?”
>
> ”On our farm.”
>
> Guitar laughed, but his eyes were too shiny to convey much humor. “Where was the farm?”
>
> “Montour County.”
>
> He gave up on “where.” ”Well, when then?”
>
> “When he sat there—on the fence.”
>
> Guitar felt like a frustrated detective. “What year?”
>
> “The year they shot them Irish people down in the streets. Was a good year for guns and gravediggers, I know that.” (42)

What motivates Pilate’s storytelling, then, is the pursuit of capturing the spirit of times past: the prevailing atmosphere, attitudes, and concerns. Alluding to the explosion of political violence spurred by Irish Republican activities in the 1920s and 1930s, her words convey her indignant cynicism in the face of the events’ horrific and disturbing consequences. Put in Benjamin’s terms, they hint less at isolated, temporally locatable events (or so-called *Erlebnis)* than at the shape which these events take when viewed from Pilate’s particular angle of vision in the here-and-now. To which extent does it truly matter when and where the events occurred in order for them to register as both relevant and memorable? Images of a fence or a street, of rural and urban landscapes caught in the throes of violence, may be more crucial than we imagine to limning the historical reality of Pilate's youth, a reality as it emerged from social and racial injustice. In a similar vein, rather than identify the person who shot her father, Pilate, instead, accentuates the absurdity of the murder: "Five feet into the air . . . ," she stresses, as if to soften her own disbelief. To, therefore, look for logical, causal relationships in the stories she tells is to err significantly from the irrational path forged by militant movements, shrewd land speculators, and unscrupulous lawyers; as we learn, Pilate's father was among those rural African American farmers who lacked access to essential legal assistance and fell prey to economic and political pressures. An aspiring detective such as Guitar would indeed remain utterly dissatisfied with his search for informational clues in the stories Pilate tells. Storytelling, after all, involves an exchange of experience rather than information. In the words of Benjamin,

> The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time.[121] ("The Storyteller," 90)

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[121] Benjamin's words resonate with Glissant's reflections on cultural agents in today's society, including but not limited to the media, which have contributed to an accelerated sense of time and an experience of immediacy that shifted the focus of attention away from the temporal dimensions of past and future toward the present moment. The human capacity to adapt to and participate in the world around hence coincides

While an exchange of information may lead to critical reasoning and rational appraisal, an exchange of experiences incites intuitive, profoundly emotional, and often unpredictable responses varying with each shift in perspective. When Milkman, for instance, becomes a witness to the multivoiced, communal trading of stories at Tommy's Barbershop, it takes some effort on his part to follow the "crisscrossed conversations" (80) addressing the news of a black boy's murder, allegedly for whistling at a white woman. Perhaps inevitably given the emotionally charged nature of the event, it is not informational detail that dominates the conversation. True, it may be possible to gather the facts behind the gruesome deed. And yet, those facts refract on their passage through the human environment: "What'd he do it for?" asked Freddie. "He knew he was in Mississippi. What he think that was? Tom Sawyer Land?" . . . "Ain't no law for no colored man except the one sends him to the chair," said Guitar" (81-82). The boy's violent death sets the stage for an avalanche of biting social criticism and harsh personal attacks directed not only against the one brutally murdered but also against each other. Offering a glimpse into a world shaped by racial attitudes and a lack of legal justice, the men's verbal exchange reveals emotional, deeply personal responses: from a sense of frustration and powerlessness to resentments against members of their own racial group. The imagined situational circumstances of the young man's murder finally conjure memories of events whose violence is considered to match the one under consideration: "The men began to trade tales of atrocities, first stories they had heard, then those they'd

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with the capacity to escape the indistinct confusion of assimilations in favor of an acknowledgement, even practice of "Diversity, the quantifiable totality of every possible difference" (*Poetics of Relation*, 30).

witnessed, and finally the things that had happened to themselves" (82). In concert with Glissant's notion of *donner-avec* aimed at rendering an understanding in Relation, the men view the event through the lens of personal knowledge, impelled, perhaps, to better grasp its unfathomable nature by relating it to their own lives and experiences.

With each of its stories constituting the active fragment of a movement inscribed within an always shifting network of relations, *Song of Solomon* points to a relational poetics in Glissant's sense, one in which "Relation informs not simply what is relayed but also the relative and the related" (*Poetics of Relation*, 27) . . . A poetics that is latent, open, multilingual in intention, directly in contact with everything possible" (32). The act of connecting with another's experience, even one lying beyond clear delineations, here allows for the unveiling of idiosyncratic, multi-faceted, and sometimes hardly perceivable experiential nuances prone to escape abstract *a priori* reasoning. *Song of Solomon* gathers particularity precisely because of its narrative integration of an oral world steeped in storytelling and music.[122] Pilate's pebbly voice coloring her stories, after all, highlights singular vocal hues and textures threatened to disappear in a modern mechanized, standardized world. Similarly, her family's musicality reveals an approach to human experience that accentuates difference and variation, their singing voices resonating throughout the novel. When Macon Dead, tired and irritable after a long, troublesome day, passes his sister's house on his way home, he seeks comfort in the sounds of their music. Lingering, he eagerly listens to "some melody that Pilate was leading. A phrase that the other two were taking up and building on. Her powerful contralto, Reba's piercing soprano in counterpoint, and the soft voice of the girl, Hagar" (29). Jazz, again, unmistakably infuses Morrison's prose: as Pilate's opening solo gradually builds up into an interlocking trio, with Reba contributing a second melody and Hagar's gentler voice tempering the unhinged shrillness of her mother's powerful singing, their sensitive tonal variations on an original musical idea strikingly recall those of a jazz performance. While their singing, too, communicates a mood of liberation, indicative of their stubborn determination to cope with whatever challenges life has in store, its power stems above all from a strong sense of connection, a connection established within a communal space aurally accessible to and thus shared by those listening: "Singing now, [Pilate's] face would be a mask; all emotion and passion would have left her features and entered her voice" (29)—the vibrations of Pilate's voice thus turning into the sole stage of her verbal expressions. It seems precisely Macon's attentive act of listening that causes him to eventually feel "the irritability of the day drain from him" and to connect, if only for a brief moment, with "the effortless beauty of the women singing" (29).

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[122] For an analysis of the creation of a so-called oral memory in Morrison's novel, see Joyce Irene Middleton, "From Orality to Literacy: Oral Memory in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*." *New Essays on* Song of Solomon. Ed. Valerie Smith. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995. 19-40.

Voice and Resonance

The presence, often mysterious, force of Pilate's singing voice forms a backdrop to many scenes and events in Morrison's novel; we will recall the voice unexpectedly bursting into song in its opening pages. Here, Pilate's voice serves to shift attention away from the blue winged man and the woman dropping her basket to a song that appears to spectators like "the helpful and defining piano music in a silent movie" (6). As we learn, "children couldn't make up their minds whether to watch the man circled in blue on the roof or the bits of red flashing around on the ground. Their dilemma was solved when a woman suddenly burst into song" (5). Visual indecision thus gives way to a determined auditory focus, to an uncompromised attention to the fragment of a song that continues to weave in and out of the larger, profoundly rhythmic fabric of Morrison's novel. Modeled on an old blues song, this musical fragment presents a recurring theme expanded, embellished, and sometimes radically transformed by the novel's various characters. First introduced by Pilate, the song is joyfully chanted by children as part of a game and plaintively spoken by Milkman in the presence of the dying Pilate.

We will return to the children's and Milkman's particular versions of the song at a later point. For now, I would like to draw attention to one more instance of Pilate's profound musicality that tends to sustain her in moments of both happiness and despair. On the day of her young granddaughter's funeral, Pilate seems to cope by bursting into song the way she did in front of a captivated audience as mentioned above. Providing guidance, the sound of her singing voice proves, again, "helpful and defining." When first entering the church, Pilate merely utters a shout: "'Mercy!' as though it were a command" (316). "'I want mercy!'" she shouts a second time, "and began walking toward the coffin, shaking her head from side to side as though somebody had asked her a question and her answer was no" (317). Tentative gestures follow her screams: a finger lifted, pointing, and slowly lowered, another "Mercy" less exclaimed than whispered, and one more: "'Mercy?' Now she was asking a question. 'Mercy?'" (317). The ensuing vocal transformation is worth quoting at length:

> It was not enough. The word needed a bottom, a frame. She straightened up, held her head high, and transformed the plea into a note. In a clear bluebell voice she sang it out—the one word held so long it became a sentence—and before the last syllable had died in the corner of the room, she was answered in a sweet soprano: 'I hear you.' The people turned around. Reba had entered and was singing too. Pilate neither acknowledged her entrance nor missed a beat. She simply repeated the word 'Mercy,' and Reba replied. The daughter standing at the back of the chapel, the mother up front, they sang. (317)

A breathtaking spell of vocal control and power, Morrison's compelling portrayal of the musical interaction between mother and daughter leaves both church audience and reader out of breath, if only for a very brief instant. The anticipation of a continuously delayed, stubbornly missing response to the caller's utterances causes a sense of impending doom closely resembling Milkman's and Guitar's feelings as they attentively listen to Pilate's stories: "afraid to say anything lest they ruin the next part of her story, and afraid to remain silent lest she not go on with its telling (42). The reader, too, is left in doubt as to the appropriate response to Pilate's utterances; less indifference than incomprehension seems to motivate the surrounding silence. A forceful command, a cry of distress or disbelief, a secret uttered softly, an urgent inquiry: Pilate's different ways of articulating the word "Mercy" leaves it floating adrift in forever shifting contextual landscapes. To whom, after all, are her words addressed: those who pursue justice, those who share in her pain, or those with access to a higher wisdom able to see through the curtain of mere appearances?

Notwithstanding the vagueness of her utterances, Pilate's bodily movements convey an underlying effort to arouse a response. Seemingly determined to subdue speech's evanescence, she yearns for a protective abode or structure—"a bottom, a frame"—that might hold or contain the word spoken. A spatial or architectural logic shapes Pilate's overall attempt to safeguard and preserve words—whether spoken or written. Her act of transforming a small brass box, her only legacy from her mother, into an earring, for instance, proves to be a highly calculated one. Having enclosed a scrap of paper with her name written on it inside the box, she would carry it close to her ear as if to listen to, rather than read, the only word her father ever wrote. The dangling noise of her earring swinging freely from her ear would serve as a constant, less visual than aural, reminder of her origins. Thus, shifting our focus back to Hagar's funeral, we become aware of the subtle contrast between the actual architectural structures we perceive inside the church and the invisible framework gradually emerging within the aural space shared by mother and daughter—Morrison's allusion to Pilate's "wonderful brass box hanging from her ear" (317) here being surely not incidental. Built in relation, the established communal space differs from static, spatial geographies insofar as it suggests what Glissant calls a "totality of relatives" (*Poetics of Relation*, 28) in which "the landscape of your word is the world's landscape. But its frontier is open" (33). Like the word hanging from her ear, fixed on paper yet echoing beyond the borders of its singular source, Pilate's "Mercy," similarly, appears isolated and stoicly expressionless only until it resonates within the walls of the church and is met with Reba's sweet "I hear you." It takes a larger structural, if invisible, framework, then, for a fathomless word to gain meaning, a “frame” or “bottom” that, based on relation, allows for the creation of connections among the most heterogeneous aspects of experience—past, present, and future. The anchor Pilate yearns for is, therefore, not a stationary foundation; rather, it involves a highly dynamic process: an act of memory.

And yet, the lack of shared knowledge and experiences precludes a meaningful exchange between Pilate and her audience. Reba, by contrast, might not know her mother’s precise intentions, yet she relates to her by means of a shared experiential repertoire the way jazz musicians respond in novel, unexpected ways within the frame of familiar musical conventions. If incapable of reading Pilate’s momentary thoughts, she still recognizes her mother’s underlying mood and emotion. The two thus communicate both musically and mentally until the last echo of their singing dissolves into silence. Pilate’s voice emerges once more as she continues to “softly, privately” (318) sing to Hagar, ending her song with words she will repeatedly speak to her audience in an impassioned, conversational manner: “My baby girl”—“Words,” as Morrison tellingly stresses, “tossed like stones into a silent canyon” (319); for the audience remains largely evasive, their glances climbing “no higher than the long black fingers at [Pilate’s] side” (319) and hence seemingly avoiding to look straight into her eyes.

Although Pilate captivates and holds great sway over her audience, she fails to enforce the kind of collective rhythmic movement characterizing the so-called swing of African American spirituals in which, to invoke James Weldon Johnson, the “bodies of a whole congregation, [sway] as if responding to the baton of some extremely sensitive conductor” (28). At the core of Pilate’s and Reba’s ability to relate to one another, after all, lies a shared rhythmic motion—"the deep secret of eloquence" (80), as Johnson argued—tied closely to the skill of timing: "the ability of the speaker to set up a series of rhythmic emotional vibrations between himself and his hearers" (338). Not only did it seem "as though Ruth was going to be the lone member of the bereaved family . . . when the door swung open and Pilate burst in, shouting, 'Mercy!'" (316), setting up a rhythmic feel that continues under her repeated shouts, but Reba seems to arrive right on time to answer her mother's lingering call, both, eventually, "[stopping] at the same time in a high silence" (318). In subtler, but no less striking ways, Pilate's performance furthermore suggests the elusiveness of swing as it resides in the performing body, a body, as Johnson elaborates, that pounds out the beat with the left hand, while juggling it with the other, capable of balancing "a minute fraction of a beat . . . for a slight instant on the bar between two measures" (30). As literary critic Brent Edwards emphasizes in reference to Johnson's graphic description of swing, "Swing is above all this hesitation, this continuing transfer. The rhythm is never lost, but it is never held or captured in the body either: it divides itself into 'fractions,' it parcels itself out, jumping from hand to foot . . . the swinging never settles" (591). Pilate's tentative bodily movements, her finger unwilling to "settle," as well as her act of holding "one word . . . so long it became a sentence" closely approximate this hesitation allegedly inherent to swing—the door "swinging" open at her arrival being here both literally and figuratively appropriate.[123]

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[123] My reading is informed by Brent Edward's lucid analysis of James Weldon Johnson's critical elaboration of the elusive edge between orality and literacy (581). Edwards likens the hesitation, uncertainty, and juggling which pervade Johnson's description of "an expressly black *time* implicated in the swing of the spirituals" (590; original emphasis) to "the action of swinging itself" (592).

Yet, as we have seen, the swinging rhythm of Pilate's performance fails to spill over into her audience. If critics such as Lucille P. Fultz are compelled to unveil the traces of a call-and-response pattern between Pilate and those in the congregation "who had the courage to look at her, shake their heads, and say, 'Amen''" (318), an insistence on the disconnectedness between them seems, therefore, to suggest another reading, one that accentuates, instead, Pilate's failed attempt at creating a sense of community by means of vocal or gestural collaboration.

While Pilate's voice falls short of resounding from within the church's massive stone walls—"a silent canyon"—the silence surrounding the Seven Days, a group of men in pursuit of avenging the crimes committed against blacks by resorting to similar violence against white people testifies even more powerfully to a severance of interpersonal connections. As literary critic Kathleen O'Shaughnessy renders the individual members of the group, "There is Empire State, stricken dumb by his 'graveyard love'; the two Tommys, who can talk only of what was; Porter who can't 'carry' love; the silent desperate Smith; and Nero, whose name suggests the emperor who fiddled while Rome burned" (127). While Smith will reveal himself as the blue-winged man publicly announcing his flight from the charity hospital called Mercy, his suicidal leap possibly ensuing from unbearable feelings of isolation and separateness, the group also includes Guitar whose rebellion against racial injustice will turn into an obsessive suspicion towards those closest to him.

Although less overtly reluctant to face and conversationally engage with his interlocutors than either the gathered congregation at Hagar's funeral or the members of the Seven Days, Milkman proves disinclined to truly listen to other people's words. During the men's impassionate exchange of experiences at Tommy's Barber Shop, for example, Milkman merely bides his time until he gets his friend's attention, more eager to share his own worries and concerns than seriously engage with those of others. Even when Guitar tells him a story meant to deepen their bond of friendship and urges him to listen, he fails to catch the significance of his friend's words, "gazing at Guitar with the wide steady eyes of a man trying to look sober" (85), instead. If Pilate and her family have mastered the skill of listening to and engaging with other people's thoughts and emotions expressed verbally, Milkman, in turn, utterly lacks the ability to do so.

Not unlike a jazz musician gradually developing an aural awareness and sensitivity, Milkman undergoes a rigorous, if not consciously chosen, auditory training throughout Morrison's novel. His initiation into a thoroughly aural world coincides with an experience of bodily fatigue during a hunting trip that proves utterly challenging to a novice like him. For hours, Milkman succeeds in keeping a wary eye on the trail lying ahead of him. However, as daylight fades and exhaustion sets in, his vision yields to an acute awareness of the cacophony of sounds surrounding him: the hunters' shouts, whispers, and tangible silences, the dogs' yelps, echoes reverberating off nearby canyon walls. While still having the presence of mind to notice "the long moan [sailing] up through the trees" (173), the wind, as he learns from one of his fellow hunters, causing the sound of a woman's voice sobbing, his watchfulness soon lessens and he gets clumsy: bumping into big stones, catching his feet in humped roots. Breathless, panting with exertion, he finally sinks down to the ground. Now focused only on the blood pulsing in his temple and the keen burning pain of a cut, he begins scrutinizing his each and every action in the past: the way he let himself be pulled into a hunt for wealth by a materialist father, his cold rejection of Hagar's possessive love, his part in a knife-and-broken-bottle fight while tracing his ancestral roots in rural Virginia. For the very first time, he assumes a critical stance towards himself: "Ignorance, he thought, and vanity. He hadn't been alert" (276). He goes so far as to question his judgments and, on the verge of wallowing in self-pity, ends up disrupting his own train of thought: "He didn't deserve . . . It sounded old. *Deserve*. Old and tired and beaten to death" (276).

Sonic Resonance

Milkman's increased auditory awareness spurs an attention to a word's concrete sonic nuances common among literate poets and illiterate bards alike. His immersion into an almost purely sonic landscape sensitizes him to a formerly less apparent sensory dimension; as we learn, "He was only his breath, coming slower now, and his thoughts" (277). A vague sense of the meaning sonically exchanged between human and animal worlds ensues: "Little by little it fell into place. The dogs, the men—none was just hollering, just signaling location or pace. The men and the dogs were talking to each other. In distinctive voices they were saying distinctive, complicated things" (277-278). Almost imperceptibly, mere signals transform into signs, into a language of gesture—gesture here denoting, as Benjamin's reflections have shown, less a concrete motion of the body than a momentary event whose meaning arises from its positioning within a larger contextual frame ("Kafka," 120-121). Mere literacy, then, proves insufficient for finding one's way through a maze of largely indistinct sounds; rather, it takes insights into an oral practice based on gesture thus conceived that allows for meaning to emerge:

> That long *yah* sound was followed by a specific kind of howl from one of the dogs. The low *howm howm* that sounded like a string bass imitating a bassoon meant something the dogs understood and executed. And the dogs spoke to the men: single-shot barks—evenly spaced and widely spaced—one every three or four minutes . . . All those shrieks, those rapid tumbling barks, the long sustained yells, the tuba sounds, the drumbeat sounds, the low liquid *howm howm*, the reedy whistles, the thin *eeeee*'s of a cornet, the *unh unh unh* bass chords. It was all language. An extension of the click people made in their cheeks back home when they wanted a dog to follow them. No, it was not language; it was what there was before language. Before things were written down. (278; original emphasis)

Morrison's portrayal of the conversations taking place between the hunters and their dogs accentuates their command of an impeccable sonic vocabulary. The non-referential, non-lexical *yah's*, *howm's*, and *eeeee*'s the participants attend to suggest what sociolinguist John Joseph Gumperz defines as contextualization cues: conversational elements "uninterpretable apart from concrete situations" (170) and hence only implicitly meaningful. The key to deciphering these enigmatic cues lies, accordingly, in one's familiarity with the information they carry as well as an acute awareness of the different components constituting the situation in which they occur; here, sonic hues, textures, and nuances take on meaning only with respect to their precise positioning—both discursively and physically. Morrison's renewed allusions to jazz fit neatly into her representation of a state preceding all language or, rather, as she swiftly adds, the time "before things were written down" (278). In jazz, too, the creation of meaning relies on both a profound knowledge of a particular musical repertoire and a masterful grasp of momentary conversational dynamics. Thus, where time-keeping, relatively fixed rhythmic elements integrate with freer rhythmic parts in a performance hall—commonly known by jazz musicians as "solid" and "liquid" aspects of rhythm (Monson, 55)—"long sustained yells" blend with a "low liquid *howm howm*" in the depth of the forest. The echo between the two sonic worlds lies not merely in the way in which single, distinct shrieks or barks approximate the sound of brass or reed instruments in a jazz ensemble; rather, the conversations between the hunters and their dogs share with jazz an interactive, relational production of meaning—both musical and conversational. As competent listeners, the hunters, much like jazz musicians, hence look for socially and culturally informed cues that indicate meaning within a larger framework of relation. Reminiscent of the frame or bottom that Pilate yearns for during her granddaughter's funeral, this framework is not given *a priori* but develops only during the participants' social interaction. Open to revision, following Gumperz, it evokes context-specific expectations regarding the constellation in which verbal or non-verbal cues may potentially occur (171). "The signalling of speech activities is not," after all, as Gumperz stresses, "a matter of unilateral action but rather of speaker-listener coordination involving the rhythmic interchange of both verbal and non-verbal signs" (167).

To pursue a deeper awareness of the world around us, as Morrison's novel invites us to believe, is hence inevitably to develop an increased sensory, and in particular auditory, sensitivity which allows for connections among different aspects of experience to emerge. It is exactly the gradually developing ability to draw connections of this kind that I want to now call attention to by looking at Milkman's different encounters with a children's singing game.[124] When Milkman first witnesses the game, his perceptions are colored by his own experiences in the past. Seeing the children dance around in a circle with a boy at the center dropping to the ground at a given signal, he is reminded of familiar childhood games such as ring-around-the-rosy or Little Sally Walker. Seemingly unawares, he projects his own dreams and longings onto the boy's gestures: his arms outstretched, the boy calls up in Milkman's mind the image of an airplane, the motif of flight, including, but not limited to, Milkman's wish to be able to fly, pervading the novel from its very beginning. The incomprehensibility of the words sung arguably accounts for Milkman's acute attention to the children's bodily movements as well as to the pitch and speed of their verbal utterances; he thus takes particular notice of the children's rapid shouting and twirling leading up to the boy's sudden fall to the ground followed, in turn, by the group's exhilarated screams. Separate visual and aural aspects of the game vie for Milkman's attention—from the children's postural gestures to the vocal delivery of their song in terms of pitch, tone, and volume. As Milkman's second encounter with the children's game testifies, these elements provide a kinesthetic and aural frame that anchors the song's deeply evocative, if not yet transparent, message:

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[124] In her discussion of the pervasive presence of Islam in many parts of Africa and the resulting confluence of African and Muslim folklore, Nada Elia likens the children's singing game to the ring shout generally acknowledged as an African survival, yet, given its strict prohibition on dancing, possibly duplicating the pilgrims' circumambulation of the Black Stone in Mecca" ("'Kum Kuba Yali Kum Kuba Tambe, Ammeen, Ameen, Ameen:' Did Some Flying Africans Bow to Allah?" 196)—dancing forming an integral part of religious rituals in non-Muslim Africa. In a ring shout, as Elia further stresses, the restraints against personal innovation and initiative coincide with highly regulated steps. Yet "the monotony of the circling will occasionally be broken by one participant" whose vocal or bodily expressions deviate from those of the others and potentially signal the arrival of a spirit, as, for instance, in voodoo ritual dance. For a vivid portrayal of the West African ring shout, see Marshall Winslow Stearns, *The Story of Jazz*, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970 (12-13).

> The boy in the middle of the circle (it seemed always to be a boy) spun around with his eyes closed and his arm stretched out, pointing. Round and round he went until the song ended with a shout and he stopped, his finger pointing at a child he could not see. Then they all dropped to their knees and he was surprised to hear them begin another song at this point, one he had heard on and off all his life. That old blues song Pilate sang all the time. (299-300)

Reminiscent of the musical "break" or "cut" in jazz—"in which the basic 4/4 beat ceases and a soloist goes off on a flight of fancy which nevertheless comes back surprisingly and unerringly to encounter the beat precisely where it would have been if it had kept going" (Kouwenhoven, 129)—the shout at the end of the song signals an abrupt, merely seemingly unmotivated, break in the children's performance.[125] What follows this climactic moment, in line with the musical "break" in jazz, is less a conclusion than the beginning of or, rather, the return to another song, one Milkman and the reader are already familiar with: Pilate's blues song. Morrison's layering of the song and the children's bodily movements highlights the crucial link between semantic expression and both vocal and physical gestures. It reinscribes the song's lyrical content within a larger, collective space of embodied knowledge. Just as the timbric nature of Pilate's voice lends each rendition of the song a different quality, the children's postures and vocal delivery of it are, similarly, open to varying interpretations. As we will recall, the boy in the center of the circle lifts his arms and reaches into far space. While his gestures articulate expansion, they, still, might appear as an imitation of flight only to a particular observer. Performer and audience both, therefore, take part in the creation of meaning. Precisely Morrison's reliance on repetition, on the continual return to a specific scene in consonance with the musical "cut" that "overtly insists on the repetitive nature of the music, by abruptly skipping it back to another beginning which we have already heard" (71), allows for improvisational and call-and-response elements to surface in her writing. By, furthermore, approximating the choreographic variations of the children's singing game, Morrison's revolving narration inscribes not only the musical but also the corporeal aspects of jazz; as our reading of Ondaatje's novel has shown, the music's physicality encompasses both the musician's playing of the instrument and the audience's participation through the moving body. Beyond "[privileging] the representation of the speaking black voice, of what the Russian Formalists called *skaz*, and which Hurston and Reed have defined as 'an oral book, a talking book'" (112; original emphasis), to invoke Gates's reflections on the so-called speakerly text, then, *Song of Solomon* proves to be deeply expressive both vocally and gesturally. As "a site where performance does not require a living body" (137), following Bev Hogue's reading of the novel, it performatively represents the experience of musically inspired rhythmic, circling bodily movements.[126]

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[125] "And as if to guard against any Aristotelian misconceptions about an end," the beat, as John A. Kouwenhoven stresses, "is likely to stop on an unresolved chord, so that harmonically, as well as rhythmically, everything is left up in the air" (129). Further following James A. Snead, "this magic of the 'cut' attempts to confront accident and rupture not by covering them over but by making room for them inside the system itself" (69-70). Jazz critics have consistently alerted us to the ways in which the music incorporates distinctive facets of the African American experience, including, among others, its unpredictability.

The Act of Listening

If the children's singing game is to be taken as a representation of improvisational and interactive processes fundamental to jazz, then doubtlessly Milkman's role as an observer evokes that of an aspiring jazz musician faced with musical elements as they appear and reappear in different settings, eager to synthesize these diverse, often deeply contradictory elements. Initially bewildered by the children's continuous shouting of nonsense words, Milkman begins to grasp the words' meaning as he gradually transforms from a self-absorbed recluse into an attentive listener sharing in other people's experiences and visibly more in tune with his surroundings. Thus, in conversation with Circe, the midwife and maid who helped birth both Macon and Pilate and who sheltered them after their father's murder, Milkman closely follows her each and every utterance. Remarks that might have easily escaped his notice in the past are suddenly given particular prominence. In response to Circe's reference to his grandmother as "Sing," for example, he curiously inquires: "'What?' He wondered if she lisped . . . what did you call her?'" (243). Milkman's attentive and responsive listening allows him to gain insights he would have never achieved otherwise. Sing Dead, as his inquiries are answered, was his grandmother's name, the name of the woman who joined his grandfather on a wagon to some place up north, “Mixed. Indian mostly. A good-looking woman, but fierce . . . Crazy about her husband too, overcrazy,” (243) as Circe emphasizes. A meeting with another relative, Susan, confirms his grandmother’s Indian heritage, while further revealing his grandfather’s name, Jake, as well as the latter’s reputation as “one of those flying African children . . . one of Solomon’s children” (321). Solomon was said to have abandoned his wife, Ryna, and all of his twenty-one children; while Ryna was working in the cotton fields, he “ran up some hill, spun around a couple of times, and was lifted up in the air” (323). Up to this day, according to folk belief, one can hear his wife mourn his departure in the ravine near Solomon’s Leap, the place he left from.

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[126] Hogue's analysis of *Song of Solomon* builds on Diana Taylor's distinction between "the *archive* of supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral *repertoire* of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual)"(19; original emphasis). While Taylor emphasizes that "Embodied memory, because it is live, exceeds the archive's ability to capture it" (20), Hogue understands the novel as a site of engagement with an imagined repertoire of performance (137-138).

Set against the backdrop of the various informational details Milkman gathers by listening to his relatives’ stories of the past, the lyrical and gestural components of the children’s singing game acquire distinct meaning. Given his new insights, Milkman’s passive observation morphs into a deliberate act of interpretation that reflects the vibratory link between somatics and narrative:

> The children were starting the round again. Milkman rubbed the back of his neck. Suddenly he was tired, although the morning was still new . . . “Black lady fell down on the ground” was clear enough . . . then “Threw her body all around.” Now the child in the center began whirling, spinning to lyrics sung in a different, faster tempo: “Solomon ‘n’ Reiner Belali Shalut” . . . The verse ended in another clear line. “Twenty-one children, the last one *Jake*!” And it was at the shout of *Jake* . . . that the twirling boy stopped. Now Milkman understood that if the child’s

> finger pointed . . . directly to another child, that was when they fell to their knees and sang Pilate's song. (301-303; original emphasis)

While the pieces of information conveyed in the children's song illuminate the fragmentary details of Milkman's ancestral past earlier provided by his relatives, the clues implicit in the game will serve to fill the gaps in the stories subsequently told. Like Milkman, the reader instantaneously recognizes the connections between the stories shared and the verbal and bodily components of the children's singing game. By thus creating anticipation of an imminent solution to the puzzles posed by the game on the part of the reader, Morrison enforces a dialectic of memory and anticipation intimately connected to what literary scholar Wolfgang Iser calls the reader's "wandering viewpoint" (112), a viewpoint aimed at establishing connections among single textual segments which carry their determinacy precisely in their relation to one another (95). Notwithstanding this "unseen structure that regulates but does not formulate the connection" (196), as Iser goes on to declare, "the reader's own disposition will never disappear totally; it will tend instead to form the background to and a frame of reference for the act of grasping and comprehending" (37).[127] If the readers hence share in Milkman's experience of attentively absorbing the text's various pieces of information, linking them to one another as well as to previously disclosed aspects of the past, their readerly involvement yet crucially contrasts with Milkman's participation in an immediate face-to-face situation. The readers, after all, can neither verify their perspective on particular events nor influence the direction of their always shifting viewpoint the way Milkman can.[128] For instance, it is only Milkman's verbal expression of surprise over the discrepancy between the information Susan shares with him in the presence of a friend and the details she discloses in a one-on-one conversation, that allows him to favor one version over the other: "'I thought you said she went to a private school in Boston" (321), Milkman says in reference to Sing's ambitions. Susan "dismissed the whole notion with a wave of her hand. 'I just said that in front of *her*, Grace. She talks so much, you know. Carries tales all over the country'" (321; original emphasis).

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[127] For a detailed analysis of the novel's dialogic components, see Marilyn Sanders Mobley's "Call and Response: Voice, Community, and Dialogic Structures in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*." In *New Essays on* Song of Solomon. Ed. Valerie Smith. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995. 41-68.

The different versions of the past in *Song of Solomon* hence partly arise from particular situational circumstances. Like the idea theorized by Bakhtin whose "realm of . . . existence is not individual consciousness but dialogical communion *between* consciousnesses" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 88; original emphasis), a story takes on different hues and colors according to the audience present. Although any act of reading always involves the presence of two consciousnesses, that of a reader and that of an author, as Bakhtin would argue, it is only a shared knowledge base extending beyond the borders and duration of the text that allows for the kind of validation of an observer's views and perspectives as it is possible in an oral setting. Morrison's portrayal of Milkman as he listens to Susan's speech lucidly captures the unmediated co-presence of speaker and listener in an oral exchange of experiences: "She talked on and on while Milkman sat back and listened to gossip, stories, legends, speculations. His mind was ahead of hers, behind hers, with hers and bit by bit, with what she said, what he knew, and what he guessed, he put it all together" (323). Milkman thus absorbs and situates most minute details about his ancestral past within a framework that extends beyond Susan's actual telling, a framework that is, after all, firmly anchored in his own past experiences, momentary impressions, and speculative anticipation of aspects still to be revealed.

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[128] And this notwithstanding Morrison's method to "make the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken . . . To use, even formally, a chorus . . . Meaning the community or the reader at large, commenting on the action as it goes ahead" ("Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," 341). For as Iser stresses, "The partners of dyadic interaction can ask each other questions in order to ascertain how far their views have controlled contingency, or their images have bridged the gap of inexperiencability of one another's experiences" (166).

Rhythms of Memory

Milkman's perpetual reevaluation of the past in light of newly disclosed information as well as his continuously sharpening conceptual grasp of events and circumstances accentuates the relational nature of both his particular understanding and the image of the past as it is gradually emerging; while critical to effective comprehension, relational inferences, as we have seen, are the crucial constituents of (historical) representation in *Song of Solomon*.[129] Milkman's increased perception of relations among single narrative elements is inextricably tied to his newly gained aural sensitivity which involves not only a skill to listen but also an ability to aurally absorb and remember words uttered, if in speech or song. Eager to make sense of the words forming part of the children's game yet neither pen nor pencil at hand, Milkman "closed his eyes and concentrated while the children, inexhaustible in their willingness to repeat a rhythmic, rhyming action game, performed the round over and over again. And Milkman memorized all of what they sang" (303). Whether pacing manual labor in Benjamin's terms or inciting the body to move and dance, the rhythmic setting of words stimulates the mind in ways conducive to absorbing and retaining aural information. Milkman's ability to do so determines the very success or failure of his attempt to reconstruct his family's past. Somewhere beneath the rhythmic flow of "gossip, stories, legends, speculations" (323), after all, lie the sediments of a communal memory waiting to be reanimated, a memory embodied within a repertoire of gestures, song, and dance, among other oral performances.[130]

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[129] Less the event as such than its contextual situatedness, for example, lies at the core of Morrison's portrayal of Milkman's knife-and-broken-bottle fight. While the author renders the verbal insults leading up to the fight, she skips the description of its actual happening, concluding, instead, that "Milkman did the best he could with a broken bottle" (268); "You pretty good with a bottle" (269), an observer later comments, a remark simultaneously evaluating the fight and forming the transition into a new conversational exchange.

And yet, rhythm in *Song of Solomon* serves as more than a bridge between the past and the present. It tends to connect individuals by allowing for a verbal exchange via a shared immersive bodily experience. Milkman's sister, First Corinthians, for instance, despite her love relationship with Porter, a yardman she met on a bus, is unwilling to commit herself in light of their different social backgrounds; educated at Bryn Mawr and fluent in French, she feels herself superior to someone like him. Acutely aware of his lover's shame and proud reluctance to display their love in public, Porter challenges her womanhood and a heated, emotionally charged conversation ensues. Resulting in First

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[130] Following Taylor, the repertoire, in opposition to the archive,

> enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge. Repertoire, etymologically 'a treasury, an inventory,' also allows for individual agency, referring also to 'the finder, discoverer,' and meaning 'to find out.' The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by 'being there,' being a part of the transmission. As opposed to the supposedly stable objects in the archive, the actions that are the repertoire do not remain the same. The repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning. (20)

Corinthians's panic-stricken effort to keep Porter from driving away in his car by "[climbing] up on the fender and [laying] full out across the hood" (199), oblivious, at first, to "Porter's footsteps as he moved around the front of the car . . . pulling her gently into his arms" (199), the tension between the lovers finally dissolves in a shared rhythmic sensation. Having arrived at Porter's home, Corinthians

> sank down on [the bed] . . . feeling bathed, scoured, vacuumed, and for the first time simple. Porter undressed after she did and lay down beside her. They were quiet for a minute, then he turned and parted her legs with his.
>
> Corinthians looked down at him. "Is this for me?" she asked.
>
> "Yes," he said. "Yes, this is for you."
>
> "Porter."
>
> "This is . . . for you. Instead of roses. And silk underwear and bottles of perfume."
>
> "Porter."
>
> "Instead of chocolate creams in a heart-shaped box. Instead of a big house and a Great big car. Instead of long trips . . . "
>
> "Porter."
>
> ". . . in a clean white boat."
>
> "No."
>
> "Instead of picnics . . ."
>
> "No."
>
> ". . . and fishing . . . "

> "No."
>
> ". . . and being old together on a porch."
>
> "No."
>
> "This is for you, girl. Oh, yes. This is for you." (200)

A deeply erotic encounter forms the backdrop to a critique of American racial history, more specifically, to a critique of a social reality in which luxury and pleasure are reserved solely, to invoke Hagar's tormenting thoughts, for those who have silky, penny-colored hair, lemon-colored skin, and gray-blue eyes (315-316). Superimposed, the tender implicit lovemaking and the crisply disillusioned dialogue counterbalance each other to create a sense of comfort resulting from a shared experience of loss and deprivation. The only compensation for social and political injustices here appears to be the momentary, solidary bond established between lovers in sync with the rhythm of their speech and, by extension, one another. Again, it is the rhythm of jazz that deeply resonates in, indeed propels the dialogue between First Corinthians and Porter.[131] Alternating the focus point between her strong, repetitive staccato and his softer, more melodic voice, the scene conjures up a contrasting duet between jazz vocalists, their voices swinging back and forth in a visible call-and-response pattern.[132]

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[131] Surely it is not a coincidence that jazz infuses a scene depicting feelings of emotional solidarity. As Monson writes: "While much literature about jazz has emphasized the competitive or cutting quality of the relationships between jazz musicians, it is also important to remember that solidarity and emotional bonds with other musicians are emphasized when players talk about what they love best about performing, what they love most about being a part of a musical community" (177).

[132] Absorbing the rhythmic structures of jazz, *Song of Solomon* also suggests the so-called "jump spaces," the sudden shifts into the future, in a jazz performance. Like a jazz musician jumping ahead, Reverend Cooper, excited about Milkman's visit, is "framing the story for his friends: how the man came to his house first, how he asked for him" (230) prior to listening to Milkman's account.

When music critic Jon Pareles defines rhythm as “music’s connection to the body: to pulse and respiration, to locomotion and dancing, to sex” (20), his words most certainly apply to the lovers’ pleasurably rhythmic lovemaking rendered above.[133] They also—and just as importantly—explain Milkman’s utter exhilaration of walking when leaving the woods with the hunters, finding “himself exhilarated by simply walking the earth. Walking it like he belonged on it; like his legs were stalks, tree trunks, a part of his body that extended into the rock and soil, and were comfortable there—on the earth and on the place where he walked“ (281). Taking one step at a time, mindfully touching the ground beneath him, Milkman attends closely to whatever his feet come into contact with—its feel, its texture. In the past, he may have mechanically walked along a natural path. His current sensations, by contrast, reflect a presence of mind, a capacity for being fully present to whatever arises in the moment, that causes him to experience both his own body and the immediate surroundings in ways he had never done before. His self-assured, jaunty gait mirrors the ease and relaxation he felt when joining in the other hunters’ amused laughter over his fearful and awkward behavior in the woods moments earlier—his very ability and willingness to do so testifying to a new awareness of both himself and others. His bodily sensation of becoming a living extension of the earth thus ensues from an expanded sense of self. To be sure, the carefree, lighthearted laughter accompanying the hunters’ playful banter alone may well have left him more at ease.

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[133] While “[all] organisms are structures of activity, and at every level of organization . . . undergo rhythmic oscillations, vibrations, periodic movements, or cycles,” biologist Rupert Sheldrake argues in *The Presence of the Past*, “We ourselves go through many such cycles of activity, for example, in our chewing, walking, cycling, swimming and copulating” (108-109).

Still, the most crucial and decisive source of influence on his mood and emotions is arguably the beat of his balanced and relaxed walk: its consistent, steady rhythm. In the same way as a person's continuous humming and chewing may be seen to bring relaxation to the jaw and vocal mechanism, Milkman's attitude and carriage of his physical body enhance a sense of relaxation and, by extension, an increased awareness of and receptivity to the most minute aspects of the world around him. Rhythmically induced, his bodily felt connectedness with the earth approximates the sense of groove a bassist may bring to a jazz performance. His feeling of groundedness and connection to the earth, after all, strikingly mirrors a jazz musician's metaphor for the walking bass line, the musical component, as we will recall, serving to articulate the harmonic and rhythmic framework of a tune: "It's like the earth—you walk on the earth" (Monson, 30).

However much an emphasis on jazz-inspired formal components such as improvisation, call-and-response patterns, and rhythm may conceal Morrison's deep concern with the past, it brings into focus a sense of the shared artistic tradition out of which the music's aesthetic properties evolved. As Berliner argues in *Thinking Jazz*, "an interrelated web of traditional performance practices guides this collective music-making process" (314).[134] Students of jazz, therefore, acquire an understanding of the music less by means of uniform notations than through live musical performances within "their own professional community—the jazz community (35) . . . a large educational system for producing, preserving, and transmitting musical knowledge" (Berliner, 37).[135] "Amid the jazz community's kaleidoscopic array of information," as Berliner further stresses, "students glimpse varied elements as they appear and reappear in different settings (51) . . . creating a mental picture or representational map of the structure of each piece from its combined parts" (75). A jazz musician thus infers the core features of a piece from the patterns shared by many performers, while simultaneously extending the logic of previous musical components. Similarly, Milkman in *Song of Solomon* synthesizes the different versions of the past by drawing on both newly gained knowledge and his own imaginative capacities: not only does he draw connections among single narrative elements, but he also fills in gaps and silences, eager to smooth out contradictions and inconsistencies.[136] He, furthermore, attentively absorbs and catalogues the different narrative versions of the past—his ear grasping, like the ear of a jazz musician, familiar aural landmarks and fixing their positions within his own conceptual map of stories heard.

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[134] Berliner's observations capture the complex connections between creation and tradition: "As artists absorb and share initially improvised patterns, repeating them as components of increasingly consistent routines, the patterns shift subtly from the realm of improvised ideas to that of arranged or precomposed ideas . . . It is this dynamic reciprocity that characterizes improvisation as both an individual and a collective music-making process" (383-384). The interactive quality of jazz emerges, above all, Berliner stresses, in the music's call-and-response pattern: here, the statements of individual musicians shape the "call" to which other musicians offer a "response." It ultimately allows the musicians to tell their own story, while always complementing the others'. *Song of Solomon* mirrors the collective dynamics of jazz by moving from an isolated, individual memory to a deeply communal one.

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[135] The lead sheet for a jazz tune may only indicate the melody and the chord changes, for instance. Performers are expected to be familiar with conventional formal structures of jazz such as progressions, vocabulary patterns, and different features of style associated with a specific tune or genre (Berliner).

[136] As Berliner argues in the context of jazz,

> emerging improvisers do not simply absorb jazz's varied conventions. Rather, they interpret and select them according to personal abilities and values, formative musical experience and training, and dynamic interaction with other artists. Ultimately, each player cultivates a unique vision that accommodates change from within and without. From the outset an artist's ongoing personal performance history entwines with jazz's artistic tradition, allowing for a mutual absorption and exchange of ideas. These processes—and the complementary themes of shared community values and idiosyncratic musical perspectives—are already evident in the lives of learners soon after they begin to acquire knowledge of those formal structures of jazz on which their own performances will depend. (59)

Going beyond the mere recovery of single, fragmentary elements of the past by reconnecting these fragments in forever changing constellations, *Song of Solomon* captures the act of memory not only in terms of a *bringing back to mind* but also, and significantly, as a *putting back together*. Again, an erotic scene metaphorically conveys the unifying, binding power of memory, a scene focusing on the intimate encounter between Milkman and Sweet, a woman he meets on his journey to his relatives:

> He soaped and rubbed her until her skin squeaked and glistened like onyx. She put salve on his face. He washed her hair. She sprinkled talcum on his feet. He straddled her behind and massaged her back. She put witch hazel on his swollen neck. He made the bed. She gave him gumbo to eat. He washed the dishes. She washed his clothes and hung them out to dry. He scoured her tub. She ironed his shirt and pants. He gave her fifty dollars. She kissed his mouth. He touched her face. She said please come back. He said I'll see you tonight. (285)

The scene's syncopated rhythm and call-and-response pattern both enhance the impression of a rhythmic, soothing, and carefully choreographed series of affectionate movements and gestures. Also, and perhaps more fundamentally, the scene is a striking display of Milkman's miraculous transformation. Who, after all, would recognize the self-alienated, self-centered man—a man whose facial features used to be "tentative . . . like a man peeping around a corner of someplace he is not supposed to be" (69), who seemed utterly indifferent to the world around him, who was even accused of having ulterior motives when assisting a stranger lift a huge, heavy crate—in the gentle, caring lover who both gives and receives? Mutual tenderness and affection, after all, shape the relationship between Milkman and Sweet. Notwithstanding the transience of Milkman's affair with a local prostitute, the lovers share a level of compatibility and respect for each other that extends beyond an exchange of sensual pleasures; as the scene suggests, Milkman's services include household chores such as washing the dishes and cleaning the bathtub. The healing process that accompanies Milkman's encounter with Sweet, as critics have variously noted, hence involves a careful, loving "re-assemblage" of someone formerly alienated from, now able to connect with both himself and others, thanks to Sweets tender care. Milkman's newfound confidence helps him to eventually overcome his emotional isolation as apparent not only in his intimate communion with Sweet but also in a slowly developing capacity to relate to, even empathize with others. When visiting his relatives, for example, he "didn't feel close to them, but he did feel connected, as though there was some chord or pulse or information they shared" (293). Milkman's rhythmically induced receptive awareness, then, arguably functions as a unifying force; calm, nonjudgmental, and open to whatever arises in the moment, he, after all, exhibits a self-confidence that allows him to feel distant from but, nonetheless, *connected* to others. Compassion and understanding begin to color also his attitude towards his parents. Thinking of his mother's forced celibacy, he shows awareness of how "such sexual deprivation would affect her, hurt her in precisely the same way it would affect and hurt him" (300). As to his father's obsession with "owning, building, acquiring," he now realizes that the way in which his father "distorted life, bent it, for the sake of gain, was a measure of his loss at his father's death" (300). The construction of his own identity thus coincides with the construction or, rather, reconstruction of his own memories of his family, the implied healing process here suggesting the re-assemblage or re-membrance of the scattered or "hurt" aspects of both himself and the past.[137]

Song of Solomon strives to engage past experiences and the mode of their transmission to delineate an oral aesthetic of mnemonic recovery and imaginative transformation. Its polyphony of voices aims to ensure that the past, while closely attended to, remains "a prophetic vision of the past" (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 132) open to always new meanings. The novel's main emphasis hence lies less with the past as such than in representing the process that underlies and constitutes its narrative creation—namely, Milkman's act of channeling the multiplicity of (remembering) voices in a manner akin to the cognitive processing that occurs in the brain during memory development as detailed in Schacter's *Searching for Memory*. In other words, Milkman ensures the remembrance of the past by means of what neuroscientists call elaborative encoding: the act of processing new information into deeper storage by creating a link or connection with knowledge already existing in memory (*Searching for Memory*, 43). If, following Schacter, "the core cognitive act of visual imagery mnemonics—creating an image and linking it to a mental location—is a form of deep, elaborative encoding" (47), I take it to represent Milkman's act of organizing information about his past within an always evolving conceptual map of stories. After all, if Milkman absorbs aspects about a past occurrence—an act somewhat analogous to the brain's neural processing of parts or features of sensory experience —each subsequent remembrance of this particular incident induces a new constellation of brain structures and processes. Not only details about the past subsequently disclosed but also cues that serve as trigger of memory hence inform the texture and quality of what Milkman recalls of a past event or circumstance. His empathetic thoughts of his parents, for instance, suggest an act of remembering through the filter of a later, more mature emotional state of mind. They attest to the truth of Schacter's definition of memories as "records of how we have experienced events, not replicas of the events themselves" (*Searching for Memory*, 6). Memories, then, never truly remain the same but change in consonance with an individual's forever shifting perspective as it ensues from new insights as well as the unique circumstances that constitute the moment of recall.

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[137] The language and images jazz musicians use to describe *groove*—a rhythmic relation or feeling among musical parts and/or individual performers—resonate with both Pilate's joined, conspiring activities of cooking and storytelling and the bath scene detailed above. Within the jazz community, after all, "*Groove* . . . is synonymous with . . . *swinging, burning, cooking, putting the pots on*" (67), while the physical pleasure of being in a groove has been captured in the image of soaking in a bathtub" (Monson, 68; original emphasis).

Insofar as *Song of Solomon* involves a transformation and reconfiguration of past events and circumstances within a constantly shifting pattern of relation, the oral transfer of the past, in line with mnemonic processes, here far exceeds a mere revelation. Relation, we will recall, "links (relays), relates" (173) and "because what it relates," as Glissant elaborates, "proceeds from no absolute, it proves to be the totality of relatives, put in touch and told" (*Poetics of Relation*, 27-28). Given its linkages and relays among a multiplicity of voices—linkages and relays indeed "proceeding from no absolute"—Morrison's novel evokes the very concept of a "totality, put in touch and told." Rather than imposing a pre-established model of relations to which elements must be made to conform, it renders relations as they arise from historical processes and from an individual's synthetic insight into a continuously changing world. While the unique particularities of personal reminiscence contribute their distinct attributes, they are continuously shaped in relation to a larger, collective history. If, for instance, Pilate's memories of her childhood provide a glimpse of her brother's affectionate and caring nature, they gain forever new meanings as they connect with other people's remembrances.[138] "One must focus," as Glissant emphasizes, "on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components." While *Song of Solomon* succeeds in capturing the texture of the fabric woven by remembrance, it, at the same time, conveys the impossibility of rendering every single imaginable perspective on the past. The possibilities inherent in the totality of perspectival conditions, after all, far exceed the already known; the truth Morrison's narrative provides is, therefore, only an approximation (*Poetics of Relation*, 27). Its ambiguous and often contradictory components testify to this "totality in evolution, whose order is continually in flux and whose disorder one can imagine forever" (133).[139] All that remains—in concert with the language and spirit of jazz—is a sonic map of possibilities.[140] An intimation of that which is not yet known, *Song of Solomon* finally moves, in the words of Amiri Baraka (when he was still LeRoi Jones), "away from what we already know, toward, into, what we only *sense*"(160; original emphasis).

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[138] While stories, when put in relation to others' stories, may function, in the words of Trinh, "as a cure and protection . . . at once musical, historical, poetical, ethical, educational, magical, and religious" (140), a disregard toward other people's verbally expressed thoughts and emotions may lead to estrangement and isolation. In his discussion of Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Theodore O. Mason hereby points to what he calls "hermetic fictions" by which the characters seal themselves off from other people (575), ranging from Macon's story chronicling possession and ownership over Guitar's single-minded pursuit of revenge to Milkman's sense of imprisonment and limitation. Only Pilate's stories, Mason argues, facilitate the establishment of interpersonal connections, "by asserting an essential commonality between teller and listener, by engaging characters in stories other than their own" (576).

[139] It is perhaps no coincidence that Glissant relates the workings of Relation to music. He writes: "The only discernible stabilities in Relation have to do with the interdependence of the cycles operative there, how their corresponding patterns of movement are in tune. In Relation analytic thought is led to construct unities whose interdependent variances jointly piece together the interactive totality. These unities are not models but revealing *echos-monde*. Thought makes music" (92-93; original emphasis).

With an impulse toward the yet unsaid, *Song of Solomon* inscribes a form of expression that lies at the heart of the African American historical experience. Both Glissant and scholars such as Gilroy who wrote extensively on the creative and artistic practices in the black diaspora, point to music, along with gestures and dance, by which African Americans "first managed to emerge from the plantation"(*Caribbean Discourse*, 248), other forms of communication being largely unavailable. Building on Glissant's emphasis on a distinctive relationship to the body, Gilroy speaks of African American musical expression as providing an enhanced mode of communication beyond an all-encompassing textuality prone to evacuate subjective agency (*The Black Atlantic*, 76-77). Inspired by jazz, *Song of Solomon* moves from an exploration and profound understanding of the past into a future forged precisely in consonance with an individual's subjective experience.[141] In so doing, the novel realizes a manner of seeing—or, rather, listening—which guides the ear toward the sonic nuances of particularity and difference, while simultaneously anchoring experience in a communal, "subterranean" memory audible in the sounds and rhythms of an African-derived culture and heritage.[142] When Morrison, therefore, ends her novel with her protagonist's unique rendition of Pilate's old blues song—Milkman speaking rather than singing her words as she lies dying in his arms—she brings to bear the particularity of her characters' individual, while communally anchored, experiences. Picking up the familiar beat of the song yet bending its lyrics to match his sadness, Milkman both echoes and reinvents the past.[143] If his words' musical frame invokes the blues, its sense of suffering and patient endurance, the song's newly transformed lyrics point to the creative potential inherent in the very act of listening to and following the music into an open, yet to be determined future.[144]

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[140] Providing a concrete image of the possible, jazz's material sounds of possibility are still, as Nick Nesbitt stresses in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, neither virtual nor actual: they are possibles, the possible as an aesthetic category (168).

[141] As Morrison stresses in reference to music: "I don't imitate it, but I am informed by it. Sometimes I hear blues, sometimes spirituals or jazz and I've appropriated it. I've tried to reconstruct the texture of it in my writing—certain kinds of repetition—its profound simplicity" (Gilroy, "Living Memory," 182).

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[142] By asserting the continuity between individual expression and inherited values and traditions, *Song of Solomon* negotiates the relationship between jazz and the music's vernacular blues roots. Andrew Joseph Scheiber's analysis of Morrison's *Jazz* addresses the author's approach to these often contrastively employed terms which equally, if less explicitly, informs the novel under consideration. While pointing to influential paradigms, including the Black Arts movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, that grounded jazz in "an African past that predated the blues and the plantation experience from which the blues emerged," Scheiber emphasizes the "centrality of these terms, and of their tangled relationship to one another, to a proper appreciation of Morrison's novel" (492). "In answer to the more radical urbanism of some Black Aestheticians," Scheiber argues, Morrison "finds the true heartbeat of the black future not in the pulse of the streets per se, but in a dialectic between rural memory and urban present that fuses old values and methods with new tools and idioms"(492). Although Milkman tends to embrace creative exhilaration and possibility at the risk of abandoning traditional values identified with the rural South, he yet arguably abides to the values set forth in the figure of Pilate—her love for others and reverence for the past tempering her nephew's individualist impulse towards highflying, innovative freedom.

[143] Again, the structures of jazz—"the improvisatory manner and the individual flights of fancy and fantasy held together by a rhythmic groundwork" (Kouwenhoven 130)—prefigure and inform Morrison's prose.

[144] While the novel's ambiguous ending, Morrison, after all, leaves us in doubt over Milkman's survival of Guitar's final ambush, suggests the mere potential of succeeding generations for transmitting the counsel and wisdom embodied in the figure of the storyteller, Morrison's text as such allows for a transmission of the past—if only in the form of an echo. In the words of literary critic Gurleen Grewal: "Morrison's novel performs this linkage between generations even as it registers the griot/storyteller's demise in modernity. Milkman's aunt Pilate, a keeper of the oral tradition, dies at the end . . . The novel takes the place of her absence, commemorating in print what she embodied" (63).

Chapter Four

Telling the Past: Rhythm and Voice in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*

> Storytelling is perhaps humanity's primary tool for *changing* reality.
>
> —Karl Kroeber
>
> *Retelling/Rereading: The Fate of Storytelling in Modern Times*

Trinh captures the simultaneously protean and enduring qualities of stories conveyed through speech, song, or dance in an analogy between storytelling and the giving of gifts. She writes: "The story circulates like a gift; an empty gift which anybody can lay claim to by filling it to taste, yet can never truly possess. A gift built on multiplicity" (*Woman, Native, Other*, 2). Inextricably tied to the human body—to the uniqueness of voice, movement, and physicality—the story itself here takes on a corporeal quality. As a circulating multiplicious gift, it acquires new meanings with each retelling, while retaining the trace of the one who tells. The acts of telling and giving, too, both suggest socially recognized yet to some degree unpredictable instances of mediatory dialogue; after all, there is no absolute certainty as to how the receiver will interpret the story (or gift) received or what the broader outcome of its transfer will be. Both thus mark out positions in a space that holds the possibility of either a weakening or an expansion of social connections—the notion of an experiential bond bringing to mind the at once intimate and literal resonance of Caravaggio's anecdotes within Hana's body in *The*

English Patient.[145]

The transfer of stories in the spirit of gift giving lies at the center of Silko's *Storyteller*—a work both rooted in the author's experience of growing up at Laguna Pueblo, a Native American reservation in northern New Mexico, and multigeneric, comprising short stories, poems, retellings of mythical tales, anecdotes, historical notes, as well as photographs. Steeped in an oral tribal heritage, *Storyteller* displays a narrative approach that locates stories largely "inside the listener; the storyteller's role," as Silko insists elsewhere, being "to draw the story out of the listener" (*Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*, 50). Implicit in its unfolding, therefore, is a negotiation of meaning aimed at creating a connection or bond between tribal and non-tribal horizons of experience, a bond that becomes all the more significant given the continuing marginalization of Native American culture and traditions within dominant political and historical discourses. Silko's capacity to do so stems primarily, I argue, from an orally inspired rhythm that presupposes the active, participatory engagement of the audience and reflects the inventive resourcefulness of traditional, tribal storytellers whose particular manner of telling a story guides their listener's interpretative activities. By examining textual clues to the staging of and anticipated audience response to single narrative components, I aim to expose rhythmic patterns that, if reminiscent of common literary devices, form in fact part of an oral heritage both as repertoire and as practice—patterns inherent, as we shall see, not only to the process of orally transmitting the past but also to the act of memory as such.

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[145] We might be tempted to compare the exchange of stories to the exchange of gifts as detailed in Marcel Mauss's famous *Essai sur le don* (1925), a pioneer work that initiated modern debates on gift giving and its role in forming social bonds. Extending beyond objects to include counsel, hospitality, ritual, and persons, the gift, following Mauss's analysis of pre-modern societies based on gift exchange, is not a fixed entity but the product of social transactions whose meaning is negotiated among different social actors. He writes, "We can see the nature of the bond created by the transfer of a possession . . . this bond created by things is in fact a bond between persons, since the thing itself is a person or pertains to a person. Hence it follows that to give something is to give a part of oneself . . . one gives away what is in reality a part of one's nature and substance, while to receive something is to receive part of someone's spiritual essence . . . Whatever it is, food, possessions, women, children, or ritual it retains a magical and religious hold over the recipient. The thing given is not inert. It is alive and often personified, and it strives to bring to its original clan and homeland some equivalent to take its place" (10). If Mauss's emphasis on the animated nature of gifts, linked closely to his metaphysical explanation of reciprocity or obligation to give in return, "indirectly completed in theoretical terms the very process of depersonalizing and reifying human relations which he himself had criticized" (162), as Gadi Algazi, Valentin Groebner, and Bernhard Jussen argue in *Negotiating the Gift*, its implicit critique of a modern market economy based on commodity exchange rather than personal relations echoes the particularizing narrative gesture on Silko's part.

While Silko's initial first-person narration and opening references to her father and grandfather, in particular their interest in photography and the value of their photographic practice in "telling" stories of her family's past, belie an impulse toward the autobiographical, her narrative situates itself within a tradition that came to embrace the genre of (written) autobiography only in the wake of contact with Euro-Americans (Krupat, 185). In contrast to the western form of the genre focusing largely on an individual's life and experiences, life stories of Native Americans traditionally assigned a significant part to family history and lineage.[146] It is no coincidence, therefore, that Silko opens her narrative with references to "the people of my family and the people at Laguna" (1); one among the Keresan pueblos in northern New Mexico, Laguna is the very place where Silko was raised—she herself being of Laguna Pueblo, Mexican, and Anglo-American descent. Dedicating *Storyteller*, a book filled with stories that she had often heard "told," to "the storytellers as far back as memory goes and to the telling which continues," she positions herself as part of an ancient tradition of oral storytelling.[147] As she carefully inscribes a communal voice into her narrative, she is mindful to assert women's rightful place as tellers of tales. Her reference to the pictograph design woven into the Hopi basket that carries her family's photographs implicitly points to the central role of women in preserving a collective cultural heritage: it is almost exclusively women who are engaged in the production of woven and embroidered textiles at Laguna Pueblo. Inasmuch as the graphic symbols invoke simultaneously an oral and a written transmission of the past, they encapsulate the union which the ensuing narrative attempts to approximate.[148]

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[146] As Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat argue in *I Tell You Now*, "The broad genre of writing known to the West as *autobiography* had no oral equivalent among the cultures of the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas. Although tribal nations, like people the world over, kept material as well as mental records of collective and personal experience, the notion of telling the whole of any one individual's life or taking merely personal experience as of particular significance was, in the most literal way, foreign" (ix; original emphasis). If Native American writers thus adopted an originally Western literary form, molding and shaping it to suit their own purposes, Native American writer Gerald Vizenor still insists that "personal stories are coherent and name individual identities within communities, and are not an obvious opposition to communal values" (*Manifest Manners*, 57).

The Speakerly Text

Silko casts herself in the mold of a traditional storyteller who "speaks" to a present, "listening" audience from her text's very opening. Here, her reference to the aforementioned Hopi basket filled with family photographs creates the sense of a shared visual presence or space: a necessary and constitutive part of any storytelling session. It invites us to imagine ourselves within the walls of Silko's family home, surrounded by objects accumulated over many years and freighted with memories. We are two pages into the narrative, when Silko, moreover, offers a visual portrait of her young great-grandparents holding her grandfather Hank, one among the more than a dozen photographs accompanying the text. The faded black and white picture of her ancestors exudes an air of gracious living and prosperous times past. Her great-grandfather's look is dignified, matched by a flamboyant handlebar moustache, and both he and his wife are dressed nobly: he in a linen suit jacket and she in an elegant silk blouse. While the photographs, as Silko stresses, form part of the stories as she remembers them, they are also crucial to the reader's gradual imaginative inclusion within an audience of listeners familiar with the author's tribal community, both present and past.[149] The narrative focus hence moves from a shared physical setting to a shared imaginative space that encompasses knowledge of family and tribal members as well as insights into the social, cultural, and natural landscape of Laguna Pueblo.

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[147] All further references to *Storyteller* that occur in the text proper are taken from Leslie Marmon Silko, *Storyteller,* New York: Arcade, 1981.

[148] Silko's narrative pattern evokes Native American cultural practices, resources, and knowledge systems that comprise both oral and written components. Tribal oral traditions, after all, find expression in graphic symbols, whether woven, engraved, or painted, that preserve and record tribal histories and beliefs. Wampum, strings or belts made of polished, different colored seashells often arranged in geometric designs, in this context holds a special significance. Used for personal adornment, it was also employed both as a medium of exchange as part of treaty and other negotiations and as a mnemonic device documenting the process of verbal communication between individuals or tribes.

Storyteller approximates an oral storytelling situation by means of yet another narrative device. Although Silko shares her stories of the past in writing, she tends to avoid markers of the written genre such as chapter divisions or titles. Instead, she conveys a sense of "rounds" or "returns" characteristic of an oral performance by means of textually marked "breaks" indicated as much by the insertion of graphic symbols and photographs as variations in text layout. A conversational style, too, marks her writing.

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[149] Jace Weaver highlights the complexity of the issue of audience when pointing to the "reality of a publishing industry controlled by non-Natives (overwhelmingly Amer-European) and the limited potential for a Native readership (due to economics, small population base, etc.)" in his *That the People Might Live* (9).

The lack of punctuation, for example, in Silko's anecdotal reminiscences of Aunt Susie, her father's aunt whom she herself refers to as "aunt" throughout the text, working "on her kitchen table with her books and papers spread out over the oil cloth" and "listen to me to all my questions and speculations" (4), captures the continuous flow of spoken words. Sudden reflective digressions complement her vivid portrayal of Aunt Susie as when Silko voices her astonishment, from today's perspective, at the fact "that she took time from her studies and writing to answer my questions and to tell me all that she knew on a subject"(4). Silko's reminiscences follow her opening remarks on the relationship between her family's photographs and the stories about to unfold without reference to time or setting: "I always called her Aunt Susie because she was my father's aunt and that's what he called her" (3); thus her narrative opens. Although a common literary device, her narrative opening *in medias res* incites less the sense of plunging into a situation that forms part of an earlier sequence of events than the feeling of entering a conversation in progress, of having missed preceding remarks or inquiries and being forced to instantly contextualize the words spoken.

The peculiar oral quality of *Storyteller* may recall the performative rhetoric of apostrophe addressed to an absent other or abstraction. And yet, Silko is far from appealing to a mute, inanimate, or divine object; acutely aware of a modern, largely urban, readership composed of Laguna Pueblo tribal members and non-members alike, including, for that matter, tribal members alienated from their Native American heritage, she tailors her remarks to an empirical addressee, instead. Her text's very opening sets up these two different cultural frameworks: "There is a tall Hopi basket with a single figure woven into it which might be a Grasshopper or a Hummingbird Man" (1). Only along the lines of a tribal perspective can the inlaid figural design be interpreted as either "a grasshopper or a hummingbird man." A non-Native American unfamiliar with Laguna Pueblo legends and myths would most likely fail to recognize the mythical figure in the woven shapes that form part of the basket's textural pattern. While the line's mythical resonance evokes a world of fluid boundaries between material and spiritual realms, its employment of the demonstrative pronoun "there" as well as reference to an object present in the "here" and "now" anchor both tribal spirituality and the unfolding narrative in a concrete, tangible world. If, therefore, signaling a narrative immersion into a cultural landscape shaped by Laguna Pueblo values and beliefs, Silko's opening line, at the same time, creates a sense of immediacy that implicates the reader in what is about to be "told." It thus inscribes experiential epistemologies extending beyond an exclusively native or tribal perspective.

Text and Audience

Silko's narrative formation of an intersubjective community that encompasses a culturally diverse readership beyond the borders of the text arguably results from pedagogical moves aimed at widening the semantic possibilities of her writing. Her didactic challenge consists, above all, in a subtle negotiation between different narrative approaches geared toward a tribal and non-tribal audience respectively. On one level, Silko appears to presuppose knowledge on the part of her readers; she often seems to speak of incidents as if her audience knew surrounding circumstances. The story about a man caught in the act of adultery and publicly humiliated by his wife and her sisters, for example, ends with his relatives "saying all kinds of things *the way they do* how everyone in the village knows" (91; emphasis mine). Silko's phrasing bespeaks her orientation towards an audience familiar with the dynamics of local gossip at Laguna Pueblo. The author's variously inserted "you knows" (93), too, give the impression of her reminiscences being conveyed to an audience acquainted with Laguna ways and customs; functioning as common conversational fillers, they might implicitly call for the listener's verification of what is said or told.

On another level, however, Silko employs the reader's potentially limited interpretive insight as a crucial means of instruction. By frequently immersing her readership into the midst of what seems an ongoing conversation or dialogue, she subtly creates an awareness of the communally anchored nature of oral storytelling. Precisely the readers' initial sense of incomprehension leads them to realize the importance of shared knowledge and familiarity with the social and cultural milieu at Laguna Pueblo with respect to their own evaluation of the stories told. Explanatory commentaries textually marked in italics form part of Silko's response to the reader's narratively triggered urge to understand. Prone to rupture the narrative flow, these commentaries often accompany the author's mention of culture-specific terminologies or customs. Thus, for instance, Silko clarifies the meaning of the term *yashtoah* as follows: it is "the hardened crust on corn meal mush that curls up" (8). As answers to anticipated questions, clarifications of this kind testify to the gradually established dialogue between Silko and her audience, while simultaneously enhancing the oral quality of her writing.

Silko imparts further lessons on storytelling in far less explicit ways. The collective itinerary of orally transmitted stories, for example, surfaces in Silko's subtle, almost imperceptible, shifts in narrative perspective. If *Storyteller* begins as a first person narrative focusing on Silko's personal reminiscences, the author's distinctive, autobiographical voice soon morphs into Aunt Susie's storytelling voice shaped by "certain phrases, certain distinctive words" (7). Silko's transcription of her relative's speech seems almost unmediated: "I write when I still hear her voice as she tells the story" (7). For many centuries, as Irish literary critic Denis Donoghue stresses, the act of reading indeed involved the slow process of converting script into audible sounds. Like the reader's voice in the past, then, Silko's writing aims "to be in unison with the original voice designated, however inadequately, by marks on clay, bone, parchment, vellum, or cloth" (Donoghue, 150). As Silko further recalls, Aunt Susie would narrate particular segments of a story with "great tenderness, with great feeling." Often, too, "there was something mournful in her voice . . . something . . . that implied the tragedy to come" (15); and yet, by the end of the story "her voice would change and I could hear the excitement and wonder and the story wasn't sad any longer" (15).

Silko's impressions convey the highly communicative power of Aunt Susie's oral performance, a power that lies beyond its referential content. As Bauman would argue, "it calls forth a special attention to the heightened awareness of both the act of expression and the performer" (*Story, Performance, Event*, 3). Casting herself in the role of a perceptive listener rather than teller, Silko recalls every nuance of Aunt Susie's speech: her particular manner of telling as much as her ability to be emotionally engaged in the stories she tells. The authentic quality of Aunt Susie's voice, shifting from a tender over a mournful to an energized tone in the course of her telling, appears to stem precisely from her capacity to empathize with the characters whose fate she so skillfully describes. As Silko comments, "Aunt Susie always spoke the words of the mother to her daughter with great tenderness, with great feeling as if Aunt Susie herself were the mother addressing her little child" (15). Her speech's very ability to engage the audience, to both agitate and reassure, is what in fact accounts for the mutual reflexive awareness established between speaker and listener. This awareness goes well beyond the interactive or dialogic components of storytelling mentioned above; as Silko's words suggest, she finds herself increasingly drawn into the story, captivated—and thus affected—by the mere *sound* of her relative's voice. Aunt Susie's oral performance hence, finally, arrives at more than representing past events and circumstances; as "a social event, quite likely with emergent properties" (81), in the words of Dell Hymes, it renders the past as something experientially realized by those attending to its telling.[150]

The Role of Opacity

One of Aunt Susie's stories included in *Storyteller* articulates a subjective experience which, from a non-native perspective, both attracts and alienates. Its depiction of a girl's vain efforts to gather the wood necessary for the preparation of *yashtoah*, crusted, cooked corn meal as we may infer from Silko's description mentioned above, leads to acts of identification on the part of the reader: aware of the girl's intense craving for what appears to be one of her favorite meals, one may wish to have her cravings satisfied.

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[150] As Kroeber emphasizes, "every storytelling performance is unique, and narrative's preeminent accomplishment is the articulation of meaning for contingent events without gainsaying their contingency" (*Retelling/Rereading*, 1).

When the pieces of wood she brings home to her mother reveal themselves as snakes, a fact that leaves the girl "very much hurt" (10), one's initial response may, accordingly, well be empathy—a readerly focus on the incident's perceived psychological shading potentially outweighing any possible surprise at the miraculous transformation of one form of existence into another. If succeeding in rationalizing the girl's pain and disappointment, readers may yet fail to do so with respect to her ensuing resolve to leave her family: "I'm not going home. I'm going to *Kawaik*, the beautiful lake place, *Kawaik* and drown myself in that lake, *bun'yah'nah. That means the "west lake."* I'll go there and drown myself" (10; original emphasis). The girl's stern and drastic resolve to take her life as a consequence of not having her culinary expectations met cannot but surprise, even perhaps shock, a non-tribal sensibility. Viewed from a non-tribal angle, too, one may scarcely avoid reading the mother's eager preparation of the meal only after learning of her daughter's saddening plans as a sign of human irrationality and selfishness.

Still, the girl's unique phrasing—deliberate, informative, repetitive—subtly impresses upon the reader the idea of an experiential dimension that lies beneath the mundane needs of an individual. A chorus rather than a single voice seems to find its medium of expression in the girl's spoken utterances that appear to draw on prior renderings of Kawaik, "the beautiful lake place," while simultaneously preempting possible linguistic inquiries: "bun'yah'nah. That means the 'west lake.'" If the occasion of a committal to suicide appears to be strangely at odds with the lyrical and rhythmic quality of the words spoken—the girl's speech, in Bakhtinian fashion, imposing on particular utterances accents that dialogically collide with previous ones (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 184)—it, at the same time, reminds us, to invoke Kroeber's words, "that every story is simultaneously representation and enactment, conveying meaning but also producing effects, provoking responses" (47). The girl's speech thus, finally, proves to be shocking only if one considers it purely in psychological terms. The work of maintaining traditional food practices is, after all, vital to a culture's survival—urbanization and the development of new technologies prone to impinge on customary foodways and eating habits.[151]

Apart from material considerations, it is, moreover, the story's configural totality that determines the reader's ultimate response. After preparing the *yashtoah*, the mother gathers the girl's clothing and leaves for the lake. Upon her arrival, she witnesses the little girl jumping off the water's edge, wearing a feather in her hair, "right on top of her head," tied "with a little piece of string" (14). Returning to her mesa home, she scatters the *yashtoah* and the clothing "to the east to the west to the north and to the south—in all directions—and here every one of the little clothing—the little *manta* dresses and shawls the moccasins and the *yashtoah*—they all turned into butterflies—all colors of butterflies (15; original emphasis). If the result of the girl's eventual drowning may initially startle a non-tribal readership, even a reader utterly unfamiliar with tribal customs and traditions cannot fail to notice the ritualistic quality of the actions and events so compellingly portrayed. Insofar as rituals are communally endowed with symbolic meaning that lies beyond an individual's realm of influence or power, the story's final episode arguably succeeds in reorienting the reader's attention away from accustomed ways of thinking toward alternative, if yet still unknown, ways of viewing the world.

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[151] For an analysis of the cultural and social significance of food, see Deborah Lupton, *Food, the Body, and the Self*. London: Sage, 1996.

As if signaling a turn to more conventional narrative strategies, a prose piece, entitled "Storyteller" and following a short vignette which details Silko's family's encounter with racism, presents a seemingly realistic portrayal of an Inuit woman's life and experiences on the shores of the Kuskokwim River near Bethel, Alaska. Despite the text's two-column page layout and hence slight deviation from accustomed norms, its division into paragraphs still indicates to the reader an entry into prose. Conventions of different arrangements of words on the page, as literary critic Edward A. Levenston emphasizes, "clarify the *structure* of the text and the *genre* to which it belongs. This certainly helps reveal its meaning, but hardly contributes to it, except in one vital respect—in the way it predisposes the reader to *react* to the text in a particular fashion" (108; original emphasis).[152] Levenston's insights prove crucial with respect to Silko's attempt at directing and re-directing the reader's response—her attention focused largely on a non-tribal readership. Less the reader's full immersion into a foreign cultural and social reality than a continuous oscillation between the known and the unknown seems to be her ultimate goal. This particular narrative approach is evident, for example, in Silko's prose piece "Storyteller." "Storyteller" opens with a portrayal of the Arctic landscape dominated by a sky "indistinguishable from the river ice, frozen solid and white against the earth . . . all the boundaries . . . lost in the density of the pale ice" (17). An air of foreboding infuses the natural scenery composed of motionless and colorless elements, the gloomy setting arguably setting the tone for the story which is about to unfold. Still, the landscape here suggests more than a mere backdrop. A peculiar sense of agency, after all, accompanies the author's descriptions of the sun that "had not moved from the center of the sky" (17), as if by resolute will alone. As Silko elaborates, "It wasn't moving; it was frozen, caught in the middle of the sky . . . in a few more hours it would be weak, and heavy frost would begin to appear on the edges and spread across the face of the sun like a mask"(18). The sun, then, is trapped, forced to immobility *against* its very will. Regardless of the precise forces causing the sun's entrapment, Silko's words evoke an expansive sense of agency attributable to humans and nature alike. Even more, the narrator's awareness of the fluid boundaries between the river and the sky as not being "a good sign" (17) points to a profound kind of knowing born of an experiential engagement with the earth so characteristic of tribal traditions, an engagement that aspires to learn from rather than dominate the environment, that seeks meaning in nature's very resistance instead of obliviously conquering and exploiting its resources.

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[152] Levenston further argues that "Faced with verse, twentieth-century readers tend to seek deeper meanings, to expect symbolism, to accept ambiguities as meaningful rather than unfortunate, to assume an overall harmony and unity of structure . . . Faced with prose, readers tend to accept the obvious meaning as the intended one, to avoid symbolic interpretation, to regard ambiguities as faults, to accept ongoing impressions without looking for overall harmony" (108; original emphasis).

The cruel exploitation of nature lies at the very center of "Storyteller." Here, oil field workers strive to subjugate the earth by means of harsh metal equipment. And yet, the earth stubbornly withstands the violence of the drilling for oil: "The metal froze; it split and shattered. Oil hardened and moving parts jammed solidly . . . The cold stopped them and they were helpless against it" (18). As we shall see shortly, nature's resistance matches the protagonist’s zealous adherence to the dictates of her own beliefs in the wake of an incident that involved the death of a proprietor of a store she used to frequent. The incident ensued after the man had been eyeing her suspiciously, remembering “how she had gone with the oil drillers” (29) which merely fueled his desire and vainly attempting to instigate a sexual encounter. When she resists his advances and leaves the store, he follows her out onto the frozen river unaware of any risks or dangers. While she “ran with a mitten over her mouth, breathing through the fur to protect her lungs from the freezing air . . . he ran without his parka or mittens, breathing the frozen air” (29). He eventually falls though the ice and drowns.

A Multiplicity of Horizons

Critics have interpreted the young woman’s actions as being motivated by her specific intent to lure the man onto the cracked river ice in order to avenge her parents’ murder, a murder committed by the hands of another storekeeper presumed to have sold them a poisoned beverage. When interrogated by a lawyer about the incident, the young woman does indeed unambiguously claim to have “intended that he die” (31) and, unfettered by the lawyer’s incredulity, vigorously insists on her role as the avenger of her parents’ death. If the reader may, therefore, be tempted to adopt the protagonist’s proclaimed stance on the event and, as a result, presuppose the premeditated nature of her actions, Silko’s actual, often bafflingly omissive, rendition of events leaves room for further interpretations. “That [a] story,” to invoke Kroeber’s reflections on Native American myths, “is not always lucid, that it perplexes, is part of its enforcing on its audience the necessity for a active, constitutive responsiveness” (67). Crucial to a story’s creative reception, deliberate gaps or omissions, following Kroeber, "compel the listener to concentrate on the action as action, event as event" (*Retelling/Rereading*, 67) and constitute a major feature of what he calls *minimalizing*, a narrative strategy aimed at reducing the scope of detailed description and most notable in myths (66). To be sure, Silko is far from foregoing descriptive details and narrative nuances to advance her story. Still, the narrative transition from her protagonist's immediate response to the storekeeper's advances, "she twisted away from him and ducked under his arm" (29), to her prolonged run on the ice consists less in a causal relation than a subtle lacuna inciting the reader to bridge any existing semantic gaps. One may, accordingly, wonder if the young woman's decision to run across the frozen river is not the spontaneous reaction to another's insulting behavior. Along this view, her prolonged, hazardous run on the ice may well have been a part of a scheme that developed only in the course of events. While running and watching the storekeeper follow her, she may have unexpectedly drawn a connection between her own and her parents' experiences and, realizing the potential effect of her actions on her pursuer, seen the given circumstances as a chance for revenge. In other words, an unanticipated insult on the storekeeper's part may have provided the justification for the pursuit of a larger cause.

Incredulous of the young woman's version of events, her lawyer offers yet another explanation of the man's death. Applying his own standards of (empirical) reasoning to the given circumstances, he tries to convince her that "It was an accident," that "she could not have killed him that way. He was a white man. He ran after her without a parka or mittens. She could not have planned that" (31). Informed by apparently modern conceptions of what is rational and real, his views may well resonate with assumptions and beliefs held by a contemporary, non-tribal readership. That the young woman could have goaded the man into acting the way he did may seem, indeed, quite improbable within this particular horizon of expectation.[153] If the lawyer's emphasis on the impossibility of her story in light of the man's unanticipated, irrational behaviour does not contradict the presumption of an only gradually materializing plan for revenge, his insistence on the accidental nature of the man's death, nonetheless, starkly undermines the woman's claim to have killed him.

The critics' tendency to describe the young woman as luring the man onto the ice and to thus give credence to her story of his downfall, and this notwithstanding conceptual frameworks that would deny such claims, arguably stems from purposeful narrative manoeuvres designed to unhinge customary modes of thought. Building a compelling case for her story's main character, Silko details the young woman's experiences growing up in a repulsive environment, forced to share her bed with an old Inuit man and aimlessly sleeping with white oil field workers after the loss of her parents. The latter's death by drinking poison sold to them as whiskey resonates tellingly with the gradual destruction of tribal life in the wake of colonization—the introduction of alcohol being only one among the many of its devastating consequences. Silko's focus on white men's sexual perversions, furthermore, bespeaks the sexist ideology of those claimed to be responsible for a loss of male self-esteem among Native Americans who failed to maintain their place within a persistently deteriorating social and cultural environment. As writer and critic Paula Gunn Allen emphasizes, “among most tribes abuse of women was simply unthinkable” (*The Sacred Hoop*, 192). When her protagonist, therefore, claims to have intended the man’s death, the reader may be tempted to empathize with her intention; the killing of someone embodying environmentally and culturally destructive forces, of someone representative of human greed and selfishness, seems deeply justified, morally speaking, despite the fact that the current storekeeper is not, as individual, truly responsible for either the poisoning of innocent people or the foreign intrusion into native territory.[154] True, the reader’s trust in the young woman’s claim is not necessarily complicitous with an approval of her actions. However, the mere *belief* in her words constitutes and implicates the reader in a reality otherwise dismissed as beyond the factual and, by extension, false or untrue.

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[153] I am borrowing the phrase "horizon of expectation" from the literary hermeneutics of Hans Robert Jauss who uses it to designate the artistic or literary norms or conventions shaping the way in which readers judge literary texts in any given period. See Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Trans. T. Bahti. Harvester Press: Brighton, 1982.

Almost surreptitiously, “Storyteller” thus develops a moral position that holds prominence over rational considerations. Its dialogue with its readers causes them to switch, in the words of French historian Paul Veyne, from one program of truth to another. For Veyne, truth constitutes a product of the imagination (xii). The historian therefore argues for a plurality of truths or, rather, a plurality of the criteria for truth often veiled as a plurality of modalities of belief (113). Perhaps not incidentally, given Veyne’s meditations on truth in the context of ancient Greece, his views echo Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday's claim that stories are "true in that they are established squarely upon belief (11). When Silko's protagonist vehemently insists on the necessity of the story being told "as it is" (31), her words might point to the potential ficticiousness of her telling; her story, after all, may well be *merely* a story. And still, her proud insistence that "I will not lie" (31) testifies to the truthfulness of her story, a truthfulness anchored in an approach to physical and human reality in which the role and identity of facts, as Veyne would argue, prove to be "only circumstantial" (37). By sensitizing the reader to a plurality of truths, "Storyteller," I argue, incites a shift not merely in the readers' perspective but, more fundamentally, in their very criteria for truth. It causes the readers to abandon a strict adherence to abstract ethical rules and to adjust their values in accordance with life's contingencies and (often) unexpected turns, instead.

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[154] The “native perception of all whites as faceless and undifferentiated” (335), as Ekaterina Stetsenko has noted, underscores a view of the proprietor as a mere representative of a larger collectivity.

Creating hesitation toward familiar interpretive responses constitutes only a first step in Silko's attempt to destabilize and dismantle the horizons of expectation prevalent among non-tribal readers. Thus, notwithstanding a possible reading of "Storyteller" along either rational or moral lines, an alternative interpretation of the text lurks just behind the surface, one that acknowledges the parallels between the text's mythical and contemporary narrative strands. Critics have variously commented on the role of the old Inuit man's mythical story of a giant polar bear chasing a lone hunter over the frozen tundra in shaping the young woman's contemporary life and experiences. According to Paul Beekman Taylor, the tale both figures the confrontation of the Inuit and the white intruders and teaches the protagonist the subversive power of story (42). Indeed, the old man would describe "each crystal of ice and the slightly different sounds they made"

(26), as if preparing his young listener for later challenges. During her race on the ice, precisely her familiarity with "the river, down to the instant ice flexed into hairline fracture," its "crouching" and "cracking bone sliver-sounds" (29-30), gives her the decisive advantage over a man who "saw clearly . . . [knowing] he could catch her"(30)—his knowledge tragically based on vision rather than sound.[155] Along with an acute aural awareness, it is a deep connectedness to the natural environment that allows the woman to outrun her pursuer: "She moved slowly, kicking the ice ahead with the heel of her boot, feeling for sinews of ice to hold her" (30); nature suggesting a force simultaneously alive and life-saving. While a non-tribal perspective may, therefore, accentuate the story's role in foreshadowing the protagonist's experiences, a tribal view, by contrast, may focus on the thematic echoes between frame and embedded story; both center on the loss and recreation of balance, whether it be one between life and death or one between good and evil.

Seen from the point of view of readers unfamiliar with tribal values and beliefs, the highly rhetorical, often cryptic, language that Silko employs in many of the versified pieces in *Storyteller* incites wonder and surprise. It, too, creates realities that are in constant dialogue with various frames of reference simultaneously. A vague shape that appears successively as feathered creature, wind, and deer, the poetic persona in "Indian Song: Survival," for instance, subtly mediates human and natural worlds; unspecified and smoothly alternating between singular and plural voices, it evokes a sense of oneness and interconnectedness of all aspects of creation. While critics have pointed to the way in which the narrator becomes increasingly more inclusive and eventually merges with nature around her (*Graulich*, 161), my own reading accentuates the lack of any voice identifiable as source or origin. It is true, the reader may register a transformative process as the narrator subtly morphs from one shape into another. And yet, the poem's variously indented lines, moving in rough diagonals to the right within single stanzas, create an impression of motion that captures the constant ebb and flow, rather than continuous growth and extension, of expansive experiences—both individual and communal. It is, therefore, less a progressive movement that radiates out from a single, compelling source than an egalitarian intermingling of forces transcending all possible boundaries that governs the poem's underlying narrative pattern.

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[155] The protagonist's proud display of photographs of himself in "Coyote Holds a Full House in His Hand," another story included in Silko's *Storyteller*, cements the deceptiveness of visual impressions. If indicative of an impeccable style, class, and elegance, the photographs were largely taken by strangers outside of posh bars and restaurants he never entered (260).

Performativity and Subversive Confusion

If readers are able to infer the portrayal of a journey "north to escape winter" (35), they may continue to speculate on the speaker's identity as the poem proceeds. Both humans and animals, after all, may be "climbing pale cliffs [pausing] to sleep at the river" (35). Moreover, the verse format of Silko's text may cause the reader to anticipate a poet's reflections on seasonal rituals. Still, the poem frustrates the reader's initial expectations prompted by a narrative structure and style that intimate the lyrical genre. "I am hunted for my feathers I hide in spider's web hanging in a thin gray tree above the river" (36), the narrator muses. What may, at first glance, appear as an anthropomorphic projection soon reveals itself as an actual shift from one realm of existence to another.

The text, after all, is far from ascribing human attributes to animals and natural phenomena; rather, it confirms the fundamental relationships among all elements of creation and conjures experiences that, evocative of ritual, involve the speaker's body, senses, and emotions. "Ritual," as political scholar Lisa Schirch stresses, "communicates through smells such as burning incense, body postures such as kneeling, noises such as bells or music, tastes such as the wine and bread of communion, and facial expressions that reference emotions" (83). The speaker's experiences of "[sinking] my body in the shallow . . . into sand and cold river water," of "smelling you in the silver leaves, mountain lion man," and of "hearing music song of branches dry leaves scraping the moon" (36), coupled with her call to the addressee to "taste me I am the wind touch me, I am the lean gray deer" (37) resonate tellingly with the formal features of ritual mentioned above. The poem's ritual character yet lies, above all, in its speaker's continuous transformation from one state or condition to another, a transformation that, from a native perspective, "consists of the verifiable, dramatic shift in physical construction of a person or object from one place to another by 'magical' means" (*Off The Reservation*, 116). The precise nature of the magic here involved emerges only gradually as the reader continues to navigate unknown cultural and linguistic waters.

A sense of magic also infuses "The Laguna People," a story which ends with people of a village turning into stone after they escape a flood and find refuge on top of a mesa. As if comforting an audience used to less dissatisfying, since inexplicable, narrative conclusions, Silko adds that "Some of the stories Aunt Susie told have this kind of ending. There are no explanations" (42). Silko thus accomplishes a fine balance between what Iser refers to as "boredom and overstrain . . . the boundaries beyond which the reader will leave the field of play" (275). While the shape-shifting narrator in "Indian Song: Survival" appears as a logical component of a mythical and, therefore, potentially magical world, the sudden, seemingly irrational, intrusion of forces beyond reason into a narrative otherwise marked by linear plot and character development may cause insurmountable bewilderment and confusion on the part of the reader. Given the unavoidable transfer of habitual frames of reference and the ensuing ineffectual attempts to create meaning, readers may find themselves on the verge of resigning to an interpretive defeat only to be reengaged by Silko's direct response to their anticipated resignation. By acknowledging the somewhat unusual ending of the tale, Silko's meta-narrative insertions both testify to the particular target audience she has in mind and enacts a renewed intimacy between text and reader which invites the latter's continued interpretive engagement. The orality of her text resides precisely in its ability to maintain a dialogue with the reader.

A Negotiation of Meaning

Silko's various retellings of the story of Yellow Woman, a central figure in folklore among the Keres (a cultural complex of Southwestern Pueblos), constitute a crucial part in her negotiation between two different and often deeply conflicting cultural codes. The story usually revolves around a young woman seduced and abducted by a ka'tsina, or mountain spirit, on her way to draw water for her family. While Silko's different versions of the tale span both mythic and contemporary realms, the author strategically positions "Yellow Woman," a modern prose version, at the beginning of a series of tales revolving around this powerful mythic figure; the piece is prefaced by a short lyric composed of formulaic language and referencing Yellow Woman and Whirlwind Man, another mythic character.

Filtered through an individual, subjective consciousness, "Yellow Woman" opens with the speaker awakening to sensuous impressions, "My thigh [clinging] to his with dampness . . . the sun rising up through the tamaracks and willows" (54). As in "Indian Song: Survival," the speaker's identity initially remains unspecified, mere hints of meaning pointing to a sexual encounter between a woman and a man. Only the dialogue that eventually ensues between the two characters identifies the speaker as Yellow Woman, if only in the man's estimation of her. For the woman named as Yellow Woman is only temporarily caught in the apparent illusion of participating in a mythic world. As she insists "I only said that you were him and that I was Yellow Woman—I'm not really her—I have my own name and I come from the pueblo on the other side of the mesa. Your name is Silva and you are a stranger I met by the river yesterday afternoon" (55). By situating their encounter in a contemporary landscape, the woman functions as a mouthpiece for Silko's larger audience; her speech arguably preempts doubts the reader may have regarding the truthfulness of the story told by questioning the latter's mythic and hence possibly unbelievable dimensions. The woman deepens the logical distance between the mythical tales and her own experiences when stating that "the old stories about the ka'tsina spirit and Yellow Woman can't mean us" (55).

From the narrator's point of view, then, stories about events that happened long ago cannot possibly refer to a story which is still in the midst of unfolding. Still, as the narrator continues to *think* and *speak* of a realm she considers separate from her present existence, she becomes increasingly torn between two identities located in contemporary and mythic worlds respectively. Her ambiguous experiences testify to a word-magic that recalls the creative faculties of Thought Woman, or Spider Grandmother, the original creator in Keres theology who forever thinks and spins the universe into being (Caputi, 202).[156] Even the reader does not remain unaffected by the magical power of her words. In calling the old myth to mind, her mere act of *saying* that she is Yellow Woman and the stranger a ka'tsina spirit leads the reader to view her experiences in a new, if unfamiliar, light. Silko provides vivid details regarding the nature of these mythical tales in a brief autobiographical insertion; as the latter discloses, these tales might revolve around a mythical character such as Coyote who would go to any length to spend a night with Yellow Woman. When Silko, almost imperceptibly, resumes the original narrative thread, the scene of tentative intimacy between the narrator and the supposed stranger might just as well follow Coyote's first encounter with Yellow Woman as described in Silko's embedded story; it arguably takes a brief moment for the reader to notice Silko's shift back to the framing plot line. The narrator's subsequent musings on the transformation of life into story resonates with the readers' momentary confusion over what they may perceive to be real and imagined aspects of experience: "I was wondering if Yellow Woman had known who she was—if she knew that she would become part of the stories" (55). The implicit connection between the narrator and the mythical figure surfaces in the former's intuitive feelings of both fear and attraction towards the stranger—a sense of fascination and danger accompanying their encounter in many other versions of the tale. "This is the way it happens in the stories, I was thinking," the narrator tells us, "with no thought beyond the moment she meets the ka'tsina spirit and they go" (56). She, by contrast, believes herself to be able to choose whether to follow the stranger or not: "What they tell in stories was real only then, back in time immemorial, like they say" (56).

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[156] Momaday's reflections on the power of words are worth quoting at length:

> Words are intrinsically powerful. They are magical. By means of words can one bring about physical change in the universe. By means of words can one quiet a raging weather, bring forth the harvest, ward off evil, rid the body of sickness and pain, subdue an enemy, capture the heart of a lover, live in the proper way, and venture beyond death. Indeed there is nothing more powerful. When a person ventures to speak, when he utters a prayer or tells a story, he is dealing with forces that are supernatural and irresistible. He assumes great risks and responsibilities. He is clear and deliberate in his mind and in his speech; he will be taken at his word. Even so, he knows that he stands the chance of speaking indirectly or inappropriately, or of being mistaken by his hearers, or of not being heard at all. To be careless in the presence of words, on the inside of language, is to violate a fundamental morality. ("The Native Voice," 7)

Silko's story about a group of witches competing with each other in a contest of black magic suggests precisely a word-magic thus conceived. Here, a witch offers a frightening story and ominously announces that "*as I tell the story it will begin to happen . . . It can't be called back*" (133-137; original emphasis). Setting things in motion and taking on a life of their own, then, spoken words prove capable of shaping and transforming (empirical) reality.

The narrator thus situates the "reality" of mythical stories in a far distant time. Her reflections bespeak an understanding of myth reminiscent of the cultural atmosphere prevailing in ancient Greece. As Veyne stresses, "legendary worlds were accepted as true in the sense that they were not doubted" (17). "For the faithful," he further argues, they "were filled with marvels situated in an ageless past, defined only in that it was earlier, outside of, and different from the present" (17)—pertaining, in other words, to another realm of belief (18). Without any doubts about their circumstantial truthfulness, Silko's narrator, likewise, implicitly considers a change in beliefs (rather than what one perceives as a different empirical state of affairs) responsible for the apparent discrepancy between past and present realities. Mythic and contemporary realms alike here seem to originate in what Veyne defines as the “constitutive imagination of our tribe” (113), an imagination shaped by socially determined criteria for distinguishing truth from falsity. “It is we who fabricate our truths,” Veyne reminds us, “it is not ‘reality’ that makes us believe” (113). The narrator’s longing to “see someone” in order to confirm the illusion of experiencing a mythical reality, to confirm that the stranger she meets at the river “is only a man—some man from nearby—and . . . I am not Yellow Woman” (56), reinforces the notion of reality as an intersubjectively established, temporarily shared social world; if others share in her suspicions, they become probable enough to be trusted. Veyne’s emphasis on the arbitrary and inert nature of more or less distinct, epochal frameworks (118) is crucial to an understanding of Silko’s attempt to loosen the reader’s hold on familiar values and ideas and to unhinge stuck modes of thought. Silko accomplishes this shift in the reader’s perception by drawing attention to the process of belief-formation. Even more, she creates a dialogue between text and reader that performatively *enacts* that very process. Thus, for example, she ends “Yellow Woman” by implicitly offering two different frameworks by either of which the reader may choose to create meaning. While the narrator decides to tell her abandoned, strongly acculturated family upon her return home “that some Navajo had kidnapped me” (62), she voices regrets over not being able to share her experiences with her grandfather whose life had been deeply shaped by tribal values and beliefs. Not only was it “the Yellow Woman stories he liked to tell best” (62); he would have shared her belief that she had been abducted by a mountain spirit and that, eventually, the latter would “come back . . . and be waiting again by the river” (62).

Composed of further retellings of the Yellow Woman story, “Cottonwood” transitions into a less obviously metafictional sequence of poetically rendered tales. Its two parts, “Story of Sun House” and “Buffalo Story,” hark back to prehistoric times, to the very dawn of storytelling, as the narrator in “Story of Sun House” tells us: “(All this happened long time ago, see?) Before that time, there were no stories about drastic things which must be done for the world to continue” (64-65). As in “Yellow Woman,” the protagonist of “Story of Sun House” leaves her family in order to join a stranger: “She had been with him only once. His eyes (the light in them had blinded her) so she had never seen him only his eyes” (65). The nature of her journey, however, differs sharply from the one detailed in the earlier, modern version of the tale; the poem’s very opening signals the decisive departure: “Cottonwood, cottonwood. It was under the cottonwood tree in a sandy wash of the big canyon under the tree you can find even now among all the others this tree where she came to wait for him” (63). The repetitious, incantatory quality of the poem’s opening lines conjures the entry into mythic time and serves as a gateway to ritualistic action: Yellow Woman’s ritual journey to the Sun around the fall equinox. As the performer of “drastic deeds which must be done for the world to continue,” the mythical figure finds herself on a sacred mission to locate and visit the place housing the Sun in order to ensure the latter’s timely return to northern skies. In Laguna cosmogony, symbols such as colors, trees, and birds mark each of the cardinal directions: places where the Sun pauses and reveals himself in his annual journey along the horizon. Yellow Woman, therefore, “did not know how to find him except by the cottonwood tree” as well as by “Colors—more colors than the sun has”

(65). Unfolding under a slow, rhythmic pace, “Story of Sun House” builds up a directional, almost hypnotic force. Long, largely unpunctuated lines, moving in zigzags across the page and often exceeding natural breath, draw the reader into closer proximity with a reality beyond material existence, shaped by a measured, undulating flow of moments. The reader’s sensual experience of language hence arguably approximates the experience of a world that situates itself in circular, mythic time.

The heightened aesthetic expectation on the part of the reader that ensues from the nearly unbroken momentum in “Story of Sun House” testifies to the performative nature of *Storyteller*. More than casting a momentary spell upon its readership, the text serves a didactic purpose by capturing less an abstract notion than the actual *experience* of a mythic world. A gradually emerging space of shared meaning and experience allows for “Buffalo Story,” the second narrative segment in “Cottonwood,” to appear as simultaneously unrealistic and persuasive. From a non-tribal perspective, many narrative components in “Buffalo Story”—ranging from clay invested with magical powers over mythical figures hovering in an ontological no-man’s-land somewhere between human being and animal, to a father’s implicit acceptance of his daughter’s death at the hands of her own husband—may be deemed either unreasonable or part of another world. And yet, a closer look reveals these elements as indicative of socially and culturally embedded values and beliefs and, therefore, as deeply meaningful and relevant to contemporary tribal life and experience. For instance, “the buckskin pouch full of red clay dust” (71) that Spider Woman hands Arrowboy in preparation for his attempt at freeing his wife Yellow Woman, said to have been taken away by the Buffalo

People, conjures thoughts of the world's creation. According to tribal lore, it was Spider Woman along with the Sun who fashioned the first people from red clay. Its use as a weapon to blind the enemy may, therefore, point to spiritual and, for that matter, female inventiveness as well as a deep connectedness with the earth. The sense of connectedness between human, spiritual, and natural realms deepens with the confusion or transgression of their boundaries. When Yellow Woman, in search of water for her family, first notices the traces left by Buffalo Man, her abductor, those traces appear to be those of a giant animal. Yet soon after, she encounters "him tying his leggings drops of water were still shining on his chest . . . It was Buffalo Man who was very beautiful" (69). While the reader may hence imagine the so-called "Buffalo People" as part of a human world, Silko's vivid descriptions of "four big bull buffalo," standing guard (71) and galloping (73), serve to further disorient her readers as to the specific nature of the tale's central figure and disturb their sense of the "real" (even) within the borders of the text.

Not merely marked by ambiguity, Silko's language in "Buffalo Story" denotes both human and animal realms of existence and thus multiple meanings simultaneously. As a trickster figure in Native American writer Gerald Vizenor's sense of the term, Buffalo Man appears as "a loose seam in consciousness; that wild space over and between sounds, words, sentences, and narratives" (*Narrative Chance*, 196), a disembodied, communal sign. Only a socially trained imagination is able to infer its precise meaning, a meaning anchored in communally shared knowledge and experience (Kroeber, *Artistry in Native American Myths*, 227). The persuasive power of Silko's tale, therefore, stems from the reader's increasingly deepening understanding of the kinship ties and mutual obligations that shape the social world the mythical figures inhabit. From an individual's perspective, Arrowboy's actions, after all, may seem cruel and unfeeling: after defeating the Buffalo People in battle and learning of his wife's sadness over their loss, he kills her, too. Still, and perhaps surprisingly, death, here, is not tinged with gloom and terror but rather consoles itself with a sense of shared fate and acceptance: while Yellow Woman, strangely and ironically, longs to stay with the deceased (75), her father, although far from unaffected emotionally, refrains from condemning Arrowboy's deed. "A'moo-ooh, my daughter. You have gone away with them!" (75), he merely laments.

At stake, then, seems less the questionable justice of Arrowboy's actions than the acknowledgement and acceptance of Yellow Woman's decision to leave. A victim from one angle, the latter reveals herself as a central agent, from another. It is true, Yellow Woman initially hesitates to leave with Buffalo Man. "I must carry this water back home" (69), she responsibly explains. And yet, she cannot keep her eyes off of him, stunned by his beauty. When Buffalo Man hence "grabbed her . . . put her on his back . . . and she couldn't escape him" (69), one may wonder if she had, in fact, any intention to do so. Moreover, it is Yellow Woman's dripping urine that reveals to the Buffalo People her and her husband's hiding place in a cottonwood tree. It is she, too, who eventually nods in acquiescence to her husband's implicit suggestion to take her life, thus silently sealing her social commitment not only to those who died but also to those who live on. Her own people, after all, "went toward the East . . . where all the dead buffalo were lying" (75-76), the meat that the buffalo provide answering the need for food in a time of drought when "the deer went too high on the mountains . . . nothing was growing" (67).

Yellow Woman's timely actions—as we learn, "it was at this time" that "Yellow Woman went searching for water" (68)—thus, ultimately, result in an abundance of food desperately needed for her people.

Silko's retellings of the Yellow Woman story discussed so far situate events in a distant time: it was "in those days" (67), "long ago" (68), "when things like that happened" (57). To some extent, then, her narrative approach recalls a Homeric viewpoint of a distant past identified with gods and heroes. Yet if Homer would emphasize distance in time as well as the disappearance (or transformation) of the heroes of the past, Silko, by contrast, creates a sense of simultaneity of archaic (or mythological) and contemporary existence. In other words, she inscribes orality into the fabric of her text in ways that extend well beyond narrative strategies aimed at blending oral and written traditions, strategies employed in both Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.

(Re) Situating the Past

Silko's final rendition of the Yellow Woman tale, "Storytelling," serves a pivotal narrative function in bridging the gap between the past and the present. "You should understand the way it was back then," the narrator emphasizes in the text's opening, "because it is the same even now" (94). To be sure, the text's second paragraph plunges the reader into mythic action, instantly recognizable in the story's, by now, familiar formulaic style, setting, and characters. And yet, a distinctive narrative voice imbues the mythical story with a contemporary presence slightly out of sync with the ethereal, timeless, and lyrical tone of Silko's earlier versions of the tale. "But where shall I put my water jar," Yellow Woman inquires when meeting Buffalo Man at the river. "'Upside down, right here,' he told her, 'on the river bank'" (95). Yellow Woman's unexpected and somewhat curious question, posed in conversational, present-day language, suggests less a practical concern on her part than a narrative device aimed to anchor events in the narrator's perspective of her own here-and-now, both linguistically and spatiotemporally. The transition to contemporary times is fully accomplished in a riveting sequence of textual fragments juxtaposing various narrative voices: "'You better have a damn good story,' her husband said, 'about where you been for the past ten months and how you explain these twin baby boys.'" (95). Mythical details and colloquial jargon here merge within a single line only; the birth of twins, after all, commonly figures in tellings of the Yellow Woman story (*Graulich*, 88). Silko's narration then rapidly moves from a mother's defense, "No! That gossip isn't true. She didn't elope She was *kidnapped* by that Mexican at Seama feast. You know my daughter isn't *that* kind of girl" (95; original emphasis), over a documentary section detailing a kidnapping "in the summer of 1967" (96), to both male and female narrators colorfully describing the particular circumstances of their kidnapping. Silko's mention of phenomena such as "T.V. news" and "a red '56 Ford" (96) most obviously inscribes presumably mythical events into a present cultural and social landscape.

The narrative pattern in "Storytelling" replicates the dynamics of gossip as encountered in the streets or backyard. Not limited to the consciousness of a single character, the shifting voices reveal the thoughts and emotions of an entire community; they carry what Morrison would call a "'back fence' connotation, its suggestion of illicit gossip, of thrilling revelation" ("Unspeakable Things Unspoken," 218). "Storytelling" hence arrives at more than imparting local knowledge in speakerly fashion; rather, it lets the readers eavesdrop on conversations occurring within communal circles and possibly not meant to be (over)heard by those outside the given community. It allows readers, if only temporarily, to become part of a social and cultural environment otherwise foreign to them and to look at the world from this new, insider's vantage point. The conflicting stances the text conveys fuel significant changes in the readers' perspective. These changes are driven less by an attempt to unveil a supposedly "true" version of events than by an acknowledgement of the ambiguities, indeterminacies, and contingencies of experience and, by extension, by an awareness of storytelling as a situated practice shaped by specific interests and concerns. The stakes for the individual teller of tales can be quite high; "Storytelling," for example, ends with one of the narrator's unperturbed, nonchalant reflections on her husband's response to her absence and presumed infidelity: "My husband left after he heard the story and moved back in with his mother. It was my fault and I don't blame him either. I could have told the story better than I did" (98). Curiously, then, the man's decision to leave is motivated less by his wife's inappropriate or shocking revelations than by her story's lack of persuasive power—persuasion lying at the very heart of Silko's larger narrative endeavor.

Embodied Sound and Lived Experience

In its peculiar positioning of the reader, "Storytelling" marks a shift from a concern with the teller of tales towards a focus on those listening. It is true, the act of listening figures crucially in Silko's tellings so far. A willingness to listen, whether to stories of others or to the sounds of nature, after all, enables the young Inuit woman in "Storyteller" to pass on knowledge of her family's past. Similarly, Silko herself relies on stories of the past when writing *Storyteller*, the latter's composition inextricably tied to the author's ability to aurally absorb and remember the stories shared by her relatives. Still, a sense of urgency increasingly accompanies Silko's emphasis on the importance of listening. "You must be very quiet and listen respectfully," the narrator in "Helen's Warning At New Oraibi" demands of the audience, "Otherwise the storyteller might get upset and pout and not say another word all night" (254). A willingness to pay attention and truly listen to, rather than merely hearing, the storyteller's words thus reveals itself as central to the transmission of knowledge and experience.

More ominous than humorous, the poetic piece "Out of the Works No Good Comes From" registers the detrimental shift from an oral culture to a world shaped mainly by visual images. A suffocating sense of loss pervades its first part entitled "Possession." "It will come to you late one night distinctly while your wife waits in bed" (103). With only a few words per line, Silko's opening sets up an uncannily threatening and increasingly alarming rhythm. With staccato insistence, the author establishes the specter of loss as a subtle but deeply disturbing presence, the presence of "something you feel is missing," of "something no longer with you," of "Something . . . left behind" (103-104). Silko's reiteration of the same word turns "something" into a nameless threat—the word having as yet no concrete image to attach itself to. And yet, the reader's attention vigorously fastens upon this "loss so complete even its name has escaped you" (104). The poem's tormenting, dramatically vague mode of expression eventually dissolves into the no less unsettling ambiguity of its final lines: “Listen now before you make any sudden move for your breathing which once accompanied you” (104). The image of death comes eerily to life as the narrator emphatically addresses someone deemed to be no longer breathing; and still, both the presumed moment and the subject of death escape the reader’s determination. While one may assume death in biological terms, its contextual embeddedness suggests, instead, the loss of the ability to communicate orally/aurally. As Donoghue stresses in reference to oral societies, their “reality . . . is construed as mainly temporal: hence its appropriate paradigm is the in and out of one’s breathing” (150). The loss of breath, therefore, arguably signals a loss of speech: the loss of voice and rhythm.

Both voice and rhythm constitute the tangible human presence so characteristic of oral expression. The living, organic quality of the voice is directly attributable to the inextricable connection between its sound and the body. Sound, after all, in the words of sound artist and writer Brandon LaBelle, “sets into relief the properties of a given space, its materiality and characteristics, through reverberation and reflection, and, in turn, these characteristics affect the given sound and how it is heard” (*Background Noise,* 123). The naked voice or, rather, its sound, then, bears the trace of the speaker’s body; its expressive features, ranging from intonational and rhythmic qualities over pace and stress patterns to pitch, intensity, and timbre, possess both individual and cultural connotations. While intensity, for instance, tends to be physiologically determined, qualities such as vocal inflection, timbre, and melody vary according to personal habits and cultural norms.[157] Prosodic contours, pertaining to rhythmic and intonational aspects of language, are among the most individuating linguistic traits; extending beyond mere periodicity, they often encompass an unfathomable rhythmic motion that resists being captured in abstract terms.[158] Their presence, therefore, hinges upon a listener's particular aural perception and is, as a result, intersubjectively decided.

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[157] Performative nuances of this kind form part of what scholars of oral traditions such as Dundes and

"Incantation," the poetic piece that constitutes the second part of "Out of the Works No Good Comes From," depicts a world utterly deprived of human presence. Here, a television set functions as a substitute for social interaction, its faded and hopelessly remote images taking possession of the narrator's home as well as mind. Flickering "in gray intervals" (104) across the screen, the images arrive at more than making the look out of the window seemingly superfluous; "I could walk to the window I would only see gray video images bending against the clouds" (105), the narrator muses. Rather, they color and redefine, along with his perceptions, the narrator's very relationship to his

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Toelken call the *textural* (as opposed to *structural*) dimension of oral storytelling, a dimension inextricably tied to the figure of the storyteller whose speech and bodily performance point to untold yet dimly perceivable attitudes, assessments, and responses that color a particular telling. Resulting from years of traditional development, experience, and ritual practice, it encompasses both linguistic and paralinguistic elements. Thus, "*The Laguna people*," as Silko stresses in *Storyteller*, "*always begin their stories with "humma-hah": that means "long ago." And the ones who are listening say "aaaa-eh"* (38; original emphasis).

[158] "Genetically," psychologist Carl Emil Seashore argues, "the ordinary measure in poetry and music is determined by what is known as the attention wave. Our attention is periodic. All our mental life works rhythmically, that is, by periodic pulsation of effort or achievement with unnoticed intermittence of blanks" (140). Seashore's definition of rhythm as "a projection of personality" (139) proves to be most crucial for our considerations. As he elaborates,

> While the perception of rhythm involves the whole organism, it requires primarily five fundamental capacities. The first two of these are the sense of time and the sense of intensity, corresponding respectively to the two attributes of sound, which constitute the sensory media of rhythm. The third and fourth are auditory imagery and motor imagery, that is, the capacity for reviving vividly in representation the auditory experience and the motor attitudes respectively. The fifth is a motor impulse for rhythm, an instinctive tendency, chiefly unconscious and largely organic. These five factors may be said to be basic to the sense of rhythm. Other general factors, such as emotional type and temperament, logical span, or creative imagination, are intimately woven into the warp and woof of rhythm, but we shall probably find that these are secondary to the primary and basic forces named. (139)

presumed wife and children. For the intensifying shallownesss of his vision, "At one time more might have been necessary—a smokey quartz crystal balanced in the center of the palm—But tonight there is enough" (105), spills over into his attitude towards his loved ones: "lovers are subtracted children multiplied, are divided, taken away" (105), his lines of thought striving to calculate and index interpersonal relations. Trapped in a "narrow room" (106), he eventually loses sight of the human element, "first the blue of the eyes then the red of blood its salt taste fading" (106). His ensuing life is built up, instead, around concocted images at variance with his human perception of the world, "the snow in the high Sierras the dawn along the Pacific" (106), and leaving him numb and uninvolved. Strangely, or perhaps tellingly, he parallels his alienation from others, and even his own self, with the loss of "intensity and hue and the increasing distance" (106) that befell his television set, as if warmth and intimacy were measurable in abstract terms; one may indeed wonder whether the now faded television images were dim to begin with or, rather, reflective of his increasingly diminishing ability to see, perceive, and feel. The narrator's mindless reduction of empirical reality to images on his television screen, "Your ocean dawn is only the gray light in the corner of this room," as well as delusional impressions, "your mountain snowstorm flies against the glass screen until we both are buried" (107), finally bespeak a deficiency that pertains less to the television set as such than to the narrator's own mental state. "Until we both are buried:" apparently addressed to his wife who deserted him, the poem's final lines invoke, once more, the disturbing thought of death. No longer denoting the mere absence of oral, interpersonal communication as detailed above, death here suggests an actual loss of life, one that resonates strongly with Silko's reminiscences about Grandma Amooh who "did not last long" after spending her final years living with her daughter in Albuquerque with "nobody dropping by" and "without someone to talk to (35)—crushed by the absence of human contact.

Unless orally inspired or stimulated, then, the mind may drop into lethargy as colors fade into neutral gray or life into death. Only the tangible presence of voice and rhythm, as *Storyteller* makes us believe, can counteract this sensory deprivation. It is, after all, the storyteller who, as storyteller David Novak puts it so tellingly, "brings touch in the form of aural stroking and warmth in the form of being truly present" (n. pag.). We will recall the way in which Aunt Susie's strong, energized voice conveys a palpable sense of enthusiasm, turning a seemingly sad narrative conclusion into an event filled with wonder and excitement. A sense of vocal touch also surfaces in the old Inuit man's storytelling mentioned above. Immersed, all day and all night, in the telling of stories, the man would "[move] his smooth brown hands above the blankets" (19)—his whole body engaged in the telling. "On and on in a soft singing voice, the old man caressed the story, repeating the words again and again like gentle strokes" (27). What propels his speech is thus connected to a physicality—an intimacy and involvement—resonant, as Ong would have it, with "a permanent inwardness, since sound manifests interiors" (*The Presence of the Word*, 229), an inwardness or interiority always reverberating across and profoundly informed by exterior, social spaces.[159]

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[159] Ong elaborates on the relationship of sound to interiority in *The Presence of the Word:* "Sound . . . reveals the interior without the necessity of physical invasion. Thus we tap a wall to discover where it is hollow

If spoken discourse can aurally caress the listener, it, too, can expose emotional wounds. In "Storyteller," for example, the old woman, in her efforts to tell the Inuit girl about the day of her parents' poisoning, struggles to express herself verbally; her "voice sounded like each word stole strength from her" (25)—its strained sound arguably accentuating vocal overexertion. The old woman appears to be at a loss for words that would convey the horror and sheer injustice of the past occurrence, as well as the deeply felt pain and anger accompanying it. Reaching beyond discursive language, the warped, scratchy sound of her voice is more than a symptom of her emotional distress; rather, it constitutes a tangible acoustic event that integrates seemingly distant events and circumstances into the physical space of present experience—thus bridging the distance between past and present dimensions mentioned above.

While signaling agitation, the old woman's speech, moreover, evolves into a rhythmic pattern akin to "laboring to walk through deep snow" and presents itself in all its physicality when "sweat shone in the white hair around her forehead" (25). Its rhythm above all else, then, is what conveys the emotional burden she carries, "the pain, which was all that remained" (25). An increasing intensity of vocal gestures yet crystallizes in bodily movements that graphically express less pain than anger: when the girl describes her own impressions of the night of her parents' death, the "Sounds like someone was singing . . . something red on the ground" (25), "The old woman did not answer her; she

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inside, or we ring a silver-colored coin to discover whether it is perhaps lead inside . . . Sound reveals interiors because its nature is determined by interior relationships. The sound of a violin is determined by the interior structure of its strings, of its bridge, and of the wood in its soundboard, by the shape of the interior cavity in the body of the violin, and other interior conditions" (118).

moved to the tub full of fish on the ground beside the workbench. She stabbed the knife into the belly of a whitefish and lifted it onto the bench" (25). The woman's gestures articulate more than words her helpless frustration over the destruction of innocent lives. Still, an emotional sensitivity towards her listener surfaces temporarily in a "low soft voice the girl had not heard in a long time" (25), a voice aimed to comfort and console as best as it can. The old woman's aforementioned rage, therefore, may equally stem from her so acutely experienced inability to share her experiences with the person who was left behind, the one closest to both herself and the victims.

While the old woman's telling reveals itself as both soothing and unsettling, its alternation between speech and phases of silence has a strong and lasting impact on her audience. After the Inuit girl attentively absorbs her final utterances regarding the circumstances of her parents' death, "The wind came off the river and folded the tall grass into itself like river waves. She could feel the silence the story left, and she wanted to have the old woman go on" (25); the girl's inquiries are yet met by further silence.[160] Still, notwithstanding or, rather, precisely because of the woman's silence, the sound of the wind, as the girl listens to it years later, "was like the voice that day long ago" (25). The woman's silence, in other words, thus brought in relation with the sound of the wind, not only constitutes part of her story but accentuates ambient sounds of nature which might have otherwise gone unnoticed—certain aspects of the natural environment here as in the texts discussed in previous chapters bearing some physical connection to the past. The girl sustains the relation between the wind and an aural, silent presence of the past. While observing "the river, its smoky water clotted with ice" (28), she registers the power of the wind to cover up aspects of experience the way silence can obscure and conceal them: "The wind had blown the snow over the frozen river, hiding thin blue streaks where fast water ran under ice translucent and fragile as memory" (28).

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[160] LaBelle's lyrical reflections on speech and silence deepen our understanding of the subtle oral interaction between the old woman and the girl: Hiding "in silence, in a space of hesitation, reluctance, uncertainty—I drift from the symbolic, become apprehensive. This silence gets lodged in the folds of memory and desire; stirs under the pull of longing . . . seeping into the eventual move toward interaction, toward answerability . . . With every word there is a shadow, an underside which is never fully revealed, yet which screams out as a throbbing pressure, in broken syllables, as a bruise upon language, an ache. It's this shadow that paradoxically speech causes to be discovered . . . in a move toward intimacy" (*Writing Aloud*, 62). As he further stresses, precisely "sound's elusiveness and abrasiveness, its softness and penetration, are properties which lead one into the cracks—the hidden cavities, the haunted memories" (*Writing Aloud*, 69).

The snow-covered river evokes both the transitory flow of experience and the promise of memory to provide access to a past life as well as self. However, a closer look reveals memory less as an unmediated gateway to the past than as a frozen, visible surface akin to Benjamin's idea of conscious remembering guided and thus constricted and fixed by particular conceptual schemes, personal goals, and habit. Differing in color and texture, the "blue streaks" of water, by contrast, evoke the only vaguely visible pattern of lived experience that lies beyond conscious perception and whose textured appearance, therefore, demands a forgetting in Benjamin's sense—an absent-minded disposition that allows access to otherwise inaccessible memories. Only a forgetting of this kind finally "uncovers traces of tribal survivance," as Vizenor would have it: "the natural reach of shadows, memories, and visions in *heard* stories" (*Manifest Manners*, 63; emphasis mine) concealed within the folds of dominant (written) historical discourses.

Benjamin locates the interweaving of remembrance and forgetting on the threshold between sleeping and waking. While the night presents the realm of forgetting weaving "the tapestry of lived life" (202), the day is the domain of "our purposive remembering . . . [unraveling] the web and the ornaments of forgetting" (202). The girl's impressions as she contemplates the river capture precisely a memory thus conceived:

> she could see shadows of boundaries, outlines of paths which were slender branches of solidity reaching out from the earth. She spent days walking on the river, kicking the heel of her boot into the snow crust, listening for a solid sound. When she could feel the path through the soles of her feet, she went to the middle of the river where the fast gray water churned under a thin pane of ice . . . On the river bank in the distance she could see the red tin nailed to the log house, something not swallowed up by the heavy white belly of the sky or caught in the folds of the frozen earth. (28)

The shadowy outlines the girl perceives evoke the ungraspable pattern of lived experience woven by forgetting; whatever experiences lie tangled within its intricate, purely ornamental arabesques remains forever concealed within the depths of night. If mere structural elements, "shadows of boundaries, outlines of paths," thus govern the girl's perception, she, still, struggles to draw into light experiences inaccessible to the wakeful, purposive consciousness of day, experiences either "swallowed up by the heavy *white* belly of the sky or caught in the folds of the *frozen* earth." In a vigorous effort to resist an all-encompassing, fixed meaning of the past, "kicking the heel of her boot into the snow crust," she looks for that which transcends this very notion, namely sheer, "solid sound." "It is a word, tapping, or a rustling," to recall Benjamin, "that is endowed with the magic power to transport us into the cool tomb of long ago, from the vault of which the present seems to return only as an echo" (59). If Benjamin's trope of the echo plays out the apparent discrepancy between the past and the present, it, at the same time, highlights the embodied reception of the past—embodied, as we have seen, in the sonic vibrations of one's speech—as well as its continuous adaptation to immediate sensory conditions. Situated and (sonically) embodied, the past finally resounds within new and concrete circumstances in ways that can never be fully assimilated into discourse.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that the girl catches a glimpse of the red tin she had nailed "on the log walls for its color" (28) right before "the fast gray water churned under a thin pane of ice;" a tin can, after all, had carried the poison killing her parents. While the churning water foreshadows the flash-like, fragmentary appearance of the past, the appeal of the red color seems tied to the very circumstances of her parents' death: "the red tin penetrated the thick white color of earth and sky; it defined the boundaries like a wound" (28). Cold metal soaked in blood, then, is what kept the sky and the land from "becoming lost in each other," the girl's momentary chill arising precisely from a vision reduced to "impenetrable white," a vision obscuring the fragile traces of a suppressed, hidden past.

The Interface of Writing and Speech

Notwithstanding Silko's warnings against a world governed solely by vision, *Storyteller* accentuates the continuum of, rather than opposition between, the heard and the seen. To be sure, when the narrator in "A Note" warns the addressee about the dangers of a cliff where, among many others, a woman had fallen "so long ago no one living ever heard anyone tell they saw her," the narrative voice urges the addressee not to "go looking don't even raise your eyes" (108)—insinuating the futility of finding evidence for the event by a mere act of seeing. And yet, it is the act of seeing that precedes and forms the very basis for an oral transmission of the past. The mnemonic importance of visual witnessing surfaces powerfully in "The Storyteller's Escape." While fleeing with her people from an unnamed enemy, the faltering female protagonist—"the old teller" who would keep the stories of earlier escapes "for those who return but more important for the dear ones who do not come back so that we may remember them" (247)—is haunted by the thought of leaving this world unremembered. "If only somebody had looked back to see her face for the last time Someone who would know then and tell the others" (249), as the narrator captures the old woman's hope for remembrance, "otherwise how could they remember her how could they cry for her without this story?" (251-252). While stories of the past here figure as a crucial means of mourning and remembering, Silko's words signal a movement from an isolated, individual act of seeing towards a practice of communally sharing personal experiences. A "narrator-as-eyewitness," to borrow literary critic Shoshana Felman's term, the one looking back joins events to language and thus mediates between history understood as a "happening"—an "acting" and a "seeing"—and narrative in terms of a "telling" (101).

The teller's mediation between history and narrative, however, is fraught with imaginings. Since no one seems to be present to bear witness to the old woman's final journey, she imagines how a "child turned back for a last look at her off in the distance leaning against a cool rock the old teller waiting for the enemy to find her" (251). If her story is based on a real scenario, she, after all, "sat down in the shade and closed her eyes" (249), she yet crafts her situation rather than simply documenting it. The story by which she wishes to be remembered should convey what kind of person she was and hence be told by someone who "knew how she had been on all the escape journeys how she hated the enemy," knew of her intention to "die just to spite them" (251). While the tale of the old woman's final moments is merely an imagined one, it vividly captures the interactive dynamics of oral storytelling—its creation of a social exchange. "This narrative transaction," following Kroeber, "the mixing of the reality of interpersonal relations with imaginative construction, is surely one of the most fundamental of social exchanges" (*Retelling/Rereading*, 13). Both the old woman's curious survival, the enemy, as we learn, never appears, and her ensuing ability to tell the story of her own escape attest to the always "contingent, provisional, and performative character of narrating, as well as the teller's need for an audience" (13). At stake, after all, is her remembrance among her people, and, by extension, the remembrance of an entire way of life.

Grandma A'mooh, Silko's great-grandmother, exemplifies both the fragile survival of old ways and customs and the continuum of oral and visual transmission. As Silko reminisces, "She still washed her hair with yucca roots or 'soap weed' as she called it," made "red chili on the grinding stone the old way," and would tell her and her sisters "about the old days when they didn't have toothpaste and cleaned their teeth with juniper ash" (34). Vivid images of Grandma A'mooh engaged in household and hygiene activities mingle with strong aural impressions. Her great-grandmother's "a'moo'ooh," a word spoken “with great feeling and love” (34), for example, still rings in Silko’s ears. Curiously, she mistook “the Laguna expression of endearment for a young child” (34) for her great-grandmother’s name—thus transmitting a term on account, perhaps, of its warmth and charm, while allowing her relative’s real name to gently slip away. The fact, too, that Silko would continue to call her great-grandmother by this mistaken name testifies to memory’s strong predilection for the aural.

While Grandma A’mooh embodies values and beliefs tied closely to an oral culture, her practice of orally conveying stories of the past still incorporates the written word. Silko vividly recalls her

> worn-out little book that had lost its cover. She used to read the book to me and my sisters . . . she read it to us again and again and still we wanted to hear it. Maybe it was because she always read . . . with such animation and expression changing her tone of voice and inflection . . . the way a storyteller would have told it. (93)

The written word hence serves as a means to mediate oral interaction. An earlier inserted photograph of Grandma A’mooh and Silko’s sisters engaged in a storytelling event of this very kind accentuates the visual and aural dimensions of her telling: here, the children peek over their great-grandmother’s shoulder into the pages of the book she holds in front of her, their attention fixed upon letters and pictures, while simultaneously captured by Grandma A’mooh’s expressive reading voice. Both the photographic and narrative portrayals of the scene situate a literate activity in a face-to-face interaction shaped as much by the bodily presence of its participants as by a shared set of contextual circumstances. Both finally gesture towards a continuum of speech and writing which *Storyteller* as such strives to embody.

Grandma A'mooh's reading aloud, moreover, bridges the gap between written words and the tangible experiences they reference. If following a pre-composed sequence of letters, it infuses the text with a rhythm that extends beyond a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables; straddling the border between reading and telling, it encompasses the rhythmic sounds of the speaker's heart beat, breath, and shifting body tensions, the latter being related to her physical orientation or positioning in space as well as effort in telling. Oriented towards the human body, Grandma A'mooh's reading arguably compensates for the loss of lived tradition as it ensued in the face of a technology- and new media-induced acceleration of time; it is, after all, her oral performance—happening in the here and now—that brings the text to life and makes it meaningful in the present.

Memory, Orality, and Lived Ecology

From the old Inuit man's deeply engaging storytelling to Grandma A'mooh's reading aloud, oral interaction in *Storyteller* provides, in Huyssen's words, "some extension of lived space within which we can breathe and move" (24). Its particular configuration of time and space allows for a transmission of the past that circumvents the pitfalls of a normative continuity "which manages to retain the past only at the expense of its appropriation and reification" (Andrew E. Benjamin, 144). The fate that befalls Enchanted Mesa, a sandstone butte a few miles east of Acoma Pueblo, reflects the impact of ossifying a once alive and vibrant past. "In 1908," Silko informs her readers, "the

Smithsonian Institution excavated the top of *Katsi'ma*, Enchanted Mesa . . . putting everything into wooden boxes as fast as they could" (198). No longer part of the present social and cultural landscape, the past here becomes a cultural artifact: a mere *object* of Native American tradition.[161] While this exemplary instance of a modern memorial consciousness, encapsulated in French historian Pierre Nora's famous *lieux de mémoire*, arguably fails to compensate for the loss of lived tradition to begin with, the institution's ambition to store the past never materializes. As if the violence of wresting a tribal heritage from its original environment were not enough, "all those boxes of things they took," as Grandpa Hank speculates, "are still just sitting somewhere in the basement of some museum" (199). Ironically, and tragically so, relics valued for their tangible connection to the past, for their potential capacity to substantiate legends and myths that circulate among Native Americans, end up buried in storage—assigned a place in what appears less as a responsibly displayed collection of antiquities than as a neglected mausoleum of tribal culture. Silko's inscription of storytellers such as Aunt Susie is, therefore, surely not incidental. As we have seen throughout this chapter, only the actual telling of events ensures the transmission of a larger cultural heritage.

As a site of (creative) recollection rather than (sorted) collection, oral storytelling differs from the curation of cultural artifacts insofar as it connects ancestral materials both to each other and to the present social and physical landscape. Speech, after all, to invoke the words of LaBelle, "makes language site-specific because it participates in the ecology of a time and a place—it exists as a material lodged in the collective strata of an environment" (*Writing Aloud*, 64). As a result, the story about a rooster Silko listened to as a child, for example, would evolve, with each telling, into "all kinds of rooster stories . . . even stories about the different versions of stories" (227)—their multiplicity attesting to forever shifting settings, moods, and audiences. Many of the stories she heard, too, told of the origins of and hence accounted for natural features of the land as well as practices, customs, and beliefs prevalent among tribal societies.[162] The etymological root of the word *tell*—Old English *tellan* translating most closely as "to reckon, calculate, consider, account"—cements the connection between telling of and accounting for the past. In other words, the act of telling about the past is first and foremost an act of *telling the past*, of probing the nature of its content and how we might discern and cope with such content in the context of present social and political circumstances including the continued marginalization of Native American cultures and a resulting sense of loss and alienation among many tribal members. It, thus, not only ensures that the past is *taken into consideration* but provides a way of *coming to terms* with the past.

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[161] The excavations by the Smithsonian Institution form part of what Swann and Krupat refer to as the "great and urgent project of 'ethnographic salvage' that sought to preserve, in the museum or the library, traces of lives and cultures that could not (so it was then believed) have a continuing existence anywhere else" (xi).

Orality and Persuasion

Silko's anticipatory assessment of her readers' responses, therefore, arguably dictates the concrete shape of her writing—its very rhythm. Crucially, this rhythm pertains as much to the timely choice between words and silence, as exemplified by the old Inuit woman's oral accounts of the past, as to the timely choice of a particular utterance or story; Aunt Susie, for instance, appears to have chosen to tell Silko a story about a girl's extraordinary hunting skills as a response to her sadness over not being able to join her parents in a deer hunt (82). Likewise, *Storyteller* as such deliberately withholds stories and narrative details only to reveal them at another, strategically chosen, point in time—both the text's temporary omissions and sequencing of tales yielding intended, often moral effects, on the reader. While Laguna Pueblo practices and beliefs thus appear in "Storyteller" and the sequence of Yellow Woman tales as a subtle invasion into empirical territory, they increasingly take on the lineaments of daily life in the stories that follow.

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[162] In Silko's tale "Up North," the eyes of Kaup'a'ta, the Gambler who lived high in the Zuni mountains where he would gamble with strangers and always win by tricking his unsuspecting opponents, "become the horizon stars of autumn" (169). Sun Man had cut out his eyes after his gamble with and orchestrated victory over him in an effort to free the storm clouds imprisoned in the Gambler's home.

"Tony's Story" signals a noticeable move towards a less binary and more nuanced perspective. Here, a seasonal feast is marred by violence when a white state officer arbitrarily attacks and seriously injures Leon, a member of the Laguna tribal community. His friend, Tony, who witnesses the officer's irrational behavior, is convinced that he is possessed by an evil spirit. Even though Tony prefers tribal means of protection such as the arrowhead amulet he wears around his neck, it is he who ultimately pulls the trigger of the .30-30 that kills the "possessed" body. "Don't worry," he subsequently comforts his friend, "everything is O.K. now, Leon. It's killed. They sometimes take on strange forms" (129). Tribal views utterly lose their ambiguous and potentially problematical dimensions in "The Man to Send Rain Clouds." Centering on an old Navajo man's burial, the tale renders the blessings of a Christian priest and tribal rituals, including ceremonial body decoration by means of paint and ornaments, as well as offerings of corn pollen, as smoothly complimenting one another. If initially reluctant, the priest eventually sprinkles the grave with holy water—his actions not merely complementing but adapted to suit tribal practices and beliefs; as we learn, "now the old man could send them big thunderclouds for sure" (186). We hence note a shift of focus, first to a sense of mystery or confusion as to what is imaginary and what is (empirically) real, then, to a double perspective that equally validates tribal and non-tribal angles of vision, only to dissolve in an unabashed embrace of tribal life and experience. For what dominates in later sections of Silko's text is a celebration of tribal storytelling. Here, stories such as "A Geronimo Story" and "Coyote Hold a Full House in His Hand" convincingly capture both the beauty and pleasure of taking the time to tell and listen to carefully and thoughtfully crafted stories, stories in which words "followed each other smoothly," where pauses "let you get a feeling for the words; and even silence was alive" (215).[163]

While *Storyteller* thus approximates a rhythmic flow characteristic of oral storytelling, its oral quality consists first and foremost in its ability to navigate the readers' judgments by means of a voice that keeps them continuously engaged with the contingencies of concrete experience, one that loosens a strict adherence to abstract rules and principles by personalizing, particularizing, and contextualizing (both spatially and temporally) the stories told.[164] Moreover, by not merely generating but *enacting* the generation of a multiplicity of interpretative paths to follow, *Storyteller* fosters a configurative perspective that comprehends narrative units as part of a single complex of relationships without losing awareness of alternative combinational possibilities.[165] Going beyond what literary critic James Ruppert calls the mediation between tribal and non-tribal determinations of meaning, it inspires a view that grasps the possibilities of meaning and truth as always unfolding, always reverberating. If, as Ruppert stresses, contemporary Native American fiction enables the implied reader to appreciate "a vision of the world that merges the mythic, communal, sociological, and psychological significance of events" (33-34), the focus of Silko's text arguably lies less in a fusion of different epistemological horizons than a shift away from the reader's separately experienced "here" and "now" towards a space of collectively shared (tribal) meaning. This shift involves more than a loss of the text's modern features accompanied by an increasing submersion into mythical time (Stetsenko, 338). Rather, extending from what originally manifests itself in the reader's tentative hesitation toward foreign or unfamiliar narrative components, it arrests the representational logic of accustomed frames of experience and enacts a fresh negotiation of meaning.

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[163] "A Geronimo Story" features Siteye, a compelling storyteller "whose words were careful and thoughtful, but . . . followed each other smoothly to tell a good story. He would pause to let you get a feeling for the words; and even silence was alive in his stories" (215). The narration of "A Geronimo Story" as such, as Helen Jaskoski observes, is "deliberate, precise, replete with detail" (90) and contrasts sharply with "Storyteller," "a tale driven by a centripetal energy that fragments and devours the many stories that leave only traces in the text"(90). As to "Coyote Holds a Full House in His Hand," Jaskoski speaks of "the triumph of storytelling: to find in narration a pleasure superior to sex" (100).

[164] As Kroeber argues in *Retelling/Rereading*: "Our problem, normally, is not knowing abstractly what is good or bad, but in figuring how to apply our beliefs to specific situations, in making quite particularized, if

The Gift of Memory

Reminiscent of the so-called "modular" structuring of oral narratives, the flexible narrative pattern of *Storyteller* plays into Silko's efforts to resist interpretative approaches

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necessarily and admittedly provisional, judgments . . . narratives localize and specify . . . stories can thus arouse 'unintended' moral effects because the very act of narrating pushes abstract principles into the dust of contingent experience" (34).

[165] "Configurative understanding," in the words of Kroeber, "means that the significance of the recounted series of event (in fact or fiction) contains the possibility of events having occurred otherwise and of being recounted otherwise" (*Retelling/Rereading*, 57).

that authorize but a single, fixed angle of vision. Like stories orally told and retold, *Storyteller* consists of a montage of variously combinable modular episodes, at times presented as independent textual segments; recall, for example, Silko's various reformulations of the "Yellow Woman" motif, whether in the form of a brief lyrical insertion or as part of a longer piece of prose. Silko allows a glimpse into this compositional technique when she alerts the reader in the midst of "The Two Sisters," a story about a girl who begrudges her sister the pleasure of a man's devotion, that "*now anything can take place in the story*" (101; original emphasis). While conjuring the very instant of telling, Silko's meta-narrative remark signals the existence of alternative narrative possibilities at each point in the telling—the actual story told presenting only one pathway among a multiplicity of choices.

The (aural) presence of other possible yet unrealized accounts of the past is the very force that animates and awaits release from Silko's (written) narrative. Like Silko's "Old Man Badger" who knew how to (re)assemble the loose skeleton bones he would stumble onto, readers find themselves called upon to connect the hints and utterances scattered throughout the pages of her book. Like he who, if initially puzzled by the sight of the disconnected bones, instinctively knew "their direction laying each toe bone to walk east" (242), who could "tell how they once fit together" (243), they are forced to contextualize, position the fragmentary pieces of the past accordingly, and *tell*. As we have seen throughout this analysis, telling the past in *Storyteller* involves less the pursuit of factual exactitude than the imaginative reinscription of the past within a present context of reception.[166] Crucially, then, the stories told are not simply the record of past events and circumstances but, rather, expressive of attitudes, wishes, and needs that both influence the process of recall and yield varying styles of narrative performance.

The act of transmitting the past in *Storyteller* hence arguably represents the very act of memory. Memory, to recall Schacter, consists precisely in "the subjective experience of recollecting a past event" (*Searching for Memory*, 70). If the stored fragments of an episode, the so-called engram monitored as distinct patterns of neural activation, and the retrieval cue that arouses or activates a dormant memory both contribute to the nature, texture, and quality of what we recall of the moment, the recollective experience consists primarily of an imaginative reconstruction of the past. Not merely guided by present goals, needs, and desires, it is driven by inferences that are based on complex records of past recordings. While some regions of the brain, in Schacter's words, "hold on to fragments of sensory experience—bits and pieces of sights and sounds from everyday episodes," others "contain codes that bind sensory fragments to one another and to preexisting knowledge" (66). It may come as no surprise, therefore, that recollections and stories in *Storyteller* change across multiple retellings; the fact that "imagined events are generated by some of the same neural machinery that contributes to the perception of actual events" (272) may alone account for the various and often conflicting narrative versions.[167] Like memories in Schacter's estimation, then, the stories of the past both painfully and pleasurably (re)collected throughout Silko's text "are the fragile but powerful products of what we recall from the past, believe about the present, and imagine about the future" (308). The stories Silko tells hence ultimately "circulate like a gift" not merely in terms of historical knowledge continuously fashioned and refashioned but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, as the *ability* or *talent* to reinvent and reconfigure the past in the face of forever changing social and cultural circumstances.

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[166] Silko's story of Old Man Badger, or Skeleton Fixer, evokes Ulric Neisser's analogy as rendered in Schacter's *Searching for Memory* that "retrieving a memory is like reconstructing a dinosaur from fragments of bone" (69). As Neisser proposes, "only bits and pieces of incoming data are represented in memory. These retained fragments of experience in turn provide a basis for reconstructing a past event, much as a paleontologist is able to reconstruct a dinosaur from fragments of bone" (40). To take the analogy even further, we might point to the process of so-called permineralization of fossil bones by which their original, open pore space is infilled with minerals. Like bones turning into fossils, then, the stored fragments of sensory experiences are transformed with each act of remembering.

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[167] Along this view, Silko prefaces her recollections of stories she would hear again and again, their telling always accompanied by changes in detail and description, by stressing that "sometimes what we call 'memory' and what we call 'imagination' are not so easily distinguished" (227).

Afterword

Nomad Memory: Toward a Literature of Orality

> What is transmitted from generation to generation is not only the stories, but the very power of transmission.
>
> —Trinh T. Minh-ha
>
> *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*

"To move from the oral to the written is to immobilize the body, to take control (to possess it)." These are the words of Glissant as written in his *Caribbean Discourse*. Reflecting on the possibility of a poetics that captures orality—that which "is inseparable from the movement of the body" (123)—Glissant seems all too aware of the chasm that separates "the hand wielding the pen (or using the typewriter) . . . linked to (an appendage of) the page" from postures and "almost semaphoric signals through which the body implies and emphasizes what is said" (122). Notwithstanding Glissant's apparent emphasis on the gulf between the written and the spoken word, *Caribbean Discourse* is largely organized around instances of orality which the author encounters in the realms of art, literature, and music. Thus, for example, his text contains a powerful critique of the sculptures by the Cuban artist Augustin Cárdenas whose work epitomizes, in Glissant's estimation, qualities and energies associated with orality:

> The man who chants has tamed with his hand a spiral of words. He becomes sculpture in motion, sowing his seeds in us . . . The poetics of Cárdenas is woven

> in this passage of time, where the uniqueness of the sculpted object is forged. It connects with the tradition of oral celebration, the rhythm of the body, the continuity of frescoes, the gift of melody . . . In this way he puts together a poetics of continuous time: the privileged moment yields to the rhythms of the voice. Memory is forced to abandon its diversions, where unexpected forms lurk and suddenly emerge. (240-241)

And from where writers such as Roy and Morrison take their point of departure. Fragmentation and dispersion, after all, shape contemporary cultural settings, stripping experience of continuity and cohesion. One may, of course, argue that new technologies form an indispensable part of human exchange in today's digital world—computational media such as blogs, skype, or flickr building connections and creating cohesion on a global scale.[168] Yet this media-saturated culture, at the same time, creates an information overload that arguably impedes opportunities for enriching cultural experiences. In the words of Huyssen, "Slowing down rather than speeding up, expanding the nature of public debate, trying to heal the wounds inflicted in the past, nurturing and expanding livable space rather than destroy it for the sake of some future promise, securing 'quality time'—those seem to be unmet cultural needs in a globalizing world"(*Present Pasts*, 27). A technology-induced instantaneity and an increased global mobility have also led to a compression of time and space that severely diminished our, if not innate capacity, then, perhaps, willingness to focus our thoughts on one particular object that would allow for a deeper understanding of the world around us; we may, indeed, be tempted to chat on skype or browse the internet rather than contemplating art works in galleries and museums or taking a walk through nature.

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[168] For the role of the new media in the formation of collectivities, see Jan Fernback, "The Individual within the Collective: Virtual Ideology and the Realization of Collective Principles," 36-54, and Ananda Mitra, "Virtual Commonality: Looking for India on the Internet," 55-79, in *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, ed. Steven G. Jones, London: Sage, 1997; and Nan Li, *Social Capital: A Theory of Social Structure and Action*, New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001.

The art of oral storytelling counters the ostensibly disruptive logic of modernity. Capable of taming the discontinuous stream of words (or noise) that engulfs us, it exposes subtle and hidden continuities as powerful as sharp, dramatic ruptures. "The concept of noise," after all, as Alter and Koepnick remind us,

> was a product of the same process that, in Benjamin's view, replaced tradition with fashion, visual contemplation with distracted looking, storytellers with image-makers . . . Whereas the sounds of rural life, whether natural or man-made, were all more or less recognizable, the layering of novel sonic stimuli in industrial environments at first clearly exceeded the individual's capacity to isolate acoustical sources and directions. (119)

By contrast, the storyteller's artful use of words—from the careful balancing of speech and silences to the calculated juxtaposition of ideas and compositional units—induces a sedimentary process of listening which, by transforming sound into lived experience, accounts for the delight in stories one has heard many times before. True, a storyteller's inexplicable or undecipherable gestures may sweep us away in sudden, unexpected ways reminding one of forces operative in contemporary media culture. Still, that which distinctively shapes the process of carefully sculpting and passing on stories, if often eluding conscious perception, is the transmission of something at once indelible and unavailable to capture, storage, and conscious retrieval: a nurturing and anchoring rhythm. As we have seen, this rhythm is deeply rooted in the sonorous memories of the nurturing feminine—the maternal—body and thus communicating traces of a submerged, forgotten, or unconscious past. As a patterning in time or, as captured more succinctly and poetically by American poet and critic Ezra Pound, as "a form cut into TIME" (*ABC*, 198), this rhythm ranges from the careful choice, positioning, and application of narrative elements to a storyteller's each and every breath and bodily stance. In part determined by a speaker's momentary mood, skills, and sensibilities, and open to the potentialities inherent in the nature of a given audience or circumstances, it inevitably particularizes each moment of narration. A storyteller, after all, adapts conventional materials and practices to suit the concerns, needs, and tastes of his/her time much like the Kathakali dancer innovatively refashions an extensive repertory of dance steps, choreographed patterns of stage movement, hand gestures, and facial expressions with each new performance.

A rhythmic negotiation of the kind described above, at the same time, shifts what occurs uniquely—an individual's singular performance—toward that which makes it transmissible in the first place: a formal mode of narratability. More precisely, it joins a situational, creative awareness to a deep familiarity with customary patterns of oral narrative. Suggesting something of the nature of *texture* which, as scholars of oral traditions such as Toelken and Dundes have shown, consists of a storyteller's untold yet dimly perceivable attitudes, assessments, and responses firmly anchored in ancestral practice and experiences, rhythm manages to blend a storyteller's particular style with the melodic imprint of each preceding telling; similarly, it allows a jazz musician's sense of timing, sureness of touch, and improvisational finesse to subtly merge with an air of studied casualness. Glissant's analogy between oral and sculptural practices, therefore, proves peculiarly well suited to capturing their various facets: both, as it were, profile the passage of time; both, too, and perhaps more fundamentally, mediate a phenomenological encounter with history and the human body. Both, finally, evade permanence and yet leave identifiable and memorable marks which, able to infuse a pre-composed arrangement with organic development and flow, carry with them the "continuity of frescoes" and "the gift of melody" mentioned above.

Occurring in time and thus extending temporal experience beyond the instant, oral storytelling fosters a kind of pedagogy that instils a sustained resistance to the attractions of the immediate, the visible, and the complete. In so doing, it feeds into a desire prevailing in many Western cultures, a desire, in Huyssen's words,

> to slow down information processing, to resist the dissolution of time in the synchronicity of the archive, to recover a mode of contemplation outside the universe of simulation and fast-speed information and cable networks, to claim some anchoring space in a world of puzzling and often threatening heterogeneity, non-synchronicity, and information overload. (*Twilight Memories*, 7)

What may come to mind as we read these lines is Roy's memorable description of a

Kathakali dance performance which, lasting through the night, succeeds in impressing upon the audience the thread of continuity between historical dramatizations and lived experiences. As the author captures the mood of the following dawn: “There was madness there that morning. Under the rose bowl. It was no performance Esthappen and Rahel recognized it. They had seen its work before. Another morning. Another stage” (224). Similarly, we may think of Almásy who slowly, yet with unfaltering zeal, pulls his audience into his stories; of Pilate’s mesmerizing lips emitting a steady audible pulse; or of Silko’s juxtaposition of faded, distant television images with the anchoring presence of voice and rhythm.

Oral discourse, in other words, provides a space proper to contemplation, proper to the act of slowly and attentively engaging with the shape, meanings, and associative echoes of any given phenomenon. As it is inscribed into the word’s etymology—from Latin “to mark out a space for observation”—*contemplation* does not linger with encyclopaedically accumulated, determinable objects alone; rather, it dwells in a region in which the beholder positions himself/herself in relation to a given set of experiential components. Put in Bakhtinian terms, contemplation occurs not so much within a person’s isolated, individual consciousness as under conditions of living contact with multiple and shifting, since always situationally determined, perspectives. Inevitably leading to a heightened perceptiveness and sensitivity to the most minute subtleties of everyday life and experience, a capacity for contemplation is what, finally, ensures a deeper understanding of and both civic and political engagement with historical, social, and cultural phenomena.

When Glissant portrays the storyteller as a "sculpture in motion," we may, therefore, well read his words as referring not only to a teller's physical gestures emphatically supporting his/her speech but also to the notion of gesture as an aesthetically or rhetorically staged moment of narration inextricably linked to a speaker's/writer's awareness of and connection to a his/her audience/readership. A work of literature, too, then, may amount to a "sculpture in motion." The establishment of a continuum of speech and writing hereby hinges first and foremost on the position or bearing of the physical/textual body relative to the listener's/reader's conceptual horizon. More precisely, it hinges on the role of posture, applied now solely to a text's topography or configuration of finely crafted, carefully arranged narrative elements, in the constitution of points of contact between text and reader—points of contact, as we recall, established along a path of either convergence or divergence. Precisely a text's openness to and accommodation of difference or otherness is what ultimately enhances the transmissibility of any given narrative. Native American myths "are popular," after all, precisely "because so adaptable to a wide range of tellers, audiences, and social circumstances" (Kroeber, *Artistry in Native American Myths*, 147)—the same arguably applying to the texts under consideration.

The degree of openness to or accommodation of that which lies outside familiar frames of reference is, as we have seen, tied closely to an aural awareness capable of reorienting attention away from the merely semantic toward the material dimension of experience. By taking a sound's concrete textures and nuances rather than its semantic associations as the object to be observed, the act of listening keeps sensory perception open to new, potentially surprising, experiential encounters. Even if sonic stimuli exceed an individual's capacity to isolate and define acoustical sources and directions, they tend to disrupt perception in ways conducive to a shift in or, rather, disposal of one's *frame* of mind—there being, as Chion reminds us in reference to cinematic sound, "neither frame nor pre-existing container" (67). Susceptible to phenomena that lie outside the scope of one's own experiences, the act of listening thus constitutes the very condition for the possibility of new insights and understanding.

Nomad Memory suggests, moreover, that aural sensitivity in the texts at issue coalesces into a feminine sensibility attuned to the acoustic facets of any given environment—from the hushed gurgle of a river to the sound of ice cracking. Let us recall Hana's skill of incorporating Almásy's each and every breath, murmur, and whisper into the folds of her own consciousness, Rahel's ability to fathom the sonic depths of a sibling engulfed by silence, and Pilate's intuitive musicality and conversational talent. In other words, all of the authors under consideration locate not only a silenced, forgotten past but also the possibility of its retrieval within the realm of the feminine or maternal. To be sure, storytellers are figured as both male and female; Silko, for example, endows men as well as women at Laguna Pueblo with the gift for storytelling. And yet, auditory agency finds expression first and foremost in their text's female characters. While women such as Hana and Mammachi encourage and cultivate an aural/oral awareness and sensibility, others, including Pilate and Aunt Susi, go even further by teaching the young about the value and importance of listening to, remembering, and passing on the stories of the past.

Apart from gendering aural sensibility, the series of texts discussed in this dissertation lavish extraordinary attention on the sonic possibilities inherent in natural settings: on the land and the (often unpredictable) aural clues to the past it harbors. They reveal an aesthetic in which listening combines with an environmental awareness that takes up landscape as a defining part of historical experience—one fraught with disturbing echoes and erasures. While Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and Roy's *The God of Small Things* sensitize the reader to the aural presence of a (visually) hidden past so as to sow the seeds for history's (aural/oral) reception and dispersal, Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Silko's *Storyteller* harness the resources of folklore and oral traditions so as to inscribe not only the stories passed on from generation to generation but also, and most importantly, the very power of transmission—one rooted in an aural, feminine, and environmental consciousness. A critical engagement with the role of gender, aurality, and landscape in the context of memory studies will, ultimately, both deepen our understanding of their complex entanglement and broaden our conceptual framework for reading the texts here discussed.

A presumption of nostalgia for oral culture on the part of the authors at issue here makes it deceptively easy to assimilate their work to ethnopoetic efforts aimed at both showcasing the artfulness of oral language and transferring the qualities of oral performance to the printed page;[169] all of the them, after all, help erode the boundaries between the written and the oral. And yet, as we have seen, these authors infuse their writing with aural/oral attributes not for the sake of transcribing or textualizing oral discourse. By taking the written rather than spoken word as their point of departure, they, instead, seek to transform current notions that limit orality to the spoken word only. More than that, they inscribe an orality which—being both female-imagined and environmentally inspired—exposes the embodied and ecological character of mnemonic procedures. Both oral discourse and memory here function as flexible frameworks within which auditory fragments of the past are constantly uprooted from one contextual setting and repositioned as constitutive parts of another yet always dialogically structured constellation of narrative/mnemonic elements. If historical erasures carry in their wake a primarily visual failure to be noticed or remembered, then the oral dimension of language assists in the task of bringing concrete historical experiences to the fore by reconnecting with the physical trace of voice and body—a trace figured primarily as a reconnection with the maternal body: our first source of nourishment, tones, rhythms, and movements.

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[169] Ethnopoetics encompasses two different strains: as an aesthetic movement, it investigates the artful uses of oral language; as an interdisciplinary field of study among anthropologists, folklorists, and linguists such as Tedlock and Hymes, it involves the analysis, translation, and transcription of oral literatures.

The authors' engagement with the oral dimensions of literature converges with the notion of *nomad memory* as developed in this dissertation: a site of a passage where sound reverberates inside and across bodies that act as vessels for the articulation and transmission of the past. The idea of *nomad memory* derives its use here from an emphasis on a locally bound, interactive sort of becoming that refers less to memories as such than to their echoes as they travel from one body to another; how telling, perhaps, that the German word for experience born of wisdom, *Erfahrung*, is etymologically rooted in the word for going or travelling: *fahren*. Roy's image of a wooden boat in *The God of Small*

Things lends expression to the particular notion of memory that *Nomad Memory* strove to capture: "Something covered with moss, hidden by ferns. Knock on it and it made a hollow knocked-on sound" (192). The boat's wooden body here functions as a receptacle that receives the knock, while providing the very means for sound transmission—and this even if wrapped in silence. Like the echo of the knocking sound, memories in the text discussed move or travel across human and textual bodies whose structural design determines their very resonance. Read as both a bodily and a textual gesture aimed at establishing points of contact and, ultimately, a connection with another, the knock itself, by creating an echo of both the spoken and unspoken, participates in the transmission of past experiences. Lingering long enough for the past's reverberations to seep through the walls of exclusionary histories, memory thus conceived finally allows for the called-for "extension of lived space within which we can breathe and move" (*Present Pasts*, 24) mentioned above. Marked first and foremost by mutability and expansion rather than speed, it not only undoes any suggestion of a teleological or exhaustive understanding of the past but also brings to fulfillment the promise inherent in this dissertation's opening image: sailing—one's boat being at the mercy not of an engine or throttle but of unpredictable, multidirectional winds.

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