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TRANSGRESSING POSTCOLONIAL INDIFFERENCE, RECOVERING HISTORY:
WOMEN AND DESIRE IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*,
AHDAF SOUEIF'S *THE MAP OF LOVE*,
AND EDWIDGE DANTICAT'S *THE FARMING OF BONES*

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the concept of postcolonial indifference at play in three contemporary novels by female writers: Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love* (1999), and Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* (1998). All three novels are rooted in the homelands of their authors—India, Egypt, and Haiti, respectively—and a consideration of the texts in their specific historical and cultural contexts further illuminates the postcolonial worlds portrayed in the novels as well as revealing how colonialism took different forms at each site. However, by linking the three works, I establish common aspects among these postcolonial experiences that shape a framework for postcolonial indifference. Extrapolating the idea of postcolonial indifference as introduced by Rukmini Nair, my study draws from existing scholarship in postcolonial studies and postcolonial feminist critique. I also employ crucial sources from other fields of study, including philosophy, trauma studies, and history.

In this dissertation, I argue that the female characters in these three novels transgress environments of postcolonial indifference by engaging in romantic relationships and expressing their sexuality. Pursuing their desires allows these women to counteract the effects of monstrous indifference in their individual lives. They experience deeply-felt personal emotions and connect intimately with fellow humans; these acts challenge the legacy of colonial indifference in the postcolonial world. From a consideration of Ammu's clear, decisive challenge to indifference in *The God of Small Things* and Anna's transgression of colonial apathy among the British in *The Map of Love* to Amabelle's subtle, perhaps incomplete breaking with numbness in *The Farming*

of Bones, I shape a trajectory that reveals how postcolonial subjects are held captive by and, more importantly, how they can break with indifference to varying degrees. A conclusion chapter acknowledges such diverse experiences but draws on commonalities, allowing the novels themselves to establish a working theory of indifference in postcolonial literary studies. This dissertation culminates in a pedagogical essay that applies my work to the postcolonial literature classroom, where I address potential challenges and explore avenues for students to connect with difficult texts and ideas in the field.

Chapter One: Introduction

The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: that's the essence of inhumanity.

—George Bernard Shaw, *The Devil's Disciple*

Haiti, Egypt, and India are postcolonial nations whose news occasionally lands them on the front pages of Western media outlets. Haiti's 2010 earthquake likely still comes to mind relatively easily among an English-speaking public—and the island nation continues to recover and reconstruct itself—but its postcolonial struggles, of course, by no means begin there. Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat has become a spokesperson for her motherland, and she has made an effort through her writing “to sustain international attention on the country's continuing woes” (Tillotson). Turning to India's own “continuing woes,” we see a nation that seems to be handling one international publicity nightmare after the next, including cases that exemplify the widespread sexual violence against women.¹ In an interview following the horrific gang rape and death of a young woman in New Delhi in December of 2012, Indian activist and writer Arundhati Roy observes that “violence against women—particularly rape—is a means of asserting power, particularly from the perspective of men who feel they lack power in other dimensions of their life. . . . There is ‘an anger and psychosis building up and women at the top, middle and the bottom are going to pay the price for it’ ” (Le Quesne). Most recently, Egypt has reached its own postcolonial boiling point, and the tumult and revolution of the summer of 2013 made international headlines. Speaking to

this crisis among the people, Egyptian author Ahdaf Soueif states, “It’s an extraordinary moment, really, where everything—nothing is to be taken for granted—no presidencies, no procedures, no constitutions, nothing. Everything has to be rethought again and again and again” (qtd. in Goodman). This time of great change in Egypt takes a darker turn as women are sexually assaulted at alarming rates in an effort to discourage them from participating in the public sphere of activism.² Rape in Haiti, too, is an urgent issue, while its judicial system has historically failed to protect victims and prosecute offenders.³ Though news sources decry such instances of violence against women, as Jacqueline Bhabha explains on the subject, “Popular outcries can be intense but short-lived, as we’ve seen with gun control efforts in the U.S.” (qtd. in Pazzanese). The cases of these postcolonial nations reveals how women in particular suffer in such times of crisis, while their stories and their voices disappear all too quickly. As Peter Hulme relates, the most apt definition of the term “postcolonial”⁴ is to consider it “a *process* of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome” (qtd. in Loomba 19, emphasis in the original). It is understandable, then, that dealing with so-called “women’s rights issues” is commonly postponed work while the endlessly complex process of postcolonial nation-building takes priority.

Women writers in these nations, then, are particularly important voices. As the focus of my dissertation, the writing of Danticat, Roy, and Soueif speaks to a Western audience but from unique hybrid perspectives. As Emily Davis explains, “Soueif’s status as the only major Egyptian-born novelist writing in English underscores her singular position as a translator between cultures and languages, a difficult position both politically and aesthetically.” Danticat and Roy, too, have certainly positioned themselves

as valuable “translators between cultures” for their literary audiences. Although the choice of these women to write in English draws inevitable criticism, primarily from readers with more nationalist concerns, that choice also provides access for a broader audience to their important works of postcolonial literature. Indeed, both through their creative and non-fiction writing, we look to these women to interpret events in their motherlands, to translate the complex happenings of their respective postcolonial nations for an English-speaking audience. As women whose chosen careers offer them opportunities to travel across the globe, to reach an international audience but still maintain ties to their home nations and cultures—to live in two worlds, as it were—they are, to draw from Danticat’s work, powerful, “dangerous” artists.⁵ They are writers but also emissaries, ambassadors, and activists. They are acclaimed and successful fiction writers, but all three write important non-fiction works that bring the crises, triumphs, and tragedies of their home nations into Western consciousness—with all that nuance and dignity as the citizens that they are. They give their finely crafted works of fiction that same nuance and dignity, and we see endlessly complicated postcolonial worlds, with all their cultural, historical, social, and political context, illuminated through the lives of their characters, especially the women whose voices—or voicelessness—shed light on how the case of gender further complicates a postcolonial experience. Focusing on these complex fictional characters allows me to undertake an in-depth study of the personal, emotional toll colonialism takes on individual human lives, both what they lose as well as what they can regain. In that vein and in my dissertation, I will look specifically at three novels: Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, Ahdaf Soueif’s *The Map of Love*, and Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*.

(Post)Colonial Indifference: An Introduction

Within these three contemporary novels, the authors showcase a facet of postcolonial life that has not been given much consideration among postcolonial literary scholars—that is, *indifference*, as a product of and lingering symptom of initial colonial encounters. In her book *Lying on the Postcolonial Couch: The Idea of Indifference*, writer Rukmini Nair introduces us to the concept of indifference in relation to colonial encounters and describes it as “a bleach that proves infinitely effective when feelings are to be washed away or the colors of emotion drained” (xxv). This metaphor is helpful in conceptualizing how colonial indifference functions: where emotion once lived, nothing remains—only blankness, only lack. In this dissertation, I will extend Nair’s concept of postcolonial indifference to a consideration of the female characters at the centers of the three novels. In this introductory section, I will define and characterize indifference—that of the colonizing culture as well as that of the colonized peoples—within the context of early colonial encounters as a foundation for how I will employ it in the chapters to come.

As Nair describes it, indifference is, by its very nature, difficult to define. It is “anonymous,” while at the same time it “signifies a subjective mental state” (xii). As an absent, *non*-state of feeling and being, indifference is an ambiguous, “slippery notion,” one that “functions sometimes as metaphor, sometimes as attitude, sometimes as practice, and always as psychology” (xxvii). The effects of indifference, then, are deeply personal, but, in its very resistance to characterization, indifference is that much more powerful and difficult to counteract. To extrapolate Nair’s concept and attempt a definition at the most general level, I characterize postcolonial indifference as more than mere aloofness or disinterest; it is an extremely dulled or flattened emotional state. Such indifference

originated in the earliest encounters between the colonizer and the colonized⁶ as native peoples saw their customs, religious beliefs, languages, and traditional ways of life devalued and crushed by European ethnocentricity, by Christianity, and with physical violence—to a point from which they could not be fully recovered. As such, apathy, a fatalistic attitude to the affairs of life, and emotional distance become characteristic of experiences for colonized individuals across time and location.

First, though, the indifference begins among a population of Europeans—both those who ventured into the colonies and those who stayed behind—whose deep-seated racism and beliefs in an indisputable God-given sovereignty allowed them to see the human beings whose civilizations they would decimate as less than human, less than they, darker than white, more barbaric. As a founding figure of postcolonial studies, Edward Said explains in *Culture and Imperialism*,

At the heart of European culture during the many decades of imperial expansion lay an undeterred and unrelenting Eurocentrism. This accumulated experiences, territories, peoples, histories; it studied them, it classified them, it verified them . . . but above all, it subordinated them by banishing their identities, except as a lower order of being, from the culture and indeed the very idea of white Christian Europe. (221-22)

This “othering” of the colonized by the colonizing culture relies on the use of constructed images. To see those colonized as other presupposes a certain image of the colonizer that can be set in opposition. In his book *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Albert Memmi describes this image:

We sometimes enjoy picturing the colonizer as a tall man, bronzed by the

sun, wearing Wellington boots, proudly leaning on a shovel—as he rivets his gaze far away on the horizon of his land. When not engaged in battles against nature, we think of him laboring selflessly for mankind, attending the sick, and spreading culture to the nonliterate. In other words, his pose is one of a noble adventurer, a righteous pioneer. (3)

Embedded in this description are the justifications that the colonizer eventually uses in oppressing and subjecting the colonized, such as having superior medical knowledge, culture, and language. However, the colonizer holds a constructed image of the native people before contact is even made, and certainly no individual contact with a colonized person can supersede such stereotypes. Indeed, the qualities of the colonized people—different from the colonizer’s and therefore perceived to be inferior—as discovered on site are used to further exploit them and justify the annihilation of their personal subjectivities. Postcolonial scholar Ania Loomba explains the importance of both “continuity” and “reshaping” of constructed images:

Europeans who traveled outwards took with them certain previous images of the people they expected to encounter. The actual encounters necessitated both the continuity and a reshaping of these images—continuity because previously held notions about the inferiority of non-Europeans provided a justification for European settlements, trading practices, religious missions, and military activities—and reshaping in order to adjust images to specific colonial practices. (58)

These constructed images are essential to the process of othering that legitimizes the colonizer’s place in the colonized’s world. They illustrate the Western ideologies that

existed about non-white peoples, which were the means used to interpellate the colonized as a certain kind of subject that could be dominated, controlled, and used for gain. This need to construct the colonized as other allows us to see that “subjectivity and ideology are absolutely central to the processes of domination” (Loomba 31). In this way, othering maximizes the difference between the two groups, creating a distance that allows for the dominant group to gain and maintain power. This difference is made concrete by Loomba’s description of the interplay of stereotypes about the colonizer and the colonized: “[I]f colonized people are irrational, Europeans are rational; if the former are barbaric, sensual, and lazy, Europe is civilisation itself, with its sexual appetites under control and its dominant ethic that of hard work” (47). For the humans locked into these dichotomies, indifference to such carefully constructed difference, to the vast, impossible distance between the colonizers and those colonized, is a key component of colonial relations—and a continuing aftershock in the postcolonial world. To further characterize this distance, Nair describes how indifference itself is manifest in different forms among social classes; it “shows up as the attribute of fatalism among the mass poor, construes itself as apathy among the upwardly mobile middle classes, and finally stands revealed as bland and total unconcern among those who hold positions of awesome political and/or bureaucratic power” (xv).

Ultimately, the indigenous peoples of the colonized regions were simply a non-entity in the colonizing game, their very identities “banished” as Said articulates. Loomba explains how such attitudes originated in the very word *colonialism*; its official *Oxford English Dictionary* definition characterizes colonialism as “a settlement in a new country . . . a body of people who settle in a new locality, forming a community subject to or

connected with their parent state; the community so formed, consisting of the original settlers and their descendants and successors, as long as the connection with the parent state is kept up” (qtd. in Loomba 1). As shaped here, the definition of colonialism “avoids any reference to people other than the colonisers, people who might already have been living in those places where colonies were established” (1). The result is that the word—and, therefore, the act of colonizing—becomes blameless. Indifference allows for this linguistic erasing of responsibility, what Nair describes as “antilanguage, a language of denial” (xxviii). Moreover, such a definition, Loomba argues, “evacuates the word ‘colonialism’ of any implication of an encounter between peoples, or of conquest and domination” (1-2). By its official definition, colonialism becomes blameless and easy, conflict-free, even inevitable. What’s more, indifference to the lives of fellow humans runs deep in this definition. The history of European colonization since shows us that white skin, European language, especially English, and the name of Christ became the tools of the ultimate exercise in rendering countless people, from the Caribbean and Africa to the Americas, India, and Southeast Asia, powerless, emasculated, and eventually apathetic to that new condition—just as those actors of colonial violence set sail from their home nations with indifference as their most valuable, insidious weapon of all.

As Loomba asserts, “Colonialism was not an identical process in different parts of the world but everywhere it locked the original inhabitants and the newcomers into the most complex and traumatic relationships in human history” (2). This complexity is crucial to acknowledge in any postcolonial study, and I would be remiss in failing to recognize the innumerable accounts of colonized persons and communities who did

fight—with physical violence, with rhetoric, with art—as well as members of colonizing nations who were not indifferent, who simply did not buy into these colossal colonizing enterprises perpetuated by their homelands. Indeed, these remarkable transgressions against postcolonial indifference and the oppressive orders that perpetuate it are where my exploration finds its footing. As I work to establish a definition of and framework for postcolonial indifference, certain generalizations are necessary, namely, that so much indifference was perpetuated by the colonial machine, both within the actors and the acted-upon, that I find it compelling, important work to look at this phenomenon on an individual level, both to exemplify that larger indifference and to show deviation from it.

Extrapolating the George Bernard Shaw quote that provides the epigraph for this chapter, Nair describes indifference as “the essence of terror, inhumanity, antimemory” (xxxix). Resistant to definition, to memory, and even to identification because it is the silent antithesis of difference, indifference endowed the colonizing machine with the protective cover of blamelessness and absence. The lingering condition of postcolonial indifference, as Nair further explains, is an inheritance, a colonial hangover in which the psychological residue of the initial indifference is passed from generation to generation. Indifference is self-perpetuating; it is a “substance that postcolonial states are especially well equipped to manufacture” (xxv). Through my exploration of *The Farming of Bones*, *The God of Small Things*, and *The Map of Love*, I will extend Nair’s idea of indifference to a scholarly consideration of my chosen literary texts and show not only that such initial colonial indifference has an undeniable effect in the postcolonial world—indeed, that indifference is one of colonialism’s most powerful, insidious, and lasting legacies—but, more significantly, that these inheritors can break free. These novels will, essentially,

create the framework for examining indifference within postcolonial literary study, shaping a theory of postcolonial indifference, particularly in application to the distinctive experiences of women.

Recovering Sexuality from Colonial Discourse

Loomba's postcolonial scholarship examines the role the female body has long played as a representation of conquered and colonized lands. Through an analysis of the John Donne poems "Love's Progress" and "To His Mistress Going to Bed" to exemplify this symbolism, Loomba asserts that "sexual and colonial relationships become analogous to each other" (73). She continues,

Donne's male lover is the active discoverer of the female body, and desires to explore it in the same way as the European "adventurer" who penetrates and takes possession of lands which are seen as passive, or awaiting discovery. Here, the sexual promise of the woman's body indicates the wealth promised by the colonies—hence, in the first poem the lover/colonist traverses her body/the globe to reach her "India," the seat of riches. (73).

This passive willingness with which Donne's speaker characterizes the object of his sexual desire "rested on the assumption that the darker races or non-Europeans were immoral, promiscuous, libidinous and always desired white people" (Loomba 158). The "supposed savagery and violence of New World natives" serves as justification for the force the colonizer uses in claiming these wild lands, enacting a "rape and plunder" scenario (Loomba 76, 79). As such, this sort of encounter reinscribes violence and

untamed sexual desire as metaphorical markers of the brutally intimate colonizer-colonized relationship. These and similar depictions portray a woman—and, by extension, her land and its original inhabitants—needing to be conquered and possessed, needing to have her primal, insatiable sexual desires controlled.

Edward Said's famous critique of the European practice of Orientalism reinforces Loomba's discussion of female sexuality as an recurring symbol for colonial conquest. As Anne McClintock asserts, however, Said's particular stance only accounts for gender in the metaphorical sense. She writes,

For Said, Orientalism takes perverse shape as a "male power-fantasy" that sexualizes a feminized Orient for Western power and possession. But sexuality comes close, here, to being no more than a metaphor for other, more important (that is, male) dynamics played out in what Said calls "an exclusively male province." Sexuality as a trope for other power relations was certainly an abiding aspect of imperial power. The feminizing of "virgin" land . . . operated as a metaphor for relations that were very often not about sexuality at all. . . . But seeing sexuality only as a metaphor runs the risk of eliding *gender* as a constitutive dynamic of imperial and anti-imperial power. (14, emphasis in the original)

Following Robert Young's critique of another founding voice in postcolonial studies, Homi Bhabha, Loomba asserts that Bhabha "does not address questions of gender: he 'seems to regard the troubled structures of sexuality as a metaphor for colonial ambivalence' " (163).

As such, I find it important work in the field of postcolonial literary studies to pull

gender and sexuality from the realm of the metaphorical in my examination of the postcolonial women within the three novels that are the subject of this dissertation. Loomba articulates the difficult positioning of such women, who are struggling to write themselves as autonomous subjects while at the same time being written—and written on—as objects: “In patriarchal society, women are split subjects who watch themselves being watched by men. They turn themselves into objects because femininity itself is defined by being gazed upon by men” (162). Although I would argue that such women don’t turn *themselves* into objects but have it done for them through patriarchal and colonial rhetoric, this objectification ultimately turns the female colonial subject into that passive being, whom Helen Carr tells us is “described always in terms of lack” (qtd. in Loomba 159-60). In her exploration of the symbolic image of woman as conquerable nation, Loomba hints at what I see as colonialism’s first deployments of the force of indifference to control colonized peoples, who are represented by such passive, “lacking” women and who must extinguish their passions and desires⁷—or have it done for them.

Indeed, as McClintock echoes concerning the pacifying endeavors of imperialism,⁸ “[P]eople’s actions and desires are mediated through institutions of power” (15). While initial colonial encounters may have had very little to do with sex itself, the “policing of sex,” to draw from Michel Foucault, ensured personal agency was limited and “colonial order” was maintained. As Ann Laura Stoler asserts in her application of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* to colonial relations, “[T]he discursive management of the sexual practices of colonizer and colonized was fundamental to the colonial order of things” (4). Because of the inevitable productive potential of sexual relations—and the concern over interracial mixing—colonial and imperial powers “racialized the dangers of

sex” (46). Stoler continues, “Discourses of sexuality at once classified colonial subjects into distinct human kinds, while policing the domestic recesses of imperial rule” (4). This policing of the intimate realms of human existence was no more felt than on the person and body of a non-white woman under imperial rule and influence. The “image of the women of the Orient,” as Shereen Abou El Naga explains, “was invented by the outsider (global) and consolidated by the insider (local)” in a “vicious closed circle” of racism and patriarchy (70). With both new imperial powers and preexisting traditional expectations at play, women in colonized regions had little control over their identities, their desires, and their bodies.

The backlash against colonization on the home front only reinforced women’s lack of agency as actual, rather than metaphorical, beings. As El Naga identifies, “On the local level, women have always been looked at as the carriers of cultural identity” (70). Loomba extrapolates the rationale of postcolonial nationalism as a response to the destabilizing, emasculating effects of colonization:

Colonialism intensified patriarchal relations in colonised lands, often because native men, increasingly disenfranchised and excluded from the public sphere, became more tyrannical at home. They seized upon the home and the woman as emblems of their culture and nationality. The outside world could be Westernised but all was not lost if the domestic space retained its cultural purity. (168)

Speaking to nineteenth-century nationalist movements in India, Partha Chatterjee echoes El Naga and Loomba, explaining the sacred duty of women regarding cultural preservation: “The home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the

national culture, and women must take the main responsibility of protecting and nurturing this quality” (159). These “new” expectations for women re-subjugated them to old patriarchy in an updated, urgent form. As Amal Amireh asserts, “[I]dealized images and real bodies of women serve as national boundaries” (748). In that way, the “loss of female virginity” represented by colonial penetration parallels a loss “also of male virility,” and “national defeat is experienced as castration” (751, 753). With traditional gender roles undermined, sexual anxiety becomes heightened, and women are re-domesticated in the context of fervent anti-colonial efforts. In such a postcolonial context, women’s physical bodies are reserved for marriage—particularly the production of male children—and their spiritual lives are wholly claimed and deployed for the metaphorical purity of the nation. Neither are their own. Using the example of Palestinian national narrative, Amireh explains the potential resistance of a woman named Fitna, whose name encapsulates the anxiety: “The name *Fitna* means beauty but has another meaning that is impossible to ignore in this context. *Fitna* in Muslim discourse also means political and social chaos, the latter often produced by unregulated female sexuality” (772). Therein lies the nature of these fears: women have sexual power, and, as such, it must be harnessed and controlled to appropriate ends, particularly amid the violent colonial clashing of cultures.

This sexual anxiety has by no means dissipated in modern postcolonial times. As journalist Praveen Swami remarks regarding the crisis of sexual violence in India, it is “a situation where women’s bodies have become ‘the principal terrain on which male rage is venting itself,’ and the sexually independent woman in particular is perceived as an implicit threat and insult” (Le Quesne). Against this backdrop of colonial, postcolonial,

and patriarchal discourses and through an exploration of the three contemporary novels, I intend to examine specifically how female expressions of sexuality and intimacy—namely the acknowledgement, pursuit, and satisfaction of love and desire—serve, by varying degrees, as transgressions against the colonial force of indifference and its postcolonial legacy in the fictional worlds depicted.

Methodology and Aims: Desire, Sexuality, and the Novels

Nair's description of indifference as "an attempt to officially annihilate desire" pinpoints an important starting point for my dissertation project. As she describes, "Desire versus indifference" is an epic "struggle between those ancient metaphorical enemies" (xxviii). No scholarship currently exists that specifically explores female desire and sexuality as set against a culture of indifference in modern postcolonial fiction, although I will draw from certain critical works on the novels to contextualize the specific postcolonial worlds of my chosen female characters. As Arundhati Roy's only novel among a significant body of non-fiction work focused on the plights of modern India, *The God of Small Things* (1997) has enjoyed the most critical and international attention of the three novels that are the focus of this dissertation. Indeed, I consider it valuable to situate the novel as an artistic rendering of the political concerns at the core of Roy's activist work and writing. While a number of scholars have discussed the political potential of certain characters' actions and the theme of desire in Roy's novel,⁹ these scholars have not specifically explored Ammu's desire as an act of transgression against the invisible yet powerful indifference that she has internalized as a female postcolonial subject in India. The idea of transgressing or breaking appears in certain works of criticism,¹⁰ but these

examine such concerns as twins Estha and Rahel breaking the incest taboo, Ammu's inter-caste affair, and the author's own transgression of traditional linguistic and narrative forms, rather than the audacity of Ammu's desirous acts themselves, which stand against an unacknowledged but ubiquitous postcolonial indifference. While the Untouchable Velutha's outcast standing—or lack of standing—makes Ammu's desirous transgressing all the more extreme, truly inconceivable, and ultimately intolerable, her daring to *want*, regardless of the ultimate end of her story, is the means by which she truly becomes a “suicide bomber,” as the novel identifies her, one who is willing to burn herself in the fire. And it is not a simple display of rebellion, an outward political act, that drives Ammu to Velutha. She *wants* to be with him, loves him even, and pursues the satisfaction of a deeply personal desire of her own choosing over the societal and familial forces that have taught her, from the very beginning, to want nothing.

Ammu's transgressive affair with Velutha challenges postcolonial indifference, specifically reconciling the fractured sexual and spiritual components of her personal postcolonial identity. Underlying Ammu's desire to “touch the Untouchable” is her desire to *know* both the abject, or that which we react to with horror and disgust, and the sacred, which converge in the character of Velutha (Fox 37). Following the work of Julia Kristeva, McClintock states, “[A]bjection marks the borders of the self; at the same time, it threatens the self with perpetual danger. . . . [T]he expelled abject haunts the subject as its inner constitutive boundary” (71). Ammu crosses this boundary—of the socially acceptable and of the self—in her sexual relationship with Velutha. By crossing over into transgressive realms of sexuality, she is able to achieve a semblance of what Nair calls “recovery of wholeness,” even if for too brief a time. Linking applicable secondary

criticism on the novel with my own focus on indifference and desire, I will further contextualize and extrapolate Ammu's transgressive actions. What Ammu achieves may, in fact, seem limited, but, in the context of both her limited postcolonial world and the patriarchally limited realm of female sexuality, her explorations are rather extraordinary, as I feel it is Roy's intention to show.

As an Egyptian novelist writing in English, Ahdaf Soueif is uniquely situated to speak to a transnational community of readers and scholars. She has written short fiction as well as three novels and numerous essays, articles, and non-fiction books; much of her body of work focuses on the sexual politics of Arab women in a Westernized world. Nominated for the 1999 Booker Prize, *The Map of Love* is Soueif's most popular and critically acclaimed work of fiction, and here we see her turning her social and political commentary to the realm of romance. Scholars indeed examine the novel as romance but also recognize its inseparable context as a postcolonial novel, one that interrogates, rewrites, and resists patriarchal and Orientalist discourse.¹¹ Scholars see the characters of Sharif and Omar, with their anti-colonial ideologies and political agendas, as Soueif's deliberate incarnations of her friend and mentor Edward Said, the founding voice of Orientalist critique and colonial discourse studies.¹² The novel's linguistic hybridity fascinates critics, as does its exclusive use of female voices amid violent, male-driven colonial/postcolonial worlds—one past and one present.¹³ *The Map of Love*, true to its title, is very much a romance, one that spans generations and continents through its unique narrative structure, and Soueif's fiction "is considered sexually daring," particularly by the standards of the author's Arab culture (Massad 85). Moreover, *The Map of Love* challenges the modern romance genre as well as canonical Western national

romances, which frame the idea of a nation—and its imperialist pursuits—as a heterosexual romance.¹⁴ It remains for me to examine just how the novel’s individual women specifically, by daring to want and by personally transgressing indifference, undermine national narratives through the pursuit of their own romances and their own desires.

In particular, I will turn my attention to the transgressive acts of British-born Lady Anna Winterbourne, who subverts colonial indifference in her early twentieth-century romance with Egyptian nationalist Sharif. As a citizen of the colonizing nation, Anna casts off the indifference, the “apathy among the upwardly mobile middle classes” which is the *modus operandi* for someone of her standing in regards to the colonized nation and its people. Moreover, she supports and aids Sharif in his work of pursuing Egyptian independence from British rule, re-committing to her rejection of imperialism and indifference time and again. This is a transgression for Sharif, too, falling in love with a British woman, but it is through Anna’s narrative voice that such breaking of indifference is revealed—and can be examined alongside the voices of other transgressive women.

As a prolific author of short fiction, novels, and essays over the past twenty years, Edwidge Danticat explores the lives of both traditional and modern Haitians, many of whom straddle the same lines as Danticat, who considers herself a native Haitian but also an American immigrant artist with a transnational identity. Danticat sets her 1998 historically based novel *The Farming of Bones* in the Dominican Republic and Haiti during the infamous Trujillo regime. For her depiction of the genocidal Parsley Massacre of 1937 and its aftermath, critics link Danticat’s novel to Caribbean and Latin American literature, specifically through the theme of witnessing to trauma and the tradition of

testimonio.¹⁵ As Danticat explores Haiti's collective traumatic memory of the massacre through the personal voice of narrator Amabelle, she fuses elements of history with the aesthetics of fiction. Scholars also discuss Amabelle's body as testimony in itself.¹⁶ The simple fact of Amabelle's existence—and her ability to give voice to those brutalized by the violent oppression of that time—draws attention as something transgressive. Among discussions of voice, witnessing, and telling,¹⁷ critics explore how the novel “breaks the silence” of that dark history, how Danticat takes on a “dangerous job” as its author, and how narrator Amabelle's “hunger to tell” as a survivor of the violence is satiated by her unique form of testimony.¹⁸

In the context of Amabelle's Haitian subjectivity and her positioning as a postcolonial woman, she is doubly subjected to the force of indifference. As a servant of a wealthy Dominican family, neither at home there nor in her nation of birth, she is expected to suspend her desires, allowing them to be subsumed within the patriarchy of her mistress's family. I will focus on these forces in contrast to Amabelle's relationship with her lover Sebastien, who appears either in reality or as a memory throughout her first-person narrative. Scholars have not yet explored this remarkable, intimate relationship for its important role in breaking Amabelle's state of numb indifference, allowing her a return to *feeling*, and opening her up to reconnect with lost and fragmented memories through a reconciliation of pain and joy. We see what may seem like a traumatized, nearly silenced ghost of a woman at the novel's end, but the physical and emotional intimacy Amabelle pursues with Sebastien nonetheless lingers as her answer to the legacy of colonial indifference on the island of Hispaniola. As an emissary of such powerful forces, Amabelle's world asks her, “Are you numb?” Because of the love and

desire between her and Sebastien that we see in the novel's early pages, we know her answer, her small flag of resistance, would have to be, "Not always."

By incorporating applicable secondary sources on the novels and drawing on the context of postcolonial studies and postcolonial feminist critique established in this introduction, I will focus on these female characters set against an environment of postcolonial indifference. I will use key interdisciplinary sources from colonial discourse studies, trauma studies, and race and sexuality studies to characterize the women's individual lives and the postcolonial cultures they emerge from. I will also establish important cultural and historical context for the resistance work of these women within their respective postcolonial worlds, examining how, as Loomba asserts, colonialism "was not an identical process" in each location and affirming that context must not be ignored in the field: "[D]iverse beginnings indicate that colonialism was challenged from a variety of perspectives by people who were not all oppressed in the same way or to the same extent" (8). Indeed, postcolonial feminist critique argues for the valuing of unique female experiences, which cannot be fully understood—and should not be subsumed—within Western literary traditions, on their own terms and within their own cultural contexts. These important efforts, as Chandra Mohanty articulates, counteract the Western academic "production of the 'Third World woman' as a singular, monolithic subject" whose experiences of domination and oppression are homogenized (255, 257).

But both context and an acknowledgment of the valuable connectedness of women—who can share experiences across racial, cultural, and national lines, even across time—are vital in postcolonial feminist critique. Uma Narayan asserts that, regardless of their positioning, "feminist theories and political agendas need to be

responsive to the diversity of women's lives, both within and *across* national contexts" (81, emphasis added). Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat echo Narayan's concerns: "Issues of location and coalition have thus become central in Third World and minority feminist critique" (8). As Ofelia Schutte succinctly identifies, "The question of integrating the local and the global from an ethical perspective is a crucial feminist one" (172). In light of these common concerns, Elleke Boehmer articulates specific goals for what she calls a "qualified, relational feminism": "In short, a relational approach allows women, at least in principle, *both* to proclaim the specificity of their particular historical experience, *yet also* to affirm common interests and political transformations across cultural and national borders, as they act from a commitment to social justice for those constructed 'woman' " (13, emphasis in the original).

As such, the context of these novels, that is, the specificity of Ammu's, Anna's, and Amabelle's respective postcolonial worlds, is of utmost importance to my discussion of their transgressing, but, by bringing them together, I aim to address the concern of postcolonial feminist scholars that connectedness—the global, the transnational, and the cross-cultural—also be recognized in light of postcolonial women's experiences. All three women do not trespass patriarchal and colonial structures in the same ways and to the same extent, but each transgresses not only indifference but history itself through the romance she engages in.

Romance and the Private Realm

These romantic relationships¹⁹ are at the core of each novel's narrative. In *The God of Small Things*, the events in Roy's uniquely structured narrative circle around and

eventually culminate with a long-awaited final chapter depicting the brief but remarkable affair between Ammu and Velutha. In *The Map of Love*, the grandniece of Anna and Sharif discovers their love story within the contents of an old family trunk. Their romance is replayed, with the present-day narrative rendered secondary to the development of Anna and Sharif's taboo, passionate relationship as seen through Anna's journals and letters. In *The Farming of Bones*, the name of Amabelle's lover opens the novel, as if providing the answer to any question one might have about her life and her story: "His name is Sebastien Onius." Even after he disappears from the narrative, Amabelle returns to their shared memories, again and again, as food for her broken soul.

As Davis relates regarding our cultural perspective on the genre, romance would seem "ill fitted to grand statements about social and political concerns." Indeed, *The Map of Love* presumably lost the Booker Prize because of "one common thread [that] ran through nearly all of the critical responses: a profound unease with the novel's combination of romance and politics. For critics, the genres of the romance and the political novel functioned as two mutually exclusive and irreconcilable traditions" (Davis). Many felt the romantic plot gave the novel too much mass market appeal, outweighing the strong political components of the narrative. The gendered implications of these critiques—a feminine, romantic agenda versus the traditionally male realm of the political—is evident. As Brinda Bose articulates, "The perception that women tend to soft-pedal on issues of 'hard' or 'actual' politics is of course an old one" (64). Rather than following such a divisive reading as Soueif's critics, I find, in her novel as well as Roy's and Danticat's, a reconciliation of the dichotomies of private and public, personal and political, romance and history. To follow Bose's consideration of *The God of Small*

Things, “[T]o read her novel *politically* one may need to accept that there are certain kinds of politics that have more to do with interpersonal relations than with grand revolutions, that the most personal dilemmas can also become public causes, that erotics can also be a politics” (68, emphasis in the original). This personal brand of politics is at play in all three novels. Not in spite of but owing to their romantic centers, the novels offer a reconsideration of history, reopening closed narratives to interrogate patriarchy, reclaim private spaces as important sites of postcolonial resistance, and situate love and desire amid an environment of deep-seated indifference. These stories insist that female voices not be dismissed, that sexuality not be merely a metaphor for the political, and that women not be scapegoated for the emasculating effects of colonial oppression.

While anti-colonial and decolonizing movements have historical associations as public, political enterprises, Loomba identifies the personal, psychological, and emotional work that plays an important role in postcolonial recovery. She explains:

Colonialism, we have seen, reshapes, often violently, physical territories, social terrains as well as human identities. As the Caribbean novelist George Lamming put it, “the colonial experience is a *live* experience in the *consciousness* of these people. . . . The experience is a continuing *psychic* experience that has to be dealt with and will have to be dealt with long after the actual colonial situation formally ‘ends.’ ” Anti-colonial struggles therefore had to create new and powerful identities for colonised peoples and to challenge colonialism not only at a political or intellectual level, but also on an emotional plane. (185-86, emphasis in the original)

This emotional work—undoing the psychic colonization and the lived-in trauma of

colonial encounters—exists in the private sphere but has undeniable ramifications in the public realm of a postcolonial world. In the three novels, the female characters undertake this work by transgressing indifference through their romantic relationships. For existing in the realm of the personal—for being “cozy and contained,” to draw from *The God of Small Things*—this emotional decolonization work is no less important. The authors rewrite the domestic spaces belonging to their characters—backrooms and bedrooms, harems, servants’ quarters—and allow the women a measure of personal recovery of epic colonial losses in these private spaces. Indifference, which originated in the first colonial encounters through Europe’s “rape and plunder” of feminized, supposedly voiceless nations and remained deeply embedded in postcolonial culture, is rejected on the “home” front of private spaces. And here, as I intend to show in this dissertation, we are reminded of the actual costs of colonialism on women’s physical bodies, within their intimate relationships, and through their personal experiences of trauma. *Gender*, then, will not be elided, and women reclaim agency of actual rather than metaphorical significance as they overturn the colonizing effects of indifference in their individual lives.

In the subsequent chapters, I will explore each of these women’s lives as portrayed in the novels. Chapter 2 will consider *The God of Small Things*, contextualizing Ammu’s story by providing background on the colonization of India, particularly regarding the institutions of caste and patriarchy, as well as situating Ammu among the novel’s other characters. As she offers the most apparent transgression of indifference, I turn to Ammu first to model my approach, establishing Roy’s description of “Big God” versus “Small God” within the novel as its own sort of theory of indifference that is applicable to the whole of my study. Chapter 3 will focus on *The Map of Love* in a

consideration of Anna's narrative, which operates within but also subverts the Victorian tradition of travel writing by women. As her voice emerges from the British Empire, her potential complicity in an Orientalist colonizing machine offers a valuable depiction of indifference from the other side of the aisle. Just as we see her breaking with the expected indifference to her own desires, she transgresses indifference to the Egyptian people colonized by her home country. Chapter 4 will explore the most subtle depiction of a personal transgression against postcolonial indifference among the three novels:

Amabelle's first-person narrative in *The Farming of Bones*. Set against historical anti-Haitian racism in the Dominican Republic and amid the dangerous Trujillo regime, Amabelle's small steps of recovery from old and new traumas, her breaking from the grip of psychological numbness, come through the avenue of her intimate relationship with Sebastien. By way of conclusion and synthesis, Chapter 5 will lay out a framework of postcolonial indifference as established by my study of the three novels, identifying key characteristics of the indifference itself as well as the means by which postcolonial subjects are able to break from it. The final chapter, a pedagogical essay titled "Embracing Discomfort and Reconsidering Empathy in the Postcolonial Literature Classroom," will extend my scholarship to applications in the literature classroom. By acknowledging different responses to postcolonial texts, from resistance to empathy and possibilities in between, I lay out an approach that will help students connect to new texts, cultures, and histories through a joint venture as a classroom community to become more responsible, insightful, empathetic world citizens.

Just as Roy, Soueif, and Danticat reopen and revise history to account for new stories of the formerly voiceless, their postcolonial characters rewrite themselves as

female subjects who have and pursue desires rather than as *objects of* desire. Limited as they are as women in patriarchal, classist, racist postcolonial societies, Ammu, Anna, and Amabelle are most liberated when they are transgressing indifference by exploring desire, reclaiming their own bodies through expressions of physical sexuality, and recovering emotional capacity through intimate relationships.

Chapter 1 Notes

1. See Nunday's "Rape Sentence Is Just the Start of India's Fight for Equality" and Hyder's "Turning to Community, Indian Women Are Organizing to Fight Sexual Violence."
2. See Theodore's "'Egypt's Sexual Assault Epidemic': Who Cares!"
3. See Jagannath's "NY Times Suggests It's Pointless to Report Rape in Haiti, Ignoring Serious Efforts to Protect Women" regarding what important efforts have been made by groups working to counteract sexual violence against women in Haiti.
4. It is also helpful to conceptualize "postcolonial" not just temporally as describing what comes *after* colonialism but as a reaction to colonialism (academic and otherwise) from its outset. In that way, the *post* prefix can be read as illustrative of a new world that is irrevocably changed *post* earliest colonial encounters. To put it another way, *postcolonialism* can be said to have immediately supplanted colonialism. As Dawn Duncan clarifies regarding the inevitable personal and cultural identity crises that followed, "The *after* reference for *post*-colonial more fittingly applies to after the onset of colonization, when the identity conflicts originate and shape the contributing cultural identities for years to come" (325, emphasis in the original).
5. See *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work* (2011).
6. Acknowledging that experiences were different at each site of colonial contact, I deliberately use such terms as "*the* colonizer" and "*the* colonized" for simplicity and to explore common central elements of colonialism as a complicated, oppressive system.
7. In my employment of the term *desire* within this dissertation, I use it deliberately to recall these early colonial encounters and their symbolic associations with sexual control

and dominance. As such, I show how the characters at the center of my study refigure themselves as women who engage with and act on their own feelings and wishes, especially those of a sexual nature, rather than let themselves exist as mere objects of desire for consumption by patriarchal and colonizing powers. Rather than specifically follow Freud, Lacan, Derrida, or Deleuze and Guattari on desire—or even Foucault’s and Spivak’s critical responses to such psychoanalytic deployments of the term—I use the pedestrian definition of desire. Nair’s description is also helpful here to establish how indifference violates our most basic humanity, our “fragile, rather ordinary, individual desires” (xxviii).

8. I do not use imperialism and colonialism interchangeably as they are not synonymous. While Loomba identifies *colonialism*, in the simplest sense, as “the conquest and control of other people’s land and goods” (2), *imperialism* is a complex, global system which can exist without actual colonies. A spatial distinction can also be helpful, with imperialism originating in the imperial country and focused on development of “*the Empire*” and colonialism referencing what happens *in the colonies*. Regardless, these two systems are irrevocably intertwined, and this dissertation’s postcolonial angle necessitates that I discuss both.

9. See especially Lanone and Bose. See also Ahmad, who dismisses the sort of personal politics that Roy endorses in her novel, and Bose, whose response to Ahmad asserts that the personal can indeed be political and that “a politics of desire . . . could certainly be considered as viable a politics as any other” (60).

10. See Almeida, Durix, Eldred, Oumhani, and Silkü.

11. See Darraj, King, and Wynne.

12. See Davis, King, Malak, Massad, Valassopoulos, and Wynne.
13. See Darraj, Davis, El Naga, Hassan, Malak, and Wynne.
14. See Davis.
15. See Caminero-Santangelo, Novak, and Rohrleitner.
16. See Clitandre, Novak, and Shemak.
17. See Clitandre, Francis, Rader, Segura-Rico, and Wucker.
18. See Rohrleitner; see Shea, “The Dangerous Job of Edwidge Danticat: An Interview” and “The Hunger to Tell: Edwidge Danticat and *The Farming of Bones*.”
19. I acknowledge that these depictions privilege heterosexual relationships as the avenue for exploring and fulfilling personal desire. In the worlds of the novels, a context for engaging in homosexual relationships simply does not exist for the characters. A fuller consideration of the transgression of postcolonial indifference than this dissertation can undertake would certainly include a discussion of homosexual relationships in postcolonial fiction.

CHAPTER TWO

Ammu's 'Unmixable Mix': Transgressing Smallness

in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

He was exasperated because he didn't know what that look *meant*. He put it somewhere between indifference and despair. He didn't know that in some places, like the country that Rahel came from, various kinds of despair competed for primacy. And that *personal* despair could never be desperate enough. That something happened when personal turmoil dropped by at the wayside shrine of the vast, violent, circling, driving, ridiculous, insane, unfeasible, public turmoil of a nation. That Big God howled like a hot wind, and demanded obeisance. Then Small God (cozy and contained, private and limited) came away cauterized, laughing numbly at his own temerity. Inured by the confirmation of his own inconsequence, he became resilient and truly indifferent. Nothing mattered much. Nothing much mattered. And the less it mattered, the less it mattered. It was never important enough. Because Worse Things had happened. In the country that she came from, poised forever between the terror of war and the horror of peace, Worse Things kept happening. (emphasis in the original)

—Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*¹

There is no better introduction to the postcolonial world of India as applicable to a

consideration of *The God of Small Things* than this description of the personal versus the public, the individual set against what is represented by “Big God”: the nation as a whole and the capital, demanding nature of “Worse Things” which never stop. In that way, personal turmoil never stops ceasing to matter. This passage becomes much more than Rahel’s American husband’s take on his frustratingly closed-off wife. Ultimately, the image of Small God represents the individual inconsequence that comes at the cost of such all-consuming powers as the caste system, traditional patriarchy, and the engine of colonialism along with its remnants in a neocolonized² nation. The competition for ownership and recognition of one’s own trauma, a constant losing battle for the individual, breeds an attitude of fatalism in those represented by Small God. We see the larger world of the novel mapped out here, and we will see where each character fits, indeed, where each character is preordained to fit in this world, never mind her deciding her own place. And in that place, she, he, they—those individuals whose personal traumas can never compete with Worse Things—become “truly indifferent.”

In sections that follow, I will contextualize the various external forces that act upon characters in the world of Roy’s novel, rendering them indifferent to oppression and injustice, and explore how such indifference is reinforced within the family. This work will establish how the character of Ammu in particular is subjugated—as a postcolonial subject and a woman, as a divorcée, even as a mother—to the indifferent world as dictated by “Big God.” Drawing from select criticism and theory, including the idea of psychic colonization, and extending such perspectives, I will argue that Ammu’s passions, her expressions of sexuality, and her desire for human intimacy lead her to a measure of freedom, albeit temporary, from her positioning within this context of

indifference. Her brief relationship with Velutha indeed transgresses what is expected and acceptable in her world, but, above all, it transgresses a deeply rooted postcolonial indifference to the personal traumas and desires of the individual.

A Context of Indifference: Caste, Class, and Patriarchy

In the novel, Roy captures indifference and emotional distance in a vivid, particular way through her description of “Small God.” In the history of postcolonial India, an evident representation of colonial and postcolonial indifference is contained within the caste system itself. In his book *Ornamentalism*, historian David Cannadine explains that British colonialism intensified and further stratified the existing Indian caste system. He states that the colonizers “came to look upon caste as ‘the essential feature of the Indian social system,’ as the analogue to their own carefully ranked domestic status hierarchy, which seemed to make Indian society familiar. . . . For the British in India, and for their friends, allies and collaborators, hierarchy was indeed ‘the axis around which everything turned’ ” (42-56). Loomba echoes Cannadine’s description: “Caste was of course a concept that became familiar in England from colonial experiences in India, and it marked a social, economic and religious hierarchy overlaid with connotations of purity and pollution, similar to those that shape the idea of race” (123). The Marxist Party, as depicted in Roy’s novel, also proclaims the link: “Caste is Class, comrades” (266). Even after British rule in India has ended, this social hierarchy emphasizes inequality and then capitalizes on indifference toward that inequality. With British and Indian culture locked in their own two-caste hierarchy of sorts and India’s preexisting Hindu hierarchal system reinforced, there is no chance for one small, personal person, in the world that Roy’s

novel depicts, to change her fate—or to even have that traumatic fate recognized and validated as unique and, indeed, personal.

Underpinning this unjust, indifferent order of things is the oppressors' fear of the unknowable, the indefinable, the uncontainable. The motif of classification and naming in the novel reveals that something—or someone—that isn't easily classified cannot be tolerated by the powers that be, just like the outlawed banana jam the family factory produces, which is "[t]oo thin for jelly and too thick for jam. An ambiguous, unclassifiable consistency, they said" (30-31). In his article "Commodity Fetishism, Patriarchal Repression, and Psychic Deprivation in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*," John Lutz speaks to this theme in the novel: "Each of the representations of authority and power in the narrative exhibits an obsessive concern with classification that extends from the organization of objects to the sorting and ranking of human beings" (63). Lutz identifies the "fear of impurity and contamination" as the motivating force behind the classification obsession, that is, the impulse to put away from ourselves what we fear to be unclean—the abject. While indifference may be, as Nair asserts, a "bleach" that washes emotion away, it is clear that what comes before—and, she would argue, remains buried underneath—is fear. The indifferent "economy" with which the police officers brutally beat outcast Velutha disguises something deeper and more ancient: "a primal fear of which they are not entirely aware, since their role is to function as part of the well-oiled machinery of the oppressive social and economic order" (Lutz 72). These enforcers of postcolonial order must "preserve the system" with all its "Structure. Order. Complete monopoly" (Lutz 72; Roy 293). Within this system, individuals' places are decided for them, prewritten, even, and the seemingly fated nature of each person's

position reinforces and maintains the fatalistic, indifferent order of the day.

As such and within *The God of Small Things*, the hierarchal system I have described, entrenched and enforced by deep fear, breeds indifference toward the lower classes—and particularly those, like Velutha and his father, beneath and outside the castes: the Dalits, or “Untouchables,” as Roy references them.³ Those who fall below in the hierarchy are not legitimate, recognized subjects. As scholar Sandra Goulart Almeida explains of postcolonial India in her article “Untouchable Bodies: Arundhati Roy’s Corporeal Transgressions,” “Untouchables are for the upper caste Indians what these in turn are for the colonizer—bodily absences in official historical accounts” (266). This recalls, per Loomba’s critique, the very definition of *colonialism* as a word that simply erases those groups and individuals who will *be colonized by it*. Almeida continues regarding the complicated world of the novel: “Roy exposes here the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in the complex structure of colonial and postcolonial relations in the sense that there is a constant sliding of categories of power and dominance” (266). To illustrate just one such “contradiction,” although the family portrayed in the novel are converted Syrian Christians—and self-proclaimed Anglophiles—they still adhere to the strictures of the traditional caste system, undoubtedly because they benefit from its classification as members of a privileged upper caste. Indeed, such ever-changing means of maintaining order as Almeida describes keep individuals oppressed and locked into a never-changing state of powerlessness. Although Ammu herself is not outside the castes, her eventual relationship and willing identification with Velutha illuminates the ways in which they are similarly disenfranchised.

The category of gender adds another factor to this complex, interlocked system of

dominance and oppression. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Gayatri Spivak asserts regarding the complicated positioning of postcolonial women, “Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization” (102). In this world, both ancient and modern, both traditional and undeniably changed by colonial contact, women’s identities are chosen for them, their bodies are commodified and consumed, and their minds are colonized by a culture of indifference. As philosopher Kelly Oliver would argue, these women are socially alienated as well as oppressed. They—not only women but racial minorities and other outsiders like Velutha—are excluded from their societies’ meaning-making activities and then silenced about that exclusion. In her book *The Colonization of Psychic Space: A Psychoanalytic Social Theory of Oppression*, Oliver argues, “Women, and racialized or sexualized others, are denied full participation in mainstream cultural and social institutions; and the affects that result from the experience of that exclusion are also denied social space for articulation” (87). And just as Oliver describes how the criminal justice system—one of these important “social institutions”—fails women, in other legal realms women can also expect nothing. Within the novel, Ammu has no claim to the family’s factory or property, and her brother Chacko won’t let her forget it:

Though Ammu did as much work in the factory as Chacko, whenever he was dealing with food inspectors or sanitary engineers, he always referred to it as *my* Factory, *my* pineapples, *my* pickles. Legally, this was the case, because Ammu, as a daughter, had no claim to the property.

Chacko told Rahel and Estha that Ammu had no Locusts Stand I.

“Thanks to our wonderful male chauvinist society,” Ammu said.

Chacko said, “What’s yours is mine and what’s mine is also mine.”

(56, emphasis in the original)

Women in such patriarchal cultures are largely expected to be modest, obedient, and selfless. In his book *India Calling: An Intimate Portrait of a Nation’s Remaking*, journalist Anand Giridharadas describes this culture of silent obedience among women in India: “Women were bred in this environment behind a virtual veil; so many were encouraged not to think, not to question, not to know themselves and certainly not to express what they knew. They were dispensers of silent smiles and of ceaseless inquiries into whether you had eaten” (240). Choosing otherwise—and the audacity of that choosing!—relegates women to the outside of society. These transgressors do not fit the prescribed order, and they cannot be contained within it. Indeed, being a divorcée and a mother of fatherless children is an identity from which Ammu is not allowed to escape; her independence is considered a defect.

While Ammu’s sexuality is a thing to be feared and controlled, her brother is at liberty to have women as he chooses. In a strangely female-enforced patriarchy, their mother enables Chacko to have discrete meetings with these women, encouraging him to satisfy a “Man’s Needs.” In the article “Sexual/Textual Strategies in *The God of Small Things*,” critic Tirthankar Chanda comments that Mammachi “adopts an understanding attitude towards her son’s libertine relationships with the women working in the family factory. By facilitating the sexual exploitation of women by her son, she accepts the tenets of a male-dominated society where women are the marginalised Other” (40).

Mammachi makes no such concessions for the desires of a single woman like Ammu, who is expected to live a life, like Small God, “cozy and contained, private and limited.” Such hypocrisy is deeply rooted, and the narrator explains that Mammachi’s “tolerance of ‘Men’s Needs,’ as far as her son was concerned, became the fuel for her unmanageable fury at her daughter” (244). Walia Pushpinder, in her article “Tracing the Contours of Conflict: Gender, Power and Powerlessness in *The God of Small Things*,” further extrapolates this double standard: “Chacko’s needs are absolutely comprehensible whereas the needs of Ammu—a divorced mother of two children—are construed as preposterous, unimaginable, in other words, devastating for the honour of Reverend John Ipe’s family” (91). There is certainly no prescribed place in the realm of this family and this culture for the aberrant, dangerous desires that Ammu will eventually embrace.

Just as her mind and identity are colonized by this environment, a woman’s body is not her own. The minor character of Inspector Matthew exemplifies, within the novel’s first few pages, the powerful, corrupt, masculine systems that rule over all aspects of a female life. When Ammu goes to the police station to give a statement, Inspector Matthew consumes her body with “eyes [that] were sly and greedy,” and he “stared at Ammu’s breasts as he spoke” (9). Even a token amount of physical assault isn’t off limits: “‘If I were you,’ he said, ‘I’d go home quietly.’ Then he tapped her breasts with his baton. Gently. Tap tap. As though he were choosing mangoes from a basket. Pointing out the ones that he wanted packed and delivered” (9-10). Indeed, Lutz asserts that this simultaneous sexualizing and commodification of Ammu’s body is part and parcel of a larger brutality and that “the Inspector’s threatening actions call attention to the patriarchal violence enforcing the subordination of women” (59). Furthermore, given his

capacity as a representative of the state and an upholder of law and order, Inspector Matthew “signifies the official, authorized version of reality that . . . enforces the strict hierarchies of class, caste, race, and gender” (Lutz 59). This “official” version of things by all means excludes Ammu’s side of the story; she is not even a subject who can speak for herself but an object for consumption and, ultimately, dismissal. As we see later in the novel, Inspector Matthew’s actions can be linked to the police officers who beat Velutha to death, identified in their official, order-keeping capacity as “history’s henchmen” (292). We are told of Matthew’s actions, “[I]t was not a policeman’s spontaneous brutishness on his part” (246). With all the same intention, control, efficiency, and emotional indifference, Inspector Matthew enforces order in his dealings with Ammu: “He knew exactly what he was doing. It was a premeditated gesture, calculated to humiliate and terrorize her. An attempt to instill order into a world gone wrong” (246). Within that order, Ammu’s voice is silenced and she is labeled a *veshya*, a prostitute, when she seeks to have a voice and a will. But it is Ammu’s mind, which we shall see cannot be completely colonized by oppressive forces, that remains hers and leads her reclaimed body to explorations of desire and sexuality that liberate her from indifference.

The Cruelty of Family

Considering India’s independence from imperial rule, Nair asserts that “the colonizers have now vanished,” leaving a nameless, faceless, blameless bureaucracy behind to reinforce the colonial status quo of indifference in the postcolonial state (xv-xvii). To extend this theory, I contend that such indifference is also maintained within the postcolonial family we see portrayed in *The God of Small Things*. Within the realm of

Ammu's home life, her family replicates the larger culture of indifference in their dealings with one another. A photograph of Ammu's father Pappachi hangs in the family home, and his "contained cruelty . . . lent an underlying chill to the warm room in which it hung" (50). Through Ammu's young eyes, we see how Pappachi's cruel indifference to his family breeds more indifference:

As a child, she had learned very quickly to disregard the Father Bear Mother Bear stories she was given to read. In her version, Father Bear beat Mother Bear with brass vases. Mother Bear suffered those beatings with mute resignation.

In her growing years, Ammu had watched her father weave his hideous web. He was charming and urbane with visitors, and stopped just short of fawning on them if they happened to be white. He donated money to orphanages and leprosy clinics. He worked hard on his public profile as a sophisticated, generous, moral man. But alone with his wife and children he turned into a monstrous, suspicious bully, with a streak of vicious cunning. They were beaten, humiliated and then made to suffer the envy of friends and relations for having such a wonderful husband and father.

Ammu had endured cold winter nights in Delhi hiding in the mehndi hedge around their house (in case people from Good Families saw them) because Pappachi had come back from work out of sorts, and beaten her and Mammachi and driven them out of their home. (171-72)

Interpellated⁴ to a fault by the indifferent hierarchal order of his world, Pappachi is, in turn, indifferent to the moral repugnance of his hypocritical life and emotionally

indifferent to his family as they suffer under his hand. On one such terrifying night, when Ammu returns to the house “to rescue her new gumboots that she loved more than anything else,” she encounters her father:

Pappachi had been sitting in his mahogany rocking chair all along, rocking himself silently in the dark. When he caught her, he didn't say a word. He flogged her with his ivory-handled riding crop (the one that he had held across his lap in his studio photograph). Ammu didn't cry. When he finished beating her he made her bring him Mammachi's pinking shears from her sewing cupboard. While Ammu watched, the Imperial Entomologist shred her new gumboots with her mother's pinking shears. . . . When the last strip of rubber had rippled to the floor, her father looked at her with cold, flat eyes, and rocked and rocked and rocked. (172)

In terrorizing his young daughter and destroying her prized possession, Pappachi reinforces indifference as the currency of exchange not only of the social order but between family members.

As she grows into adulthood, the lack of care Ammu's parents take with her marriage further reveals the apathy that surrounds her. After “Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl,” Ammu waits for the next phase in her life: “There was very little for a young girl to do in Ayemenem other than to wait for marriage proposals while she helped her mother with the housework.” In the context of her parents' apathy to her future, “no proposals came Ammu's way.” Then, “Two years went by. Her eighteenth birthday came and went. Unnoticed, or at least unremarked upon by her parents” (38). Shirking the most important parental obligation to a daughter

in this culture, Ammu's parents seem indifferent to her very existence, and certainly to her future life. Desperate and forced to take matters into her own hands, Ammu chooses her husband. She gives in to his proposal with the same resignation that rules her family home: "He proposed to Ammu five days after they first met. Ammu didn't pretend to be in love with him. She just weighed the odds and accepted. She thought that *anything*, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem. She wrote to her parents informing them of her decision. They didn't reply" (39, emphasis in the original).

The new family Ammu creates for herself subjugates her to a very familiar sort of man: "Her husband turned out to be not just a heavy-drinker but a full-blown alcoholic with all an alcoholic's deviousness and tragic charm. There were things about him that Ammu never understood. . . . why he lied so outrageously when he didn't need to. *Particularly* when he didn't need to" (40, emphasis in the original). When her husband, who is only called Baba in the novel, is about to lose his job as assistant manager of a tea plantation, he entertains his boss' indecent proposition regarding his beautiful young wife: "Mr. Hollick proposed that Baba go away for a while. . . . For as long as it took him to get better. And for the period of time that he was away, Mr. Hollick suggested that Ammu be sent to his bungalow to be 'looked after' " (41). Willing to offer his wife's body up for a business transaction, Baba reinforces Ammu lack of agency as a woman. When Ammu doesn't jump at the chance to be exploited by her husband, their marriage devolves into abuse, with "Drunken violence followed by postdrunken badgering." Now having young children to care for, Ammu finds it necessary to rescue them from this environment when Baba's "bouts of violence began to include the children." With no other choice, "Ammu left her husband and returned, unwelcomed, to her parents in

Ayemenem. To everything that she had fled from only a few years ago. Except that now she had two young children. And no more dreams” (42).

Closing the circle, returning to her first callously indifferent home, Ammu sees no future for herself, no more possibilities: “[I]n the pit of her stomach she carried the cold knowledge that, for her, life had been lived. She had had one chance. She made a mistake. She married the wrong man” (38). Ammu is back in the home where she first learned to expect nothing but indifference from her own family. It is appropriate that, as the ruler of this cruel, apathetic place, Pappachi dies after “keeping indifferent health” for a time. Ammu observes her mother’s grief at his funeral, telling her children, “She was used to having him slouching around the pickle factory, and was used to being beaten from time to time. Ammu said that human beings were creatures of habit, and it was amazing the kind of things they could get used to. You only had to look around you, Ammu said, to see that beatings with brass vases were the least of them” (49). Just as the larger indifferent order of a postcolonial world is reinforced within the family, the theme of smallness reappears here, as Ammu articulates her resignation to the fact that personal traumas are sometimes just too small to be recognized, particularly when set amid public turmoil. At such a young age, Ammu feels she has already lived her life, leaving her family home only to encounter more indifference and more powerlessness. She resettles into the Ayemenem house with resignation, a young-old woman with no future.

Baby Kochamma Gives Us Another Lesson in Indifference

Although the beatings end with Pappachi’s death, the indifference is deeply rooted, engendering more cruelty. His death by no means diffuses the status quo of indifference

and emotional distance, which continue to permeate the family home. Even without violence, Mammachi and Ammu's aunt, called Baby Kochamma, carry on Pappachi's legacy. A look into the mind of Baby Kochamma in particular reveals much as I further explore the environment of indifference in Ammu's life. Such indifference, as Nair proposes, is a legacy of transgenerational colonial trauma, and, I argue, it continually replicates the emotional distance of the social hierarchy within this single family. After Ammu returns to the family home with her young children, Baby Kochamma has no sympathy let alone love for them; they represent the offspring of Ammu's "*intercommunity love* marriage," as she disdainfully identifies it (45, emphasis in the original). Baby Kochamma observes the young twins' play and interaction with each other, but, rather than feeling compassion for these "doomed, fatherless waifs," she sees in them something wrong, that is, an inordinate amount of happiness in a largely unhappy setting:

Baby Kochamma grudged them their moments of high happiness when a dragonfly they'd caught lifted a small stone off their palms with its legs, or when they had permission to bathe the pigs, or they found an egg hot from a hen. But most of all, she grudged them the comfort they drew from each other. She expected from them some token unhappiness. At the very least.
(44-45)

Baby Kochamma does not find joy in watching the children thrive after traumatic upheaval in their lives; rather, she begrudges their joy, particularly because it means, as she interprets things, that they do not know their place, their fate as "doomed" children. For this same reason, we are told, "Baby Kochamma resented Ammu, because she saw

her quarreling with a fate that she, Baby Kochamma herself, felt she had graciously accepted. The fate of the wretched Man-less woman” (44-45). Ammu has the audacity to choose for herself: to leave her husband and pursue another life, that is “to defy a patriarchal social code through which women are mere tokens of exchange” as Almeida asserts, recalling Baba’s attempted exploitation of her (264).

Baby Kochamma, like virtually everyone around her, allows herself to be defined and bounded by the “Love Laws” of this postcolonial world, which are a frequent motif in the novel. As old as history itself, the Love Laws “lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much” (33). They serve as another enforcer of indifference and emotional distance in small, personal lives. We learn that, as a young woman, Baby Kochamma loved Father Mulligan, an Irish priest, but was unable to have him. Forced to accept this rejection and the “aching heart” that accompanied such (25), Baby Kochamma sinks into indifference, immersed in an apathetic condition and a fatalistic, indifferent attitude—both for her own life and toward her family members. With her empathetic capacity stunted in this way, she focuses on her material possessions, especially when presented with the reality of a tumultuous world on television: “She was frightened by the BBC famines and television wars that she encountered while she channel surfed. Her old fears . . . had been rekindled by new television worries about the growing numbers of desperate and dispossessed people. She viewed ethnic cleansing, famine, and genocide as direct threats to her furniture” (28-29). Nair’s insights on indifference as perpetuated by modern media is apt to Baby Kochamma; she asserts that it is the “tendency toward collective amnesia—a form of slowly gathering indifference—that characterizes a global society fascinated by news. . . . yet it is part of the epistemology, the logic, of news that it cannot

focus permanently on any one subject” (xxiv). Indeed, Baby Kochamma’s lack of concern for “desperate and dispossessed people” is reinforced by the “public forgetfulness” of global media and its audience (Nair xxiv). As Lutz further describes Baby Kochamma’s television-centered lifestyle, “[H]er abandonment of gardening for the pleasure of satellite television situates Baby Kochamma as a passive consumer,” and her existence is reduced to “stultifying inactivity” (59-60). Indeed, Baby Kochamma apathetically consumes the lives of others and cares not that her own life contains no purpose or goodness.

Whether looking at the lives of strangers or her own family, Baby Kochamma undoubtedly represents a postcolonial individual who has inherited indifference but also made it her own personal asset, a protection even, against fear and pain. As such, she makes decisions with little self-awareness and no self-responsibility. Baby Kochamma even becomes the family’s most powerful enforcer of indifference, expecting others to resignedly accept their own fates—and feeling compelled to sacrifice them for punishment when they do not. Because Ammu and Velutha’s affair is an aberration of the Love Laws and the resignation that rules this world, Velutha’s horrific death becomes to Baby Kochamma simply an inevitability, despite her distinct role in setting in motion the events that cause his death. As Ammu explains, articulating the cruelty and indifference she has known since her earliest memories, “This was the trouble with families. Like invidious doctors, they knew just where it hurt” (68).

Children of Indifference

The primary voices in the novel—small in their world but resounding on the page—

belong to Ammu's children, twins Rahel and Estha, with much of the novel filtered through their perspectives as children. They exemplify how, even from youth, indifference breeds indifference when individual lives are locked into a complex postcolonial hierarchy. Even within their own family, innocents Rahel and Estha are marginalized amid the fervor surrounding the visit of their cousin, Sophie Mol. When Sophie Mol arrives, Rahel observes the welcome party from the sidelines, as "she stood forlornly at the edge of the driveway, on the periphery of the Play" (174). From this viewpoint, the reader is able to see how half-British Sophie Mol, who is "Loved from the Beginning" (176), represents the continued dominance of and preference, even within a postcolonial Indian family, for Anglo culture. As Aïda Balvannanadhan states regarding this moment, the twins' "lives change as they are relegated to the second or inferior position" (100). The twins, particularly in their places as members of such a cruel family of self-serving people, are psychically colonized by forces from all sides.

And it is not just within the family that Rahel and Estha experience cruel indifference to their emotional vulnerability. In his first and most traumatic encounter with the larger indifferent world, Estha is rendered helpless—and eventually silent—when a pedophile, apathetic to the innocence of a young child, targets him. Dressed up like a small Elvis and at the theater with his family for a showing of *The Sound of Music*, Estha is molested by the man who runs the refreshments counter. From the beginning, the "Orangedrink Lemondrink Man" identifies Estha as a vulnerable boy and a Westernized product: "He saw, with gummy eyes, Estha Alone in his beige and pointy shoes. And his spoiled puff. The Man wiped his marble counter with a dirtcolored rag. And he waited. And waiting he wiped. And wiping he waited. And watched Estha sing [a song from the

movie]” (97). Then the Man offers Estha a drink: “ ‘No thank you,’ Elvis said politely. ‘My family will be expecting me. And I’ve finished my pocket money.’ ‘*Porketmunny?*’ The Orangedrink Lemondrink Man said with his teeth still watching. ‘First English songs, and now *Porketmunny!* Where d’you live? On the moon?’ ” (97-98). Here the Man, whom Estha recognizes as a powerful, capital-letter adult, resents Estha for the little boy’s taste, and the narrator implies that he is enacting a sort of revenge on Estha as the child of a well-off Anglicized family and as a product of Western culture. What limited agency the Man has he cruelly deploys in a predatory attempt to offset his own societal oppression. The Man “watches” Estha “with his teeth,” ultimately consuming him and his sexual innocence. After this trauma, the Man tells Estha, “You’re a lucky rich boy, with porketmunny and a grandmother’s factory to inherit” (100). Then Estha realizes that the Man “knew where to find Estha. That was what he was trying to say. It was a warning” (104).

This event depicts a complicated perpetuation of trauma, which is told as one of the many ignored private histories amid a larger public one. The Orangedrink Lemondrink Man, whose existence has likely been impacted by powerful colonial forces, turns to a person smaller than he to exert even a marginal dose of power. Before Estha comes into the lobby and becomes the Man’s target, his lack of power and voice amid a world of bigger voices is evident in the theater: “ ‘Shhhhh!’ they said together. It was Estha who was singing. A nun with a puff. An Elvis Pelvis Nun. He couldn’t help it. . . . The Audience was a Big Man. Estha was a Little Man” (96). After his traumatic sexual encounter, Estha withdraws further and further into his own world, eventually choosing never to speak. That night he is literally sick over his trauma: “ ‘Goodnight,’ Estha said,

too sick to love his sister” (109). Though small Estha simply “couldn’t help it” and is rendered powerless through this incident, his sister Rahel shares his secret pain. We are told, “She remembers, for instance (though she hadn’t been there), what the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man did to Estha” (5).

Although these are the most deeply personal and traumatic experiences Estha and Rahel will have, they are not matters on the scale of Big God. Just like the depiction of Small God, who “whistled, kicked stones” (20), Rahel turns her resentment at being marginalized into violence against “a whole column of juicy ants,” which she “squished and squashed with a stone” (176). Minor characters in the novel also exemplify this apathetic mentality toward other beings. For one example, “Every time a pye-dog strayed onto the road, the driver made a sincere effort to kill it” (108). As a similarly disturbing example, the actions of the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man show a casual indifference to the suffering of others because, perhaps, his own postcolonial trauma has gone unrecognized. In the family and in the bigger world, indifference answers indifference, and “despair came home to roost and hardened slowly into resignation” (285). There is no room for the consideration of personal trauma when Big God and his definitive, demanding trauma loom over every aspect of life. In such a world, individuals are not allowed the luxury of claiming any kind of ownership over their own trauma; their trauma matters little in the presence of Big God and Worse Things, and it becomes necessary for them to surrender to indifference rather than self-destruct.

Ammu Shows Her ‘Unsafe Edge’

As the primary focus of this chapter, the character of Ammu emerges as a challenge to

the indifferent home and world in which she lives. From the expectations of motherhood to the limits put upon her as a divorced woman, a person of a certain caste, and an individual in a nation ruled by Worse Things, her transgression begins even before she meets Velutha by the river during what will be the last nights of his life. Almeida speaks to the repressive nature of the society presented in the novel: it is “a social and cultural system that not only stifles individual freedom and social mobility but also, and above all, represses the expressions of the body and the discourses of desire” (259). As the narrator puts it regarding Ammu’s return to her family home, “For herself she knew that there would be no more chances. There was only Ayemenem now. A front verandah and a back verandah. A hot river and a pickle factory. And in the background, the constant, high, whining mewl of local disapproval” (42). In this disapproving place, because desires are repressed, contained, and certainly never spoken about, the yearnings and stirrings that Ammu cannot fully put down—or have smothered by her world—give her an “Unsafe Edge.” The description of Ammu when she is in one of these dangerous moods transforms her from a hopeless, exhausted mother of twins into someone full of life and passion, a mysterious creature, not fearful but to be feared:

Occasionally, when Ammu listened to songs that she loved on the radio, something stirred inside her. A liquid ache spread under her skin, and she walked out of the world like a witch, to a better, happier place. On days like this there was something restless and untamed about her. As though she had temporarily set aside the morality of motherhood and divorcée-hood. Even her walk changed from a safe mother-walk to another wilder sort of walk. She wore flowers in her hair and carried magic secrets in her

eyes. She spoke to no one. She spent hours on the riverbank with her little plastic transistor shaped like a tangerine. She smoked cigarettes and had midnight swims.

What was it that gave Ammu this Unsafe Edge? This air of unpredictability? It was what she had battling inside her. An unmixable mix. The infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber. It was this that grew inside her, and eventually led her to love by night the man her children loved by day. (43-44)

In the world I have contextualized, this “Edge,” the “unmixable mix,” is significant, noticeable, and aberrant. Ammu is a loving mother but a live wire; she is a woman who senses her life is essentially over but can’t deny the terror this engenders in her. With nothing to lose, Ammu finds empowerment rather than resignation in her prescribed positioning—this is her “Unsafe Edge.” Even her children are wary of her at these times, and just as one would handle a live bomb, “on the days that the radio played Ammu’s songs, people avoided her, made little loops around her, because everybody agreed that it was best to just Let Her Be” (44). We see Ammu’s potential to, metaphorically speaking, burn herself alive in an act of fury, of passion, of daring to feel anything.

The context of Ammu’s world, on the other hand, proves to be its own quite mixable mix, in which the powers that be combine to make a Big God, who is even more oppressive than any system alone could be. As Chanda observes of the novel, “One of its major themes is certainly the control of female body and sexuality by a patriarchal society governed by a peculiar combination of indigenous tradition and Christian morality” (39). Women’s bodies and desires, then, are suspect in more ways than one,

particularly desires of the dangerous nature we see in Ammu. It is this premature damnation—the idea of being guilty before trial, indeed, before even committing the crime—that ultimately frees Ammu to not just *want* but to *act*. The novel’s narrator describes her as “a woman that they had already damned, now had little left to lose, and could therefore be dangerous” (44).

Ammu wants back her own female body, which Almeida identifies as “the most oppressed version of the body in culture” (271). She wants to reclaim her body from the gazing eyes of men and from the identity of motherhood. Though she undoubtedly loves her children, she desires another avenue for her body and does not want it to be subsumed by a single label: “Ammu grew tired of their proprietary handling of her. She wanted her body back. It was hers. She shrugged her children off” (211). Ultimately, Ammu must reclaim herself from psychic colonization by embracing and following her wild instincts in order to reclaim her body. As Oliver explains of “those othered within mainstream culture,” they are “excluded from meaning making, even, or perhaps especially, creating the meaning of their own lives and bodies” (88). Indeed, when Ammu finally “shrugs off” indifference and the ties that bind her physical body as well as the labels and constraints that colonize her psyche, her “Unsafe Edge” is transformed into a brief but sublimely joyful relationship.

In this act of choosing for and defining herself, Ammu breaks free of her personal psychic colonization—and throws off the world. While the disapproving voices whisper, her dangerous, wild, aberrant sort of femininity is the avenue through which the novel offers a sliver of hope and a portion of beauty that challenges the status quo of the violent, cruel, suffocating place portrayed in the novel. As Almeida asserts of Ammu as

well as Rahel, “The attribute of femininity relates to powerlessness and oppression in a long-established colonial and postcolonial context; yet, in Roy’s narrative it also figures as the locus of transgression and resistance” (271). Ammu’s bodily expressions of sexuality and pursuit of desire with another oppressed individual, which are the moments that close the novel, become crucial acts of resistance in a patriarchal, caste-centered, neocolonized world. As Almeida articulates of these acts, the most transgressive of the novel, “In the end, the most oppressed version of the body in culture—the female body—defies culture and rejects victimization” (271).

Ammu and Velutha Transgress Fear: The Audacity of Love

A second look at the mind of Inspector Matthew reveals the culture of fear that keeps people in their places—and requires agents like Matthew to maintain that order. More than Velutha stepping beyond the bounds of his assigned label, the fear that Ammu, a beautiful woman from a respectable family, desired him and made her own choice⁵ to pursue the satisfaction of that desire shakes this world to its core:

Later, when the real story reached Inspector Thomas Matthew, the fact that what the Paravan had taken from the Touchable Kingdom had not been snatched, but *given*, concerned him deeply. . . . [W]hen Ammu went to him with the twins to tell him that a mistake had been made and he tapped her breasts with his baton, it was not a policeman’s brutishness on his part. He knew exactly what he was doing. It was a premeditated gesture, calculated to humiliate and terrorize her. An attempt to instill order into a world gone wrong.

Still later, when the dust had settled and he had had the paperwork organized, Inspector Thomas Matthew congratulated himself for the way it had all turned out. (246, emphasis in the original)

Even while he manages his own fear, which represents that larger cultural fear of societal order being overturned, Inspector Matthew must perform a no-holds-barred sort of damage control; he is not concerned with ethical police work. He “organizes” the stories of those involved in the incident, constructing a more palatable truth and making sure each piece fits within the official story—the version of capital-letter *History* that must march forward—setting things back within the prescribed order. We can see how Roy works to counteract such injustices through her own deliberate construction of the novel’s narrative to account for the personal histories of those elided by the indifferent order of things.

Although Inspector Matthew’s handling of things puts a disturbing, “official” ending on a series of sickening events, Roy highlights the beauty of the love affair itself by placing it strategically within the novel’s closing pages. Here we see two characters who throw off indifference—and the fear that runs beneath—by joining together in acts of love that defy the laws of their world and transgress the demands of Big God. Their oppressed positions, as characterized earlier in this chapter, are what bring Ammu and Velutha together. In the article “A Martyrology of the Abject: Witnessing and Trauma in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*,” L. Chris Fox reminds us, “The two are transgressive and are counted among the socially abject separately before they join their rage and love” (51). The narrator then shows us the first bolt of passion that runs between them, which is characterized as a profound moment that challenges the world, their

places in it, even history itself:

Suddenly Ammu hoped that it *had* been him that Rahel saw in the march. She hoped it had been him that had raised his flag and knotted arm in anger. She hoped that under his careful cloak of cheerfulness he housed a living, breathing anger against the smug, ordered world that she so raged against. . . .

The man standing in the shade of the rubber trees with coins of sunshine dancing on his body, holding her daughter in his arms, glanced up and caught Ammu's gaze. Centuries telescoped into one evanescent moment. History was wrong-footed, caught off guard. Sloughed off like an old snakeskin. Its marks, its scars, its wounds from old wars and the walking-backwards days all fell away. In its absence it left an aura, a palpable shimmering that was as plain to see as the water in a river or the sun in the sky. As plain to feel as the heat on a hot day, or the tug of a fish on a taut line. So obvious that no one noticed.

In that brief moment, Velutha looked up and saw things that he hadn't seen before. Things that had been out of bounds so far, obscured by history's blinkers.

Simple things. (167-68, emphasis in the original)

When Ammu and Velutha connect through this glance, they are throwing off history, which loses its capital letter 'H' and falls away, allowing them to see things that represent the opposite of the indifferent, ordered world around them. For the first time, they are allowed to see each other on their own terms, without looking through the lenses of the

prescribed orders: caste, class, culture, history. Simple things are finally allowed to mean something, and Big God's shadow does not hang over them—in this moment or when they eventually meet by the river.

Ammu becomes open to her connection with Velutha when she embraces her own anger and recognizes the legitimacy of his, yearning for a kinship of shared rage and desire. Their desire to resist a world kept in order by and through unnatural human indifference links Velutha and Ammu together. As Lutz states, "Ammu's affair with Velutha provides the thematic and emotional centre for such a resistance, registered in the presence of all those small things that defy easy classification. Resisting classification herself, Ammu has moments when she manages to temporarily transcend the oppressive structures that surround her" (71). Ammu and Velutha are both disenfranchised subjects who, as Kelly Oliver articulates, "arrive too late into a world that already has constructed their meaning as abject and debased" (88). As such, they have been denied the right to define themselves because they are deemed "inferior, deficient, or sick." In their world, Ammu and Velutha are "seen as incapable of fully making meaning, especially the meaning of one's own body" (Oliver 88). Their resistance to being labeled from the outset and from the outside and to having their bodies—Ammu's feminine one and Velutha's strong, muscular one—relegated to certain purposes without their consent brings them together as they use their bodies to forge a passionate, loving, human connection. Within Ammu, the conditions of her postcolonial life have made just the right "unmixable mix," and her repression creates discontent rather than passive indifference. In summary of the feelings that launch her into the transgressive affair, the narrator tells us,

Ammu leaned against the bedroom door in the dark, reluctant to return to the dinner table, where the conversation circled like a moth around the white child and her mother as though they were the only source of light. Ammu felt that she would die, wither and die, if she heard another word. If she had to endure another minute of Chacko's proud, tennis-trophy smile. Or the undercurrent of sexual jealousy that emanated from Mammachi. Or Baby Kochamma's conversation that was designed to exclude Ammu and her children, to inform them of their place in the scheme of things. (312)

Surrounded by the subtle but persistent cruelty of indifference and being denied her human right to self-fulfillment "creates emotional instability" within Ammu and "gives rise to a transgressive desire that threatens the social order" (Lutz 71). As Lutz further explains,

The combination of unfulfilled desire and hopelessness puts Ammu temporarily outside the ordinary mechanisms of social control . . . Indeed, it is partly a commonly felt resistance to the social order that draws Ammu and Velutha together: both share a subordinate position in their social world and have had their autonomy circumscribed by its unjust, discriminatory practices. (71)

This anger, then, which is characterized by Ammu's wild restlessness, draws her to Velutha, and together their resistance explodes into acts of emotional intimacy and love, which are the ultimate answers to an indifferent world.

Almeida asserts that "*The God of Small Things* is particularly a novel about

resistance in and through the body” (261). However, their love itself is an audacious act. As Lutz states, “Ammu and Velutha’s affair suggests that love is a force capable of transcending centuries of oppression” (71). We understand the reasons, as articulated through Inspector Matthew’s perspective, why love between a woman like Ammu and a man like Velutha is unthinkable. Even further, Almeida tells us that Ammu’s breaking of the Love Laws in the way that she does is a more serious offense than a man of an upper caste being with a female Untouchable. She states, “Ammu commits the ultimate transgression in cultural terms by daring to touch the Untouchable” (263). However, in traditional India, *love* regardless of caste has its own challenges. Giridharadas explains his take on the concept of love within the traditional Indian marriage relationship:

When I visited India as a child, I noticed that few, if any, of our relatives had my parents’ kind of romance. The men in particular tended to be remote and gruff and insensitive, incapable of entering a woman’s mind. . . . Judging by what happened in public, married life in India seemed to be a series of obligations and duties, motions to be gone through and trials to be endured. No one said “I love you” beyond the privacy of the bedroom. On the crowded streets, men walked five feet ahead of their wives. I remember my wonderment when growing up that people who treated each other so coolly by day could then cling together to make children by night. (166-67)

These observations certainly don’t represent all Indian marriages, and such emotional distance as Giridharadas describes here is evident in other settings, as in the isolating relationship between Rahel and her American husband. However, romantic love, whether

in or outside of the institution of marriage, is a remarkable act within the context of postcolonial indifference. Giridharadas knows his parents' marriage, which is truly a "love marriage," is unusual for its quality of "Twoness," as he calls it. Just as Rahel and Estha find comfort in their own Twoness, others, like Baby Kochamma, resent the closeness and affection of true love—romantic or otherwise; the natural human capacity to love has been stunted in an unnaturally indifferent world. We can see that the Love Laws which rule the postcolonial world of the novel do not foster love, human intimacy, and emotional connection but only suppress them. As Bose articulates, "This is a society, Roy believes, that bypassed the very efficacy of Love by laying down Laws that dictated who to love, and how much" (68). Because they share an intimate emotional connection, Rahel and Estha are able to console one another, and Velutha, too, is characterized as empathetic, kind, and sensitive, which are qualities that run directly counter to the sort of men Giridharadas describes. These qualities, when partnered with the desire for a life more felt, more *lived* than the quiet, contained one prescribed by an apathetic world, are remarkable and audacious against the backdrop of ubiquitous postcolonial indifference.

Ammu and Velutha join together because they want to resist such indifferent cruelty of the world around them by daring to feel and by daring to find that quality of "Twoness" with one another. In the novel's final chapter, titled "The Cost of Living," we see Ammu and Velutha meeting by the river for the first time. Finally, Ammu does more with her Unsafe Edge than brood and smoke and listen to the radio. Her connection with another being who dares to rage, to *feel*, draws her to action: "Then suddenly she rose from her chair and walked out of her world like a witch. To a better, happier place" (314). The simplicity of the description "a better, happier place" should not go unnoticed. To

return to the Big God metaphor of this chapter's introduction, we see that Small Things finally win out. Ammu and Velutha delight in the feel of each other's skin while the rule of "history" and the label of the "untouchable" lose their capital letters and their powers over these small, private moments. Ammu finds safety in Velutha's arms despite that it is "the most dangerous place she could be" (319). Perhaps it is *because* of the danger that Ammu only finds safety for her own dangerous needs and desires with Velutha. They do not look too far ahead, nor do they make plans that will surely never come to be:

"[I]nstitutively they stuck to the Small Things" (320). In a world where people are constantly grasping for control, turning whatever power they are able to obtain against those slightly smaller, slightly less powerful, Ammu and Velutha "put their faith in fragility" (321). By embracing the dangerous emotions they feel and the desires that make them vulnerable, they boldly cast off indifference in a spiritual reclaiming and reconciling of their unnaturally fractured minds, bodies, and hearts. Just as Rahel and Estha eventually return to their natural, instinctive, pre-birth togetherness, Ammu and Velutha meet each other, make love, and laugh at small things in the natural setting of a riverbank and "The water. The mud. The trees. The fish. The stars" (316). Simple things.

As I will discuss in the concluding chapter of this dissertation, Rahel and Estha's own sexual encounter is a significant act of transgressing against the unnatural, indifferent order of their postcolonial world. Jean-Pierre Durix states of these aspects of Roy's work, "Her main characters are all transgressors of cultural limits and their instinctive behaviour belies fixed notions of identity. They author implies that such breaking of artificial laws is part of a natural logic which transcends all others" (21). Both affairs are, indeed, transgressive acts toward the reclaiming of a natural state that ignores

caste, the Love Laws, History, and even the threat of annihilation. The scenes are left to the end after the breathless, circular narrative finally funnels us to these moments.

Balvannanadhan explains, “The placement of the love scene at the end of the novel, just as the incestuous scene is, serves as a commentary on the right to love, on the necessity to transgress certain laws that meddle with the very happiness of people in the name of religion or social order” (105). Bose further reinforces that each respective scene “is proof once again of the subversive powers of desire and sexuality in an arena that is rife with the politics of gender divisions and the rules that govern them” (64). Understanding these encounters in a context of postcolonial indifference, we see that such transgressions, while deeply personal and intimate acts, are not *Small Things* at all.

Ultimately though, only Ammu and Velutha close the novel with a scene that breathes hope, life, and beauty into a tragic narrative.⁶ This sends the reader away from the novel not with images of violence, abuse, and shocking indifference but with a sense of subtle contentment in that fact that, for a few brief nights, “two self-realized human beings with unspoiled happiness” won out over the legacy of colonial trauma and simply loved (B. Roy 62). Both lovers recognize that this happiness will never last, always leaving each other with only the promise of “‘*Naaley.*’ Tomorrow” (321). Regardless, for a time, Ammu breaks completely free of indifference. As Balvannanadhan further articulates, we cannot ignore “the narrator who symbolically places the coming together of the two at the formal end of the novel in an effort to allow that forbidden love to live on in her own narrative” (106). Although Velutha’s death, Estha’s being sent away, Ammu’s own death, Rahel’s unhappy marriage, and the twins’ sharing of “hideous grief” all occur after Ammu and Velutha’s affair chronologically, the choice to structure the

narrative in this way and leave the whisper of such a beautiful Twoness to linger after we close the book is a deliberate act, one that offers this case of transgressive desire, love, and emotion as an answer—indeed, a challenge—to the indifference, apathy, and brutal efficiency of the established order that we see in the novel’s preceding pages.

Conclusion: Where Smallness Meets History

It is left for the reader to decide if the “Cost of Living” is too high a price to pay for fleeting moments and Small Things. As even the narrator asks of Velutha, “Had he known that he was about to enter a tunnel whose only egress was his own annihilation, would he have turned away?” The answer is left open-ended: “Perhaps. Perhaps not. Who can tell?” (315). I argue that this chapter’s consideration of Ammu proves her own answer would be “Yes.” As Bose reinforces, “To lunge, knowingly and deliberately, for what one must not have—for what will result in shame and defeat—is to believe that the very process of the pursuit would render the ultimate penalty worthwhile” (70). While Ammu doesn’t lose her life so violently and suddenly as Velutha, she has only a short, painful life remaining after the affair, a living death, one might say. However, to feel her life has already been lived but to *lunge* for even a few brief moments of passion and intimacy, this act allows Ammu to transgress the inevitability of her “small” life and to transgress the indifference of her world.

Why are such stories—those of small, individual subjects who have been classified into powerlessness—significant? Because these lives weigh as much, *matter* as much, as history itself, which cannot be complete without stories that account for those who bristle at classification, those who won’t stay in their predetermined places with

indifference, those who resist. It is the small, unclassifiable things, Lutz asserts, the things and persons that fall through the cracks, which “trigger an awareness of the full story of the past” as “unclassified pieces of history provide potential sites of resistance to the various forces of oppression” (67). Even while the “Heart of Darkness” hotel marginalizes and commodifies token Indian traditions and “history’s henchmen”—those neocolonial enforcers of the caste system—murder Velutha in an effort to control history, Roy’s telling of the private histories of such figures as Ammu, Velutha, Rahel, and Estha undercuts the public howling of Big God and the official master narrative British colonialism has left behind in India. Through such voices in *The God of Small Things* as a postcolonial novel, we are able to see humanity reemerge from under the shadow of hundreds of years of colonial trauma as characters connect with their own traumas and to one another, making a new, revised history to accommodate such personal stories of transgression.

Ultimately, Ammu’s transgressive desiring and expressions of sexuality constitute the most fully actualized resistance to postcolonial indifference in *The God of Small Things*. As she rushes to meet Velutha for the first time, Ammu cannot fully understand what she is choosing, that she may be saving herself from succumbing to a life of encroaching, crushing indifference: “She didn’t know what it was that made her hurry through the undergrowth. That turned her walk into a run. That made her arrive on the banks of the Meenachal breathless. Sobbing. As though her life depended on getting there in time” (314). And the narrator’s description of the final scene’s effect on Ammu shows such emancipation: “Seven years of oblivion lifted off her and flew into the shadows on weighty, quaking wings. Like a dull, steel peahen. And on Ammu’s Road (to

Age and Death) a small, sunny meadow appeared. Copper grass spangled with blue butterflies. Beyond it, an abyss” (320). The sunny meadow of Ammu’s contentment may be small, and beyond it uncertainty and more suffering, but the Small Things she and Velutha hold in their grasp during those nights live on, symbolically, through their spider friend Lord Rubbish, or *Chappu Thamburan*:

They chose him because they knew that they had to put their faith in fragility. Stick to Smallness. . . .

They knew that things could change in a day. They were right about that.

They were wrong about *Chappu Thamburan*, though. He outlived Velutha. He fathered future generations.

He died of natural causes. (321)

With this hint of future generations, ones not born through suffering and into an inheritance of indifference, Roy’s novel presents a small, subtle hope of breaking free from colonial trauma and postcolonial indifference through Ammu, the first who dares to transgress the Love Laws.

Chapter 2 Notes

1. Roy 20.
2. To draw from Loomba, I refer to *neocolonialism* as economic and/or social dependency that lingers after decolonization, a description which is certainly apt to modern India. I also associate the continued influence of Western culture as part and parcel of a neocolonial state. What's more, as Pal Ahluwalia discusses, neocolonialism is further complicated by the formerly colonized nation's co-complicity in postcolonial crises. Ahluwalia recognizes that "both the colonizer and the colonized are deeply intertwined and implicated and that they are a product of colonialism and its continuing legacy" (185).
3. Among other names, *Dalit* is considered the most widely acceptable modern designation for those traditionally considered outside the castes.
4. The idea of *interpellation* originates with Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser. It is the process by which ideology "hails" people as "always-already subjects" who are a part of the ideological order rather than free, autonomous agents (174-76).
5. As Bose explains, Ammu is, "necessarily, the initiator of the sexual act." This subversion of "the male tendency to dominate" situates Ammu and Velutha for an encounter that is equitable and mutual (64).
6. Catherine Lanone asserts of the novel, "Love which comes last can only be seen through the lethal filter of everything we have already read, and which for the lovers is yet to come" (132). I would argue that this "filter" increases rather than diminishes the value of the final scene. What has passed since this scene cannot be undone, but, in collusion with the narrator, the reader rewrites the narrative—not chronologically but

emotionally—and this final scene becomes the takeaway, which is made all the more heartbreaking for our awareness of that “lethal filter.”

CHAPTER THREE

Lady Winterbourne in the Harem: Rewriting the Fantasy

in Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love*

For her, her whole life will change. Her people will be angry with her. And the British here will shun her. And even if they soften, it will be difficult for her, as your wife, to visit them or receive visits from them. She will be torn off from her own people. Even her language she will not be able to use . . .

If she feels for you as you feel for her, she will throw away the world and come to you. But if you take her . . . you will be everything to her. If you make her unhappy, who will she go to? No mother, no sister, no friend. Nobody. It means if she angers you, you forgive her. If she crosses you, you make it up with her. And whatever the English do, you will never burden her with the guilt of her country. She will be not only your wife and the mother of your children—insha' Allah—but she will be your guest and a stranger under your protection and if you are unjust to her God will never forgive you.

—Ahdaf Soueif, *The Map of Love*¹

And insofar as these people exist between the old and the new, between the old empire and the new state, their condition articulates the tensions, irresolutions, and contradictions in the overlapping territories shown on

the cultural map of imperialism.

—Edward Said²

The sobering words of Zeinab Hanim to her love-struck son, Sharif, when he is contemplating marriage to British traveler Anna Winterbourne are a potent reminder of the incredibly vast gap between the British, as the colonizer of Egypt during this time, and the colonized Egyptian people. There is no precedent for this relationship, which is the romantic center of Ahdaf Soueif's novel *The Map of Love*. In his article "The Politics of Desire in the Writings of Ahdaf Soueif," Joseph Massad articulates the tensions at play in their love story, namely, "the ostracism to which Anna was subjected by the English *colons* in Cairo on account of her marrying an Egyptian and the questions raised about Sharif's nationalism by Egyptian nationalists on account of his marrying a colonizer" (81). Just as Anna would be leaving behind everything she knows, Sharif enters uncharted territory in his relationship with a woman from another world, from the ranks of the powerful British imperialists who oppress his people. Indeed, Zeinab Hanim warns Sharif that he must not attribute England's guilt as something innate to the Englishness of his future wife.³ The work Anna and Sharif must do to make their relationship a success will be a great challenge, and Anna will bear the brunt of the alienation and isolation as she is fully and utterly *away from home*, in every sense of the phrase. Contemplating her upcoming marriage, Anna writes, "Piece by piece it is coming to me: the distance I am placing between myself and those I have known and cared for all my life" (310). Despite all such future obstacles, Zeinab Hanim, as evident in the counsel she gives her son, sees the potential for two people from supposedly opposing sides to create a harmonious

whole.

Within Said's description of the "cultural map of imperialism" in the epigraph above, I find many layers of meaning to the new postcolonial world he evokes, from geographical, political, and cultural applications to questions of individual identity, interpersonal relationships, and all the complications inscribed therein. His quote speaks to the unprecedented number of "refugees, migrants, displaced persons, and exiles" in our modern postcolonial world (*Culture* 322). It certainly applies to the characters within *The Map of Love*, who live their lives in a state of in-betweenness as Egyptians inextricably linked to the Western world but yearning for freedom within their own sovereign nation. In fact, as Said was Soueif's "personal friend and her intellectual mentor," it is fitting to draw links between Said's writing and the characters and themes of her novel (King 143). Scholars writing about *The Map of Love* note the connection between Said himself—as writer, activist, intellectual hero, and even the founder of postcolonial studies—and Soueif's rendering of Sharif as well as Omar, who is Sharif's grand-nephew and counterpart in modern New York. But so too are Said's postcolonial philosophies applicable to the character of Anna, whose life during the course of the novel comes to be defined by "tensions, irresolutions, and contradictions." She is an aristocratic British woman who seeks out the company of the colonized, namely, a family of Egyptian nationalists who are active enemies against the British occupation in Egypt. As the foremost exile in the novel, Anna indeed encounters difficulty, as her mother-in-law predicts, but she also has the opportunity to revise her positioning, to rewrite her identity and locate it on the new map of a postcolonial world. As Said articulates regarding this postcolonial condition, "Exile, far from being the fate of nearly forgotten unfortunates

who are dispossessed and expatriated, becomes something closer to a norm, an experience of crossing boundaries and charting new territories in defiance of the classic canonic enclosures, however much its loss and sadness should be acknowledged and registered” (*Culture* 317).

For all that she has lost, we see the exiled Anna, who narrates her story through her journals and letters, challenge the “classic canonic enclosures” of British epistolary and travel writing traditions. And Anna’s story is deftly handled by Soueif, whom Said himself described as “one of the most extraordinary chroniclers of sexual politics now writing” (qtd. in Massad 77). Indeed, in the novel, the personal and the political intertwine, and Anna’s politics of desire hold ground with the male-dominated politics of a nation. For all that she loses, Anna—an unsatisfied wife and then widow—has much to gain, and she does so, first and foremost, by transgressing the indifferent world she lives in. She rejects British imperialist ideology, upper-class patriarchal expectations, and even the confines of her own native language as she embraces love, desire, and sexuality through her boundary-crossing travels and relationships.

In this chapter, I will situate the historical relationship between imperial Europe and Egypt as a backdrop for Anna’s positioning as a British woman who is intrigued by Orientalized representations of the East. When she chooses to travel in Egypt and explore Arab culture, to see for herself how the paintings and stories ring true, Anna situates herself in the Victorian tradition of women’s travel writing, but she also subverts it. Through her journals and letters, I will establish the factors that both limit and embolden Anna and how she must free herself from an indifferent environment in order to pursue her desires. It is only by willingly exiling herself in multiple senses that Anna is able to

follow her desires, ultimately finding freedom, peace, and physical and emotional intimacy with a man whose mind and heart matches her own.

Writing the East, Fighting the West

In his book *The Arabs: A History*, historian Eugene Rogan reminds us, “For centuries, Europeans had traveled to the Middle East and written books on the manners and customs of the exotic people they found there” (86). In a three-year project that accomplished such feats as the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, the world’s first Egyptologists, working for Napoleon himself under the banner of scientific discovery, perpetuated this introduction of an ancient nation to the Western world. As journalist Nina Burleigh describes in her book *Mirage: Napoleon’s Scientists and the Unveiling of Egypt*,

Those *savants* who survived produced an exhaustive encyclopedia of Egypt, twenty-three outsize volumes, delicately printed with engravings of the buildings, rocks, people, plants, and thousands of the beasts, birds, bugs, and fish that dwelled in Egypt circa 1800. *La Description de l’Égypte* (The Description of Egypt) comprised the ultimate work of the scientists. Their encyclopedia is a record of the impressions of European civilian participants in the first large-scale interaction between Europeans and Muslims in the modern era. (xiii-xiv)

For all the “firsts” that Burleigh attributes to these men and the books they authored, Said situates the project in a colonial context, as the first and best example of how an effort to know the Other could be formalized and deployed for the benefit of a European colonizing agenda. As Said relates in *Orientalism*, Egypt was an important staging

ground for the later endeavors of colonialism that flourished in the Victorian age. Burleigh herself grants that the French government of the time saw Egypt as belonging to nobody (xi). In the novel, Sharif explains that this fascination with the exotic East originated with the West, in the West, and for its own interests—with the Eastern people themselves an afterthought to the intent: “This attraction is born in the European while he is still *in his home country*. When he comes here, he finds that the land is inhabited by people he does not understand and possibly does not much like” (481, emphasis in the original). Wanting to “render it completely open, to make it accessible to European scrutiny,” Napoleon gave no thought to the Egyptian people who were already the keepers of their own stories; rather, he sought to transform Egypt into “a department of French learning” (*Said Reader* 104). In an effort to commodify a strange, exotic culture for the easy digestion of Europe, Napoleon’s Egyptian “project” produced the commanding body of knowledge that Burleigh references, which was rooted, not in “empirical reality,” but in a Western construction of “ideas and myths culled from texts” (*Said Reader* 101). However, as Said clarifies regarding such products of Orientalism, they are not “a mere collection of lies”:

Orientalism, therefore, is not an airy European fantasy about the Orient, but a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment. Continued investment made Orientalism, as a system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness, just as that same investment multiplied—indeed, made truly productive—the statements proliferating out from Orientalism into general culture. (*Said*

Indeed, these efforts of Orientalism held power and served great purpose in constructing the Orient for the benefit of the West.

Such knowledge about the Orient, which Anna would have been exposed to, is then skillfully constructed and repurposed as part of a colonizing power-knowledge regime. The human element dissolves into the metaphorical as a Western power seeks the means—any means necessary—to make a play for the territory of the Other. While, as Said discusses, “it was characteristic of all Orientalist projects before Napoleon’s that little could be done in advance of the project to prepare for its success,” these French endeavors to contextualize Egypt—to *textualize* it, really, through the *Description de l’Égypte* volumes—served as valuable weapons to facilitate Napoleon’s thrust for power. The French leader “wanted nothing less than to take the whole of Egypt, and his advance preparations were of unparalleled magnitude and thoroughness” (*Said Reader* 100). As Said explains, Napoleon’s project in Egypt set a precedent for future European colonizing enterprises, which would use a Western-constructed knowledge base as a tool in acting against a real people:

His plans for Egypt therefore became the first in a long series of European encounters with the Orient in which the Orientalist’s special expertise was put directly to functional colonial use; for at the crucial instant when an Orientalist had to decide whether his loyalties and sympathies lay with the Orient or with the conquering West, he always chose the latter, from Napoleon’s time on. As for the emperor himself, he saw the Orient only as it had been encoded first by classical texts and then by Orientalist experts,

whose vision, based on classical texts, seemed a useful substitute for any actual encounter with the real Orient. (*Said Reader* 100-101)

In the novel, Sharif articulates a similar sentiment based on his experience living under the British occupation of Egypt: “Europe simply does not see the people of the countries it wishes to annex—and when it does, it sees them in accordance with its own old and accepted definitions: backward people, lacking rational abilities and subject to religious fanaticism. People whose countries—the holy and picturesque lands of the East—are too good for them” (483). Anna echoes this sentiment, observing of the blatant racism in her Thomas Cook guide to the Middle East, “So far I have found that the book, like my friends at the Agency, has a fairer view of the land than of its inhabitants” (209). Drawing their conclusions separately, Sharif and Anna both identify a particular quality of colonial relations: Western indifference to dark-skinned fellow humans which denies their subjectivity as well as their rootedness in their lands, histories, and cultures. Drawing a link between the historical Said and Soueif’s character of Sharif, Katherine Callen King explains the connection in her article “Translating Heroism: Locating Edward Said on Ahdaf Soueif’s *The Map of Love*”: “[L]ike Said, Sharif talks about the invisibility of real modern Egyptians to the European eye and about Europeans’ insistence that intellectual Egyptians get their ideas from elsewhere and are not representative of the mass of their people” (145). Indeed, Sharif’s justified indignation is palpable as he decries the British rule: “What are we? A nation of infants? . . . After five thousand years? Do we have to keep going back to the beginning?” (364-65). For all their supposed knowledge and “special expertise,” the Orientalist savants—as Said describes them and Sharif experiences them—are voyeurs, feigned scholars, spies. Perhaps is it precisely because

the Orientalist has not sought out a “real” encounter with the culture he studies and does not “see the people,” as Sharif laments, that the question of loyalty Said poses is no question at all.

Napoleon’s specific choice of Egypt—as this earliest of battlegrounds on which the colonizer’s knowledge-as-power advantage played out—was far from an arbitrary one. As Anna describes Egypt, it is an “amazing land, this conjunction of the two mighty continents of the Ancient World” (210). Regarding the “cultural, geographical, and historical significance” of the nation, Said states, “Egypt was the focal point of the relationships between Africa and Asia, between Europe and the East, between memory and actuality” (*Said Reader* 104). Joseph Fourier’s original preface to the *Description de l’Égypte* offers an explanation as to why Egypt, and *only* Egypt, would do as the staging ground for modern European colonization of the exotic Orient:

Placed between Africa and Asia, and communicating easily with Europe, Egypt occupies the center of the ancient continent. This country presents only great memories; it is the homeland of the arts and conserves innumerable monuments . . . It is therefore proper for this country to attract the attention of illustrious princes who rule the destiny of nations.

No considerable power was ever amassed by any nation, whether in the West or in Asia, that did not also turn that nation toward Egypt.

(qtd. in *Said Reader* 105)

This most ancient of nations, then, becomes an important pawn in the modern power games of Western nations—and its own sovereignty is negligible when “illustrious princes” step up to play. Said continues, describing Egypt by another metaphor, that is,

the stage on which new histories unfold:

Because Egypt was saturated with meaning for the arts, sciences, and government, its role was to be the stage on which actions of a world-historical importance would take place. By taking Egypt, then, a modern power would naturally demonstrate its strength and justify history; Egypt's own destiny was to be annexed, to Europe, preferably. (*Said Reader* 105)

To “justify history,” then—indeed, to legitimize a worldwide colonizing enterprise—it becomes understandable that Britain has turned its imperial gaze toward Egypt in the turn-of-the-century world in which Soueif situates Anna Winterbourne.

Moreover, because the stakes are so high as to lose their “own destiny,” it is just as understandable why Egyptians, including Anna's eventual husband, Sharif, would fight back—and why Egyptian-born Soueif would portray such struggles of world-historical significance at play in the individual lives of her novel's characters. As seen through Sharif's thoughts, his people were not unaware of the British cultural gaze. He playfully reminds Anna of such stereotypes when they reminisce about their first encounter:

“Weren't you afraid of me? The wicked Pasha who would lock you up in his harem⁴ and do terrible things to you?”

“What terrible things?”

“You should know. They're in your English stories.” (153-54)

Indeed, the unique nature of their romance itself recalls—and challenges—the British literary canon of the time, which offered voyeuristic narratives that further bolstered a

Western imperialist agenda. Just as Napoleon carefully crafted his Egypt project for the benefit of his own empire, so too did “colonial romances express the fears and fantasies of Western publics about their empires” (Davis). Noting such texts as Sir H. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* and Edgar Rice Burroughs’ *Tarzan of the Apes*, scholar Emily S. Davis explains that “the romance’s tradition of male questers seems to lend itself all too well to narratives of imperialism as grand adventure.” In her article “Romance as Political Aesthetic in Ahdaf Soueif’s *The Map of Love*,” Davis sets the context for *The Map of Love*’s subversive power as a novel within this very same genre, which “proved well suited to the xenophobic nationalism of the colonial project.” While certainly not all English literary romances of the time reinforced or even engaged with such ideology, Davis’ discussion characterizes the backdrop against which Soueif’s novel exists. In *The Map of Love*, we see an insightful female traveler, rather than a “male quester,” encountering the East—not to conquer it as a representative of the Empire but as an individual who refuses to be penned in by the indifference of her mannered British world. Indeed, because Anna and Sharif’s romance cuts across national lines rather than reinforces them, it transgresses the agenda of the national romance. Davis explains:

While in the national romance, idealized love is threatened by the same forces that undermine national unity, Soueif’s evocation of the colonial romance tradition necessarily complicates the nationalist equation.

Sharif’s relationship with Anna cannot function simply as a tale about national unions, because Anna’s position as imperial white woman makes her an icon of the very forces that undermine national unity.

Written from a century later, this romantic center of Soueif’s novel reaches back to the

genre to reshape the colonial romance to a postcolonial and transnational agenda, with Anna functioning importantly as the instigator of this new sort of romantic adventure.

As King explains, the author situates her romance—and particularly the “darkly handsome romance figure” of Sharif—within a “politically deromanticized Egypt,” using the seductive draw of a love story to showcase an important “political struggle between imperialist Britain and occupied Egypt” (143). Resisting the Orientalist’s gaze is part and parcel of a larger effort to fight European colonization. In her article “Narrating England and Egypt: The Hybrid Fiction of Ahdaf Soueif,” Susan Muaddi Darraj explains how, using Sharif and Anna’s relationship, “Soueif speaks back to the colonialist vision of the Arab in order to correct it” (103). Darraj contextualizes Sharif and his compatriots, as Soueif portrays them, as part of a historical anti-colonial movement that fought against total British colonization. While England “had, indeed, colonized Egypt for decades, the Egyptian people, especially the intellectual class, prevented that colonization from being complete” (102). Darraj continues,

There was a thriving anti-colonial movement, as well as a recognition by the Egyptians of the orientalist veil English attempted to thrust upon them. The colonization was not a complete victory, as the Egyptians refused to be colonized quietly. Instead, there existed an almost two-way relationship, and when England finally left Egypt, it was not totally unchanged by its experience. (102)

Even marking on their colonizers, Sharif’s historical counterparts prevented a complete political and cultural takeover of Egypt. Both through her romance and her individual autonomy, Anna herself becomes a participant in the resistance, and we can see how her

early writings shape her distinctive anti-colonial stance.

Becoming ‘That Son’

Particularly in light of Egypt’s place in these modern power games, the resulting postcolonial world, as Said describes in this chapter’s epigraph, is difficult to define and, for the characters of the novel, even more difficult to navigate, whether in the context of the early 1900s or the 1990s portion of *The Map of Love*’s intertwining plots. As a sheltered woman who fearlessly seeks out her own answers to the doubts and unknowns that have begun to torment her, Anna commits remarkable acts of rebellion just by questioning the imperialist ideology of her own British culture. First we meet Anna as she writes in her journal in 1897, when she articulates her struggles in living up to the domestic expectations of her feminine role regarding her husband, Edward: “I did strive—do strive—to be a faithful and loving wife and companion” (11). As we quickly see, Anna’s desire for an expanded sense of female autonomy is linked to her desire to see a broader world than the sheltered, aristocratic one she has lived within thus far. While she doesn’t join in the men’s talk on British colonizing enterprises and racial sovereignty, the views of her father-in-law, Sir Charles, stir up her curious mind:

The question of whether savage nations had a right to exist came up, George arguing—from Darwin and the survival of the fittest—that they had none, and the rest of the company being of much the same mind. Sir Charles was much incensed and ended the conversation by saying (somewhat strongly) that the British Empire had done so much harm to so many people that it deserved to perish and then it would be too late to say

or do anything. Edward was, for the most part, silent, I fancy because he really agreed with the younger set but was careful of offending his father. Sir Charles's only ally was John Evelyn, who declared his intention of sending his son up the Nile to "learn Arabic, keep a diary and acquire habits of observation and self-reliance and not to imbibe Jingo principles." I wish—if that is not too wicked a wish—I wish I were that son. (13)

Anna's recollection of this conversation is important in establishing her character. While she doesn't explicitly place herself on either side of the debate, she doesn't automatically subscribe to the predominant apathetic sentiment toward "savage nations." What's more, her fragile desire to travel and learn more of other cultures emerges here, even though she knows it is a far-off fantasy because of her role as a married British woman.⁵ She doesn't want to be sheltered from the larger world by her positioning.

It was not unprecedented, however, for a British woman to travel and write of foreign lands. The publications of such women as Mary Louisa Whately, Amelia Edwards, and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, all of whom traveled in and wrote from the Middle East, shaped the historical genre for Anna's writing as seen in *The Map of Love*. Anna specifically references "the letters of Lady Duff Gordon" and meets Lady Anne Blunt while in Egypt, both of whom published their personal writing from travels in Egypt and the surrounding Arab region. As her grandniece Amal reads through Anna's journals and letters decades later, she describes Anna as "a little self-conscious, perhaps, a little aware of the genre—*Letters from Egypt, A Nile Voyage, More Letters from Egypt*. . . . Perhaps she is thinking of a future publication. In any case, I forgive her the mannered approach as she feels her way into my home" (58). Such Victorian travel

writing by women detailed encounters with the East, often reinforcing stereotypical images such as the harems depicted in Edward William Lane's English translation of *Arabian Nights*. Anna was familiar with these influences as well—even, no doubt, influenced by them herself—as she references Lane and is fascinated by the works of British Orientalist painter John Frederick Lewis. Darraj examines Anna's exposure to such depictions to illustrate "how deeply England was drowning in its culture of orientalism—a culture that allowed the English to imagine the Arabs as exotic 'other' " (102). Regardless of the Orientalist images some of her historical counterparts reinforced, Anna chooses her true inspirations carefully,⁶ drawing from Lady Gordon and Lady Blunt as open-minded, fearless women who traveled more deeply into unknown areas of the Arab desert than was considered proper. And Anna will eventually do so herself, dressed as a man, making her spark of interest in being "that son," autonomous and free, a fantasy that Anna is able to fulfill in spirit.

Exploring ideas that will later inform her perspective as a female traveler-writer in Egypt, Anna carefully listens to such talk as she relates in her journal entry, unable to ignore a nagging sense of disapproval for the colonizing enterprises most of her fellow British companions blindly support. After Edward returns from military service in Africa during the Boer War, Anna links her concern about her husband's strange behavior to her burgeoning critique of the "invented" British Empire, as her father-in-law characterizes it (32). Edward shows symptoms of post-traumatic stress, and his father, Sir Charles, has the ammunition removed from the guns kept in the house for fear that his son will do himself harm. As Anna and Sir Charles discuss how Edward's service in the Boer War has wreaked havoc on his sanity, Sir Charles criticizes his son for his willing role: "If he

had not the stomach for it, what drove him to go? He requested that commission—he would not be denied.” Anna more sympathetically contemplates Edward’s motives: “ ‘He believed he was doing the right thing.’ And also, she thought, he wanted action, adventure, purpose, a mission.” This afterthought in particular is a desire which Anna shares for her own life. Representing his view on the British imperializing mission that sent his son to the Sudan, Sir Charles says, “I told him, though. I told him this was not an honest war. This was a war dreamed up by politicians, a war to please that widow [Queen Victoria] so taken with her cockney Empire” (30).

Following her father-in-law’s lead and seeking to understand what her husband has experienced, Anna continues to question the British imperialist agenda with its particularly aggressive approach to nationalism. It is clear that she is beginning to gain an awareness of the disturbing truth beneath the surface of what she, as a British citizen, has been told about this “war.” She wonders, “What had they done beyond taking the Soudan and restoring order? . . . I long to ask my husband what this means, for my instinct is that there is a key here to what ails him, but I am afraid.” Repeating a euphemism for colonization she has no doubt heard time and again—“restoring order”—Anna is unsettled by what underlies Edward’s post-traumatic symptoms: “But Edward will not speak and I am afraid. I have not dared voice the thought, but I am afraid we are in the grip of something evil—my husband is in the grip of something evil, something that will not allow him to shake off this illness and come to himself” (31). She watches her husband grow sicker by the day, unable to keep down anything he eats, of which Anna observes, “I fancy he is attempting to purge himself of—all manner of things” (33).

Rather than deny them and retreat into the sanctuary of a polite British life, Anna

follows her intuitive thoughts about the “evil” nature of the British war in Africa. As she watches her husband fade away and finally die in the months after his return, Anna comes to a conclusion about the nature of Edward’s experiences and how they have irrevocably changed him:

Oh, I do so completely fear for my husband now, for if it is true and if he took part in those terrible deeds, he who puts honour above all else and truly thought that in embarking on this expedition he embarked on a brave and honourable task, I cannot see now how he can put it behind him—most particularly when he is so ill in body and at the mercy of the fever which burns him up for hours and leaves him, when it does, limp and so weakened that he can barely take the water that we put to his lips. (35)

Anna knows that Edward’s illness is the physical parallel to a deeper psychological trauma. And Edward’s condition hearkens a larger British complicity, as Catherine Wynne explains in “Navigating the Mezzaterra: Home, Harem and the Hybrid Family in Ahdaf Soueif’s *The Map of Love*”: “The Victorian section of *The Map of Love* not only establishes an anti-imperialist theme in terms of its politics but also domesticates it, as the sins of the empire return to haunt the British home” (57). A man of honor, as Anna knows Edward to be, who is used—indeed, used up—in a dishonorable war simply cannot recover, as the “sins of the empire” follow him home. Edward’s personal encounter with the “terrors” and the “evil” of the British colonizing rampage in Africa has sapped his soul, rendering him, in the end, a shell, emptied of will and emotion, indifferent to his own existence.

Her husband’s death pushes Anna from a nebulous curiosity about distant lands to

convictions about empire and dominion, honor and dishonor. Ultimately, she leaves behind the polite salons of British aristocratic life, along with the restraint and naivety that characterizes women in her position, never allowing herself to turn to the willful ignorance that would be required to step back into her former life. Rather than push down nagging thoughts, squash her curiosities, and disguise her distresses, Anna faces what haunted her husband to his death head-on. Realizing that he would never find relief from his painful experiences—and that she would never be fully free in her station—Anna reluctantly acknowledges the freedom his death endows her. She describes “A terrible thought: that in this grief I have no thought for myself. I have not once found myself thinking: what shall I do without him—” (41). In that admission, we see that, deep down, Anna knows just what she will do without him, what she is *able* to do because he is gone. She will be able to travel and write and see a part of the world she never thought she would. However, it is a difficult decision for her to reach. She continues her polite but stunted grief for Edward, denigrating herself for not making him happier in life, but she also blames the dishonorable war, knowing she could find peace if she “could believe that he died for a noble cause” (44). Finally, when she sits listening to a moving opera, she lets herself be overcome, surrendering herself to emotion for perhaps the first time in her quiet, modest life:

It was as though I had been holding myself very still, holding a door shut, holding something down; something which the music swelled and strengthened until it broke through. And for many days later, although I could not put my feelings into words, much less write them down in my journal, it was as though I felt that music coursing through my body and as

it went, like a river in full flood, it churned up its bed and its banks, and I was most ill with a fever and—poor Caroline tells me—delirious and impossible for many days till one morning I woke up and—I had not quite returned to the world, but I had seen the door by which I might return. (44)

Typically able to craft her thoughts and feelings in words, Anna experiences something unprecedented, something that defies being precisely articulated in the careful writing of a lady's journal. This breaking free, breaking loose, and giving in to what she has so carefully kept at bay is an awakening for Anna on numerous levels. Indeed, as she hereafter becomes gravely ill and then recovers, it is a rebirth, as symbolized by "one last cluster of blossom like a small pink chandelier" that has lived longer into the fall season than any other foliage. She observes, "I was overcome with gratitude as though it had stayed there to say to me, Look! It is not too late" (45). Anna won't wither away as a young widow in an empty London house haunted by the sins of imperialism. It is not too late, and she doesn't need to continue living indifferent to her desires or indifferent to the realities of the world. She is reborn as a bold traveler.

Anna will even fulfill another part of the original fantasy when she learns Arabic. As she dives into the language, her quest for freedom and self-discovery runs parallel to her education in the Arabic language and culture alike. In that way, Anna goes beyond many of her fellow female Victorian writers. Indeed, she leaves behind the "mannered approach" Amal sees in her early writing, no longer preoccupied with conforming to the British literary style of a particular genre. As Anna dives into the rich Arabic language, she becomes more and more enlightened as to the reality of life in Egypt, with its respective struggles and beauties. Just as Soueif offers untranslated Arabic within her

English text—and uses her characters to illuminate these words’ complex, nuanced meanings and connotations—Anna discovers that one language alone, particularly the language of the colonizer, is not enough for her new life. Articulating her linguistic journey as part of a larger experience, Anna describes the different types of love that exist within the Arabic language and, indeed, within the entire novel:

‘Hubb’ is love, ‘ishq’ is love that entwines two people together, ‘shaghaf’ is love that nests in the chambers of the heart, ‘hayam’ is love that wanders the earth, ‘teeh’ is love in which you lose yourself, ‘walah’ is love that carries sorrow within it, ‘sababah’ is love that exudes from your pores, ‘hawa’ is love that shares its name with ‘air’ and with ‘falling’, ‘gharam’ is love that is willing to pay the price.

I have learned so much this past year, I could not list all the things

I have learned. (386-87)

Beyond learning a language, observing a culture, and rejecting aggressive “Jingo” nationalism, as John Evelyn wishes for his son, Anna experiences more because of her positioning as a woman. She deeply loves a proud Egyptian man, she finds mutually fulfilling friendships with women in the inner sanctum of the harem, and she fulfills sexual desires as well as personal ambitions. She learns things she cannot articulate, in that way rejecting an Orientalist sort of commodification of her new life in the Arab world. Anna protects her experience as a personal gift, feeling “a strange unwillingness to provide a detailed picture of ‘life in the Harem’ ” to her British friend Caroline. Instead, Anna recognizes some things as untranslatable using words alone: “If she were to visit,

however, I would be glad to have her as my guest for it is only then, I think, that she would gain a true picture of my life here” (354).

With Edward’s death, Anna steps up to become the son of her father-in-law, who has served as her political and intellectual mentor. She becomes “that son,” not of John Evelyn, but of Sir Charles. As she experiences Egypt, becoming involved in the inner lives of an Egyptian family who is fighting British rule, Anna observes, “I had the strangest feeling of life expanding and opening out. I found myself thinking about Sir Charles, wondering what he would make of this Egyptian Pasha into whose house I had landed in so odd a fashion. And then came the thought that under the same circumstances, Sir Charles himself would probably have acted in the same way” (144). In this way, Anna writes her own fantasy, fulfilling herself but also replacing her husband as the child his father always wanted: one who both sees the world and sees herself in it.

Frustrated Female Agency and Desire

Within the same journal entry in which she articulates her desire to travel far and freely, Anna identifies other passions, specifically sexual “stirrings,” which give us a sense of just how her feminine world limits her. Regarding her feelings of dissatisfaction after her husband visits her bedroom, she says,

I have long thought it was a mark of the waywardness of my character that on such occasions I was beset by stirrings and impulses of so contrary a nature that I was like a creature devoid of reason: I wept into my pillows, I paced the length of my chamber, I opened the casements to the cold night air and leaned out and wished—God forgive me—that I had not been so

resilient in physical health that I might not catch a fatal chill and make an end of my unhappiness. (13-14)

Anna identifies her passions as unnatural, “contrary,” and “devoid of reason.” In that way, her thoughts and feelings are set against the backdrop of a British culture that is indifferent to female sexuality, a culture that expects the individual woman to be indifferent to any such passions or desires within herself. As Stoler explains in *Race and the Education of Desire*, “Male sexual anxiety focused on more than suitable Christian marriage partners for European women and on the transmission of property, but on the unmanaged desires of women themselves” (41). At the heart of this need to control and define women—and the resulting indifference to their lack of fulfillment and agency—is the ever-present fear of being undone by the Other, in this case the feminine Other. As Stoler continues, the “unmanaged sexuality” of European women “was considered a threat to these different social bodies,” namely, the “Christian nation” (41-42).

Knowing she would have more autonomy as a man, Anna invests her desires in that fantasy, rather than ones in which she envisions herself fulfilled—sexually and otherwise—as the woman that she is. As the novel’s author eventually situates Anna and her sexual desires in the context of a colonized Egypt, some insights on the sexuality of Arab women at this time is certainly applicable in understanding Soueif as an Egyptian-born “chronicler of sexual politics.” Amal Amireh extrapolates the fear over female sexuality as a reinscription of men’s own fears of violation, of being unmanned or rendered impotent in a time when the nation itself was vulnerable. As Amireh explains—echoing Stoler’s assertions regarding European patriarchy—within Arab culture there circulated a “dominant traditional ideology according to which female sexuality is

legitimately realized only in marriage, wifedom, and motherhood” (763). As such, without finding sexual satisfaction as a wife, Anna has no recourse for her frustrated desires. It is ironic, then, that she should find it by traveling to this region with perhaps more stringent parameters on female sexuality and through her transgressive relationship with an Arab man.

As the earliest pages of Anna’s journal reveal, because such indifference to her human sexuality is the truly unnatural state, she simply can’t deny that certain passions, desires, and curiosities exist within her, however shameful she deems them to be. Indeed, before she goes down to breakfast after such nights of pent-up anguish, she makes every effort to hide any sign of her distress from her British family, and she even questions the good her journal writing does, as it gives her a place to express her wayward, “wicked feelings.” Anna attributes these to “some weakness of my feminine nature” and has “devised small stratagems” to distract herself, trying to bridle her feelings and her desire for freedom by living a carefully ordered life (14). Until Anna is freed from all such trappings of her current life, she is not able to pursue the avenues of fulfillment that her journal writing foreshadows. What Anna feels here is a fluttering, a hint at future sexual and personal freedom. And the process of reaching that end, Massad asserts, is more important than the end itself. He describes an “unfolding” that is particularly applicable to the character of Anna: “The journey of [Soueif’s] characters is not one where liberation is the necessary telos, but rather the complex process through which the unfolding of desire(s)—sexual, social, economic, and political—is shaped by the characters themselves and all that surrounds them” (75).

As a passionate, desiring British woman in the colonial context of *The Map of*

Love, Anna inhabits a truly unique position, one transected by her gender, her race, and her class. Anna's kinship with Arab women in a patriarchal culture is evident; however, she is undeniably born and bred of—though, as we see, not fully interpellated by—British culture. As Anne McClintock relates in her book *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* of colonial women, “Barred from the corridors of formal power, they experienced the privileges and social contradictions of imperialism very differently from colonial men.” These colonial women were rarely people who “reaped the vast profits” of the system: “The vast, fissured architecture of imperialism was gendered throughout by the fact that it was white men who made and enforced laws and policies in their own interests.” However, McClintock asserts, the white privilege of these women cannot be denied: “Nonetheless, the rationed privileges of race all too often put white women in positions of decided—if borrowed—power, not only over colonized women but also over colonized men” (6). Although Anna doesn't seek to wield this sort of power in her travels to Egypt, her unique positioning remains: “As such, white women were not the hapless onlookers of empire but were ambiguously complicit both as colonizers and colonized, privileged and restricted, acted upon and acting” (McClintock 6).

Similarly, Anna's upper-class status both limits and emboldens her; she must be a proper well-born lady, but she has influence and the means to travel on her own terms. And these terms, really the *only* term she stipulates, is that she see the “real” Egypt,⁷ to walk behind the façade of the Orientalist harem paintings and encounter Egyptian people—not as a colonizer but as a woman exploring a liminal space on multiple planes, both restricted and free, as a traveler seeking a home for her soul, and as a fellow human

full of passions and desires. Given her complicated positioning, it is, perhaps, symbolic that she recognizes “the oddity of Egypt’s position” as it is pulled three ways by its complicated political identity: a theoretically independent nation which is still part of the Ottoman Empire but ultimately governed by the British Agency (57). Indeed, the political and the personal intertwine as the Egyptian effort of nation-building portrayed in the novel juxtaposes Anna’s quest for freedom from the various constraints upon her.

‘Life in the Harem’: Fantasy Fulfilled

We see that Anna has, according to Darraj, “rejected her country’s orientalist and racist notions of the Arabs,” and she tries “to understand Egypt on its own terms” (102). Anna has also found a measure of female autonomy simply by leaving the expectations of a proper widowed life behind her, applying her intellect and her passions to the same enterprise through her travels to and within the Middle East. Placing herself outside of the realm of patriarchal and Orientalist discourses gives Anna subjectivity within a new discourse. As El Naga explains of such female agency, “It is a discourse that emanates from a liminal space, joining a feminist consciousness with a cultural awareness. . . . For these women, identity does not invite binaries or antagonism. . . . Put differently, this discourse explores new margins that are capable of subverting old binaries” (71). It is from this liminal space, from “new margins,” then, that Anna finds the freedom of feminine self-definition along with the freedom to interrogate the Empire.

For a time, her only companions are other British travelers, “who feel it their duty to assist and chaperone an unprotected female in a strange land” (60). But Anna did not travel this far to be among her countrymen and women. She has seen the bazaars and the

pyramids, but, she laments, “I sit here in my room at Shepherd’s Hotel possessed by the strangest feeling that still I am not in Egypt” (102). The idea of joining a guided expedition to see the Sinai region sounds distasteful, as Anna knows she would be hampered by the perspectives of fellow British tourists: “I would have remained within the world I knew. I would have seen things through my companions’ eyes, and my mind would have been too occupied in resisting their impressions to establish its own . . . [T]here was a strong part of me that did not wish to be in the company of my own kind here” (213). Indeed, when given the opportunity to engage with Arab culture on her own terms, Anna’s wholehearted enthusiasm and innocent, childlike wonder contradicts the typical British attitude Arabs expect. As her future sister-in-law relates of Anna,

[S]he had none of the arrogance or the coldness we were used to imagining in her countrymen, so that we almost forgot that she was English except that she would wonder at things and admire things that we were so accustomed to that we no longer saw them or thought about them, and the result of this was to make us look afresh at the things surrounding us and, seeing them through her eyes, find them fascinating once again.
(372-73)

For Anna, it is not enough of an experience to engage with careful, sanitized bits of Egyptian culture as the other British do. She observes that they criticize anyone who seeks out more than nominal contact with the Egyptian people, culture, and land. Such a person “they regard as a crank who chooses to live in the desert, and they use of him the phrase ‘gone over’ by which I assume they mean he sees matters from a different point of view” (70). Discussing this man who has “gone native,”⁸ Anna feels kinship with him.

She writes, “But I feel it would be a little odd to come all the way to Egypt and learn nothing except more about your own compatriots” (71). In pulling away from the enclave of British society in Cairo, Anna gives herself an adventure but also the peace she has been seeking. She finds solace—and a “soul free to contemplate” (213). As we can see, Anna is not a tourist, really. She doesn’t simply “tour” in the culture of others, but she looks to find her soul—to be irrevocably moved and marked upon and changed—through the unique experiences she seeks out and, especially, the people she meets.

Echoing Sharif’s sentiment about the invisibility of Egyptian people, Anna thinks, “And yet I wonder whether it is possible for a conquering ruler to truly see into the character of the people whom he rules.” Thinking of her own maidservant, Anna questions, “How well, in fact, I have found myself wondering, do I know Emily?” (99). Trying to find a parallel in her own life, Anna is not ignorant of or indifferent to the colonized Egyptian people who live under British rule, and she refuses to have her knowledge limited by her gender and race. With that, Anna devises a plan to travel uninhibited into realms and regions that would be potentially dangerous for a woman by dressing and behaving as a man. Her actions come at a price, though, as she is mistaken for an important British man and she and her traveling companion, Sabir, are kidnapped. Because the crime becomes worse when her gender is discovered, Anna’s first instinct is to protect Sabir from the fallout of “this episode,” as she calls it:

My thoughts run mainly on my friends at the Agency and how I should prevent any word of this episode ever reaching their ears. As to consciousness of danger, I can truthfully say I have had none, nor do I have any now. Any fear I might feel is conjured up more by the imagined

visage of Lord Cromer than by the actual circumstances in which I find myself. I know that he will blame Mr. Barrington most severely for encouraging my foolishness, and will probably insist on his dismissing poor Sabir and that will make him most unhappy. Sabir will also be deprived of both his protector and his income. I am determined not to let this happen. For myself, the thought that holds most terror for me now is to become known in London as “that Lady Anna Winterbourne who was abducted by the Arabs.” (105)

Anna even seeks to protect her well-mannered captors, whom she feels do not deserve the wrath of Lord Cromer and the British Agency. She writes of these Egyptian men, who have kidnapped her in hopes of gaining some kind of leverage against the British toward the goal of Egyptian self-governance:

It was a great pity that I was not able to converse with them, and find out the nature of their grievance, and how they thought this wild action would bring them closer to redress. Is this event the reason I felt Fate draw me to Egypt? How odd it would be if—through me—the Egyptians got their longed-for Constitution. But I am not important enough, nor will this affair reach that proportion, for I do believe that once they have found out that I am a woman and a mere visitor, they will send me on my way with courtly apologies. (106-107).

She neither wants to be rescued nor prevented from having future adventures, so Anna makes the most of her abduction. She sees it as an opportunity, finally, to meet real, proud Egyptian people, ones who aren't in the pocket of the British, including her

eventual husband, Sharif, and his sister, Layla, who will become Anna's lifelong friend. And, in her own way, she soon becomes "important enough," even as a woman, to participate in the political realm as a partner with Sharif in working for full Egyptian independence. Indeed, before she has even married Sharif, Anna takes up the causes of Egyptian national autonomy that she has come to believe in, approaching Lord Cromer himself to appeal for British support for the education of Egyptian women. She chooses to "see" the Egyptian people, separating herself from her former complicity with the indifferent British colonizing machine.

By making herself open to all the possible experiences of her new life abroad, Anna is not penned in by the binaries of Western and Other, nor even by the binaries of male and female. Rather than being treated as a delicate English lady as in her other encounters with men, she meets Sharif on terms of her own devising, which allow her to forge not only a romantic but an intellectual connection with him. As King observes, Anna is Sharif's "true intellectual partner" as they share "key Saidean ideas that undergird the novel's political poetics" (144). Indeed, years earlier, Sharif had divorced his first wife after discovering their intellectual incompatibility. He narrates his thoughts at that time in a letter to his mother:

I cannot live my life with a woman who has no key to my mind and who does not share my concerns. She cannot—will not—read anything. She shrugs off the grave problems of the day and asks if I think her new tablecloth is pretty. We are living in difficult times and it is not enough for a person to be interested in his home and his job—in his own personal life. I need my partner to be someone to whom I can turn, confident of her

sympathy, believing her when she tells me I'm in the wrong, strengthened when she tells me I'm in the right. I want to love, and be loved back—but what I see is not love or companionship but a sort of transaction of convenience sanctioned by religion and society and I do not want it. (151)

Knowing she is deeply concerned over the “grave problems of the day” for Egyptian people, Sharif cherishes Anna, as the partner that she is to him in every way. As Layla describes, “Anna started to help him, to translate for him from the British newspapers, and to use her connections in England to bring him what news she could that had a bearing on life here” (373). Because Anna and Sharif are well matched in mind and spirit—and because Anna knows and expresses the strength of her own mind—neither Anna’s race, religion, culture, and language nor her gender prove as real obstacles to their mental connection. In fact, Sharif is obliged to acknowledge to himself that he fell in love with Anna in spite of, and perhaps partly because of, her gender-bending ways:

As they travelled through the Sinai, he had laughed at himself—at the end of his time he would desire a man. A fair young amrad [man with no facial hair], who rode with grace and skill, who raced him neck to neck—there were times when he would forget that his companion was a woman, she blended so well with the taciturn men, with the silence of the desert. (274)

The homoerotic feelings Sharif describes here don’t impede their relationship but, rather, help to solidify their intellectual bond as they work together to achieve goals within the typically masculine political arena of postcolonial nation-building.

Both characters seem rendered more whole—and more free—for such explorations of love, desire, and sexuality, which lead to their eventual marriage. For

Anna, their sexual relationship arouses in her a sense of embodied female being she has never felt before. The morning after their wedding night she writes, “And now, today, I feel as if—I hardly know how to describe it, but it is as if my body had been absent and now it is present. As though I am for the first time present in my own body” (335). Anna links a deep, newly realized happiness to this bodily epiphany:

I feel happiness—I could laugh aloud as I write the words—as surely as I would feel the warmth of a fire upon coming to it from a cold, damp night. And the oddest thing is that I am grown fond of my own limbs. The hands and feet that have served me these thirty years, the hair I have brushed unthinkingly each night—I feel a tenderness for them now as though they were cherished creatures in their own right. (350)

The body that has “served” Anna for all her years—she now serves it, cherishing a wholeness of being that she was never able to have within the confines of an indifferent British society. And this new physical awareness provides a true sense of peace to her formerly restless spirit: “And I am content. I am content just to be” (335).

In their non-traditional, interracial, cross-cultural relationship, Anna and Sharif are indeed experiencing something rare, liberating, and transgressive. Specifically the case of a white woman pursuing a “native” man was a cause for disgrace in Europe: “[T]he sexual choices of white women were at issue; they are desired objects, but unruly desiring subjects as well” (Stoler 41). Anna’s very identity, then, as a “desiring subject” is problematic, but her actions make her a dangerous transgressor of the British nation itself. Sharif, as an Arab man, isn’t questioned for his actual desire for a white woman. To recall Loomba, Western ideology presumed that “darker races or non-Europeans were

immoral, promiscuous, libidinous and always desired white people” (158). But Anna’s audacity to identify and pursue her desires, particularly when the target of them is a non-white man, places her outside the realm of acceptable female behavior for a well-born British woman, in whom colonial “anxieties about female sexuality and racial purity” converge (Loomba 159). As Stoler articulates regarding an interplay of race, nationality, gender, and class, “Discourses of sexuality do more than define the distinctions of the bourgeois self; in identifying marginal members of the body politic, they have mapped the moral parameters of European nations” (7).

Embracing the freedom she finds there in the margins as a sexual woman, both desiring and desirous, Anna interrogates these “moral parameters,” standing up to Lord Cromer himself in defense of her interracial union. While Spivak facetiously asserts, regarding colonial interference in traditional native culture, that “white men are saving brown women from brown men,” in this case, white men, like the historical Lord Cromer as British controller-general of Egypt, can’t even save white women from brown men. In that sense, Soueif revisits history and offers Anna’s transgressive actions, particularly her sexuality, as a challenge to the British nation and empire at the turn of the twentieth century.

Conclusion

My dear Sir Charles, I understand so much more now of what I used to hear you say. I have started to believe that what we are doing is denying that Egyptians have a “consciousness of themselves” . . . and that by doing

so we settle any qualms of conscience as to our right to be here. So long as we believe that they are like pets or small children, we can remain here to “guide them” and help them “develop.” But if we see that they are as fully conscious of themselves and their place in the world as we are, why then the honourable thing is to pack up and go.

—Anna, *The Map of Love*⁹

With this realization—following the lead of Sir Charles but only after she has seen for herself—Anna breaks the hold of the colonizer’s indifference in her own life, recognizing the dehumanizing effects on both sides of treating others as beings less endowed with a right to exist freely. It is an enterprise with which she can no longer be complicit, an ideology she has never fully shared and must finally break with in order to achieve self-actualization—finding freedom, purpose, and peace—by fulfilling her desires. As Massad contends, “Desire, in Soueif’s work, always exists in a context of politics, history, and geography, all of which are intermeshed and cannot be disentangled” (74). In that context, Anna strikes out, making herself a willing exile as she travels the map of the complicated new postcolonial world Said describes. And on that journey, Anna doesn’t leave the most difficult philosophical questions and political tasks to the men. When Sharif asks his sister if she believes Anna is up to the task of marrying him, of sharing his challenging life, Layla says, “[O]f course it will not be easy for her, and if it had been anyone else I would say she would not be able to do it. But Anna is different. She has a big mind” (284).

By loving Sharif and partnering with him in the Egyptian anti-colonial

movement—leaving behind her former life to embrace a new one—Anna performs her own political act; she makes history. She blurs the lines between the political and the domestic, between the public and the personal, between history and romance, rendering the lines themselves irrelevant in the sphere of her own life. Regarding the complex interplay of history, politics, and sexuality in the novel, Soueif reminds us, “[I]t’s still desire that brings the characters together” (qtd. in Massad 84). And that personal realm of desire, as Davis asserts, does not serve “merely as an allegorical stand-in for politics.” Rather, “Soueif’s complex narrative structure explores the linkages between sexual politics and national and international politics” (Davis). The sexual and romantic center of the novel is not *mere* romance at all but the makings of an important reconsideration of colonial history itself.

In her own living Arab pastiche, Anna reinvents the harem, following her desires and creating and fulfilling her own fantasy, where Orientalist illusions give way to reality and where love and family share a space with the modern fight for an ancient nation. The novel opens with a family tree that stretches back to Sharif’s ancestors in the eighteenth century, but everything hinges on Anna, from the narrative’s romantic center and the family she creates to the novel itself as Soueif’s “imagined recovery of ancestral history” (Wynne 65). Not just one family’s history but history itself can be revisited—and revised—through Anna’s journey from a privileged British woman, surrounded by indifference for those colonized by her nation, to becoming “that son.” As it turns out, that son could only be a daughter.

Chapter 3 Notes

1. Soueif 281-82.

2. *Culture and Imperialism* 332.

3. In fact, we see Sharif comforting Anna over the historical Denshwai (or Dinshaway) incident, in which the British react to the accidental death of one of their officers during a pigeon hunt by arresting over fifty native Egyptians and cruelly punishing them. Four were executed. As Rogan explains, this incident reinforced the efforts of Egyptian nationalism, and “Dinshaway was not forgotten nor were the British forgiven” (145-46). Upon hearing the fates of those convicted, Anna weeps and says, “I am ashamed.” Sharif tells her, “Listen. You must not—ever—feel like this. This is not to do with being British. . . . The only way we can bear this is to make it work for us. To make sure it can never happen again. Never” (429).

4. Sharif’s awareness of the trope of the harem in Orientalist texts is notable here. He jokingly identifies his place in such stereotypical stories as the “wicked Pasha,” the powerful Arab man so masculine as to need a bevy of women to satisfy his insatiable sexual desires. Feminist consideration of the harem trope “conceptualizes the harem as a set of sites crucial to gender construction” (Booth 11). While a complete survey of the many insightful critiques of the harem trope is impossible here, I suggest Booth’s anthology *Harem Histories: Envisioning Places and Living Spaces*, Joan DelPlato’s *Multiple Wives, Multiple Pleasures: Representing the Harem, 1800-1875*, and Reina Lewis’ *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel and the Ottoman Empire*, to name just a few.

5. Anna’s sense of exclusion from traveling within the male-dominated realm of the

British colonies was appropriate. As David Goldberg asserts, “The colonies thus were male clubs of a kind, at once the laboratory, factory, and stable of white men’s making, their fantasies forcibly serviced by the local populations, men and women of color alike. Colonization in effect was about power and to serve country, king (no doubt preferably), and God (undoubtedly masculinized).” The qualities associated with the feminine nature of white women exclude them from participating in the male fantasy of such enterprises, as Goldberg continues: “White women were seen as getting in the way of completing the ‘rough’ work colonization necessitated and its vast profits required, too squeamish in the face of the necessary violence, too soft and tearful before health and hellish standards, too sensitive even for the hardships of difficult administrative decision-making” (95). No doubt these stereotypes didn’t always hold true when European women did venture into the colonies. However, by keeping women cordoned off from these “hellish” realities, European men ensured a “squeamish” woman’s empathetic capacity wouldn’t interfere with the standard of apathy toward the colonized. Many of Anna’s fellow British women are content to let their husbands, fathers, etc., shelter them from such violence, but Anna proves herself eager to leave the easy shelter of apathy behind.

6. As Malak explains of another influence for Anna’s writing in British literature, “Soueif’s rendition of Anna’s intelligently inquisitive sensibility revealed in journals, diaries and letters recalls the English literary tradition of epistolary fiction, especially Samuel Richardson’s two eponymous novels *Pamela* and *Clarissa*” (157).

7. I distinguish Anna’s desire to *see* Egypt for herself from the concept of the Western imperial gaze I discuss early in this chapter. In the same way that Anna protects herself from the male gaze by concealing her gender, she makes efforts to remove herself from

complicity with the problematic British imperial gaze. While Anna's initial curiosity regarding Arab culture originates with Orientalist portrayals such as the Lewis paintings, she allows all of her preconceptions to be refigured by her contact with the reality of Egyptian life. Anna's self-consciousness of her positioning is key here; she is aware that power dynamics make any effort to really know and understand the individuals one has power over a futile act (see upcoming quote from the novel regarding Anna's maidservant Emily). Moreover, when Anna turns her critical gaze toward, for example, the racism in her Cook guidebook, she willingly relinquishes any measure of power afforded her by the Western construction of the Arab. Anna takes many such steps in removing herself from participation with the British gaze upon the Other, each step reinforcing her willingness to give up the power the gaze endows the gazer. Anna also comes to feel protective of her new life, seeking to guard the culture of the harem from the gaze of her British friend Caroline. And, as I will consider in the next section, Anna's sister-in-law explains how Anna values their Arab culture with such innocence and eagerness that the family, in turn, comes to revalue their culture anew. Ultimately, what Soueif shows us is that these encounters with Arab culture and people write on Anna more than she influences them. Having followed Anna's journey from the outset, we know that this is what she always wanted.

8. Loomba discusses the "potentially unhinging" experience of "going native," as famously represented in English literature through the character of Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (136).

9. Soueif 247.

CHAPTER FOUR

‘Mine Enough’: Amabelle’s Miracle in Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*

It’s either be in a nightmare or be nowhere at all. Or otherwise simply float inside these remembrances, grieving for who I was, and even more for what I’ve become.

—Amabelle, *The Farming of Bones*¹

We know that the essence of grief is loss. But what is it that the survivor has lost? For what does he mourn?

—Robert Lifton²

This early quote from Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones* sets the tone for what Haitian narrator Amabelle later calls her “living death” (283). In his book *Death in Life*, Robert Lifton calls such an existence a “life of grief” in which the “work of mourning . . . is never accomplished” (483-84, 504). Having watched both of her parents drown when she was a young girl, worked as all but a slave for a wealthy Dominican family, and, finally, survived the brutal Parsley Massacre, or *El Corte*, Amabelle lives an unceasing life of grief. In this chapter, I will situate Amabelle’s past trauma in a context of postcolonial indifference in order to foreground how her explorations of emotional and physical intimacy are transgressions against her indifferent world. A consideration of other characters in the novel, including Amabelle’s lover, Sebastien, is valuable to establish

this context. Using a framework of trauma theory, I will discuss Amabelle's traumatic symptoms as both reinforcing and reinforced by her positioning within her postcolonial surroundings. I will also discuss the historical fear and racism that incited the massacre, as they are important components of the indifferent culture that yields Amabelle's new traumatic encounter. As the aftermath of that encounter, I will explore how Amabelle's silent, bodily testimony serves as an answer back to the violence, allowing her to remain connected to the intimate memories that sustain her. Finally, I will close the chapter with a close look at Amabelle's physically and emotionally intimate relationship with Sebastien. By reading their relationship within a trajectory much like the one we find in Arundhati Roy's uniquely structured novel, I argue that Danticat's novel shows us how this relationship has effects that overreach and redefine Amabelle's trauma and Sebastien's presumed death. In that way, Amabelle's small but remarkable expressions of sexuality and desire transgress postcolonial indifference. Indeed, they become possessions as valuable as her traumatic memories.

A Context of Indifference

Though they are her oldest and most personal possessions, in the eyes of those around her Amabelle's burdens are nothing extraordinary. Other emigrant Haitians like her have borne the same tragedies, perhaps worse, during these most violent years of President Rafael Trujillo's reign in the Dominican Republic. The characters who surround Amabelle—as postcolonial subjects deemed racially and socially inferior not only by Trujillo but according to the long history of racism that precedes him—have their own stories of grief and tragedy. The most shocking event within the early part of the novel is

the killing of Joël, a laborer at a local sugar cane plantation. Just as the privileged children of Amabelle's employers are being born, Joël is run down on the road and, after a superficial search, left to die. Meanwhile, the birth of the master and mistress's twin babies overshadows the death. Despite his clear distress over the incident, Luis, who is Amabelle's fellow servant at the house, more or less absolves Señor Pico of his guilt as the driver, saying, "I have never seen a man so overjoyed. It wasn't his fault. Who can blame him?" Luis further describes the accident:

Señor Pico was driving and talking. The closer we came to the house, the faster he went. He asked Don Ignacio all sorts of questions about the children. When Don Ignacio wouldn't tell him for the seventh and seventy-seventh time how big the children were, who they looked like and so much else, Señor Pico went even faster. When he reached the road near the ravines, we saw three men walking ahead . . . Señor Pico shouted at the men and blew the klaxon . . . Two of the men ran off. The other one didn't seem to hear the horn. The automobile struck him, and he went flying into the ravine. He yelled when the automobile hit him, but when we came out to look, he was gone. It was a bracero, maybe one who works at Don Carlos' mill. (38-39)

Though Luis intends no disrespect, he only identifies Joël by his employment with Don Carlos. In this environment of postcolonial indifference, his life represents little more than a commodity for the labor he provides—and this by no means promises his safety. As Marta Caminero-Santangelo asserts in the article "At the Intersection of Trauma and Testimonio: Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*," Joel's death foreshadows the

brutality of the imminent Parsley Massacre of 1937: “This first killing of the novel, while accidental, already lays the groundwork for the later massacre by revealing the disposableness to the Dominican property-owner of the Haitian worker’s life” (12). Compared to the births of privileged Dominican children, the loss of a Haitian life means little. Moreover, we are told, Joël’s “owner,” Don Carlos, won’t even pay for his burial (Danticat 48). The disposability of Haitian lives is indeed a theme throughout the novel, one that ultimately climaxes with the massacre itself. Through Amabelle’s perspective, we see the toll such “under-living,” to draw from Lifton, takes on one’s subjectivity.

The reaction of Amabelle’s lover, Sebastien—who was one of the other two men walking on the road when Joël is struck—to the incident is additionally telling. When he tells Amabelle that his friend is dead, she asks, “And you? Did you break any bones?” Amabelle then thinks better of this, thinking, “I asked, as if this were the only way in which a person could be wounded, only when his body was almost crushed, pulped like the cane in the presses at the mill” (47-48). This image suggests deep pain, such as the loss of a loved one, which is not validated by a visible manifestation. And the image—of extreme bodily violence, of crushed, used bodies—evokes the cruelty of this world, where strong Haitian bodies are chewed up and consumed, given no concern for the embodied humanity they represent, and treated like cane to be cut down. But the acknowledgment and consideration of psychic trauma and emotional pain have no place in this indifferent postcolonial world. As Amabelle tells us further of Sebastien’s reaction, “ ‘Yves and I were lucky,’ he said. And then I thought how truly fortunate he was. He was not crying or yelling or throwing rocks at the house, or pounding a tree stump against the side of the automobile that had killed his friend. Perhaps the truth had

not yet touched him deeply enough. But, then, he had seen death closely before” (48). Sebastien is “lucky” to not be overwhelmed by sorrow for the loss, enraged at the needlessness of the violence, or crying out for those responsible to be held as such. Both Sebastien and Amabelle understand the nature of their postcolonial world, in which they have lost loved ones before, as indifferent to their pain and grief. They realize that it is better to feel nothing than to expect sympathy or show emotional vulnerability. However, despite the world they live in—as we will see later in this chapter—Amabelle and Sebastien are far from indifferent to each other’s pain, and together they carve out a place of emotion, empathy, intimacy, and love.

Amabelle’s fellow servant at the house, Juana, also reveals how this environment of postcolonial indifference requires that those subjugated suspend their own natural human emotions and desires. Amabelle observes how emotional Juana is when the twin babies are born, guessing that it is more than her shared excitement for the family during this momentous event. Amabelle asks her, “Why are you crying so, Juana? I don’t believe they’re all for joy, your tears.” Juana’s reply shows the desires she has long ago buried but never forgotten: “ ‘It’s a grand day in this house,’ she said, ‘a day that comes to remind me how quickly time passes by. A woman like me grows old while more and more children arrive in this world’ ” (30). Constantly serving others, having watched the women she serves bear their own children, Juana comes to resent her own female body, which seems worthless to her since it has never given her children. She says to Amabelle, “At this moment in life, a woman asks herself: What good is all this flesh? Why did I have this body?” We also come to understand why her husband, Luis, empathizes with Señor Pico’s reckless excitement over his newborn children. Juana says of him, “My

Luis, he loves children. If they could grow out of the ground, he would have grown one for me long ago.” Juana won’t let herself cry for her own pain; even her tears belong to the family she works for: “I have no need to cry for myself. I must cry for Doña Rosalinda, who died in the attempt to bring a second child into the family. And I must cry for Señora Valencia, who’s without her mother on this day.” Although we don’t know exactly why Juana has never carried a pregnancy to term, her life is not really her own, and her position of servitude pushes such natural desires as motherhood into the category of dreams that Juana will never be able to realize. This world and their situations don’t foster in Juana and Amabelle realistic, simple expectations for growing their own families. Amabelle, for her part, doesn’t even think of her life as having a potential future, let alone one with hopes and desires: “Perhaps because my parents both had died young, I never imagined myself getting older than I was, much less living long enough to bear my own children” (32). Their lives are limited to the small, restricted sphere of their postcolonial world, one which suffocates their autonomy as human beings.

Deep in thought after carrying Joël’s body away from the scene of the accident, Sebastien describes how he and the Haitian laborers he lives among have come to view themselves after living in this environment of postcolonial indifference, in a land that is not their own: “ ‘Sometimes the people in the fields, when they’re tired and angry, they say we’re an orphaned people,’ he said. ‘They say we are the burnt crud at the bottom of the pot. They say some people don’t belong anywhere and that’s us. I say we are a group of vwayajè, wayfarers’” (56). Having accepted their lives as “crud,” as something not only disposable but loathsome, they are inheritors of a transgenerational indifference to their lack of freedom and self-definition. While privileged Dominicans are living lives of their

own direction, racism, apathy, and under-living characterize and control every facet of these Haitian postcolonial lives. Putting the early events of the novel into a larger context, Caminero-Santangelo states that Joël's "killing is linked to others, *not* by Trujillo's genocidal orders, but by the larger national history of racism in which Haitian life is devalued" (12, emphasis in the original). This quote identifies a specific instance of indifference for the lives of others as part of a larger postcolonial indifference, neither unique nor entirely owing to Trujillo and his reign. As Caminero-Santangelo continues, we can understand this devaluing of human life to be a perpetual trauma: "It is this national truth to which Danticat's novel testifies; Trujillo was *always* just one manifestation of a larger cultural trauma" (12, emphasis in the original). Though such "cultural trauma" is certainly of the blanket nature Caminero-Santangelo describes, it engenders isolating, deeply personal symptoms of trauma in postcolonial individuals.

Between Traumas: A Life of Under-Living

This indifferent environment is where we first encounter our Amabelle, and a consideration of her painful memories is valuable to establish how such indifference intersects with and amplifies her symptoms of trauma. Amabelle's grief for what she has become, quoted in the epigraph above, intermingles with a deep sadness tied to painful childhood memories. As a Haitian *restavek*³ child and later an adult servant in a Dominican home, Amabelle's inferior racial and social position reinforces the traumatic symptoms of her childhood memories. In her book *Trauma and Recovery*, trauma specialist Judith Herman discusses groups of symptoms an individual experiences following traumatic events. Herman's definition of trauma certainly applies to what

Amabelle has experienced in her young life: “Unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death. They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror” (33). Indeed, Amabelle’s earliest memories as she describes them in the novel are characterized by such extreme fear, which is amplified by her innocence and powerlessness. As she watches her parents drown when she is a young child, Amabelle tells us, using a present-tense description that captures her in-the-moment pain, “I scream until I can taste blood in my throat, until I can no longer hear my own voice” (52). Even years later, the tremendous terror and helplessness which Herman identifies as inherent to traumatic encounters is palpable within this moment Amabelle describes.

When we meet Amabelle, years after this childhood trauma, she lives in a nearly constant state of what Herman terms *constriction*. This state of numbness or “detached calm,” which is “similar to hypnotic trance states,” serves as “a protection against unbearable pain.” As a victim “may feel as though the event is not happening to her, as though she is observing from outside her body,” the lingering symptoms of trauma mimic this detached reaction to the traumatic encounter itself. Indeed, as a survivor of trauma—both before and after the massacre—Amabelle moves numbly through life, “with a feeling of indifference, emotional detachment, and profound passivity in which the person relinquishes all initiative and struggle” (Herman 42-43). Robert Lifton echoes this concept, describing it as “psychic closing-off,” or by its more extreme form, *psychic numbing*. Although Lifton’s work is fully titled *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima*, his framework of traumatic survival and recovery indeed applies to Amabelle, who

exhibits similar symptoms as a survivor of her own horrific traumas. True to the terms they fall under, these post-traumatic symptoms constrict the sphere of a person's life to the small, limited portion of the present that she can handle, much like being numbed by the influence of hypnosis, drugs, or alcohol. The traumatic memories, on the other hand, remain outside, "walled off from ordinary consciousness" (Herman 45). Amabelle's trauma is, indeed, "walled off," a symptom Danticat represents by setting off the chapters that depict Amabelle's fragmented memories from the main chronological narrative of the novel. Amabelle's ability to simply keep on living requires such psychic feats of repression, which exhibit indifference—a vital but undetectable protective instinct—to one's own pain at the deepest level. In a description that is certainly apt to Amabelle, Nair reminds us that the "effects of indifference . . . can lead to forms of self-denial equivalent of death" (xii).

Because her symptoms will never be formally named or diagnosed, Amabelle's experience, alongside the traumatic experiences of so many others in this context, could be rendered unremarkable. As Herman explains, the "negative symptoms" of post-traumatic experience, when compared to the traumatic event itself, "lack drama." However, she asserts, "[T]heir significance lies in what is missing" (49). Indeed, it is within these gaps between near-death and almost-life—spaces of numbness and nothingness where we expect to find rage or guilt or sorrow—that we see singular stories of embodied pain so personal as to be completely remarkable. And each day Amabelle lives within the borders of a nation that hates her on sight, a nation whose deepest fears are inextricably linked to the color of her skin and the texture of her hair, her numb indifference is reinforced; her quiet, ghostly existence serves as a protection.

To further extrapolate these psychological theories to the setting of the novel, I contend that Amabelle's numbness makes her the ideal servant. She describes how her servile attitude puts her "blindly, instinctively" at-the-ready for any task: "Working for others, you learn to be present and invisible at the same time, nearby when they needed you, far off when they didn't, but still close enough in case they changed their minds" (35). Amabelle is obedient and unobtrusive but ever-present, and she has learned to fully suppress her own thoughts and emotions after years of living on what Lifton describes as a "treadmill of unresolved grief" (504). As she delivers Señora Valencia's babies, Amabelle observes, "I had to calm her, to help her, as she had always counted on me to do, as her father had always counted on me to do" (7). Indeed, Amabelle exists to serve another woman's every need. As Nandini Dhar explains, "Danticat does not allow any space within the novel where a common bond between Amabelle and Valencia could be formed" (197). Although Señora Valencia might see her and Amabelle as friends after spending so many years side by side, Amabelle knows that her life and her identity is different. Señora Valencia lives her own life, while Amabelle lives a limited version of hers, one that shadows her mistress's. And Amabelle knows her world is constructed to be limited: "Many people who considered themselves clever found pleasure in frightening the household workers with marvelous tales of the outside world, a world they supposed we would never see for ourselves" (19). Treated as innocents but expected to bear heartbreaking trauma and hate, such individuals are "lucky" to be like Sebastien, to be able to sequester their personal desires and emotions and to be indifferent to them just as the larger world is. Such a life sees Amabelle suspend every last desire to the will of others—like Juana does, like Luis does, like many others do. Indeed, this indifference

to their own wills and desires is so entrenched that these characters barely dare to even have desires, let alone pursue their satisfaction. As we will see, Amabelle's life may not be fully her own, but her grief as well as her intimate joys are her sole possessions—and solely hers.

While her official façade is one of servile numbness, Amabelle's early memories preserve themselves with great potency as lingering symptoms of the initial trauma.

Throughout the first half of the novel, Danticat uses the short, odd-numbered chapters, set in bolded type, to allow for Amabelle's expression of fragmented memories; these are the gaps-filled-in, where numbness and absence leave off and an ever-present past fills in. As Herman explains of the post-traumatic symptom of *intrusion*,

Long after the danger is past, traumatized people relive the event as though it were continually recurring in the present. They cannot resume the normal course of their lives, for the trauma repeatedly interrupts. It is as if time stops at the moment of trauma. The traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep. . . . Trauma arrests the course of normal development by its repetitive intrusion into the survivor's life. (37)

This idea of intrusion is certainly applicable to the interrupting, in-the-present nature of Amabelle's traumatic memories. She narrates:

The water rises above my father's head. My mother releases his neck, the current carrying her beyond his reach. Separated they are less of an obstacle for the cresting river.

I scream until I can taste blood in my throat, until I can no longer hear my own voice. Yet I still hold Moy's gleaming pots in my hands.

I walk down to the sands to throw the pots into the water and then myself. The current reaches up and licks my feet. I toss the pots in and watch them bob along the swell of the water, disappearing into the braided line that is the river at a distance.

Two of the river boys grab me and drag me by my armpits away from the river. Their faces seem blurred and faraway through the falling rain. They pin me down to the ground until I become still.

"Unless you want to die," one of them says, "you will never see those people again." (51-52)

Amabelle remembers every sensation of those moments when she watches helplessly as her parents drown. The event is present, vividly and ever with her even as an adult. While the faces of the boys who try to help her are "blurred and faraway," the trauma itself remains intact, impenetrable to the eroding quality of time and forgetting. The river boys⁴ encourage her to seek distance from "those people" who have disappeared with the current, but the traumatic nature of the memory ensures she will see them, again and again, in these intruding memories.

Herman further describes such memories as "congealed," or set outside of the chronological sequence of time, "not encoded like the ordinary memories of adults in a verbal, linear narrative that is assimilated into an ongoing life story" (38, 39). As such, Amabelle is caught in an unconscious fight between constriction and intrusion, "caught between the extremes of amnesia or of reliving the trauma, between floods of intense,

overwhelming feeling and arid states of no feeling at all” (Herman 47). Danticat’s narrative style in the novel represents the complicated nature of Amabelle’s trauma, which is never completed, never done, never fully in the past. Her joyful childhood memories, too, break into the linear narrative of the novel through these interrupting chapters. Because of all that she has lost, her grief cannot be contained to just the painful memories. As Amabelle tells us, “[I] simply float inside these remembrances, grieving for who I was” (2). She mourns for the childhood she lost, and even her moments of high childhood happiness are not safe from the coloring of grief. Another passage from one of the bolded chapters shows the depth of Amabelle’s pain as she lies quietly, searching for its end: “I am hoping to feel the sweat gather between the cement floor and the hollow in my back, so that when I rise up, there will be a flood of perspiration to roll down over my buttocks, down the front and back and between my thighs, down to my knees, shins, ankles, and toes, so that there will not be a drop of liquid left in me with which to cry” (94). Amabelle’s grief is boundless; she is grief embodied. These moments remind us, despite the blanket indifference surrounding Amabelle—despite her life of numbness, of “floating” from day to day within a life existing only to serve someone else—that deep human emotion can never fully be extinguished.

Racism, Fear, and the Dark Secret

Though Amabelle’s indifference springs from her traumatic life experiences, an environment of indifference, with dark fears as its foundation, surrounds her and reinforces her state of apathetic numbness. The proud, lighter-skinned, Spanish-descended Dominican people, including Señora Valencia and her father, have no reason

to question the deep-rooted racial hierarchy that gives them social power. Michele Wucker, in her book *Why the Cocks Fight: Dominicans, Haitians, and the Struggle for Hispaniola*, explains the connotations that being labeled Haitian in Amabelle's time brings with it: "In the Dominican Republic, calling someone Haitian is on the surface synonymous with describing them as *negro* or *morado* but with an added psychological weight of fear and hatred" (33). This "psychological weight" has been formed by centuries of racial tension and the constant struggle for a Dominican standard of purity—that is, to maintain the Caucasian bloodline of the first Spaniards to settle the island. As Europeans interbred with—and sometimes married, depending on the current political agenda—the island's indigenous Taino inhabitants and the African slave population, the idea of maintaining a supposedly pure majority was not only ludicrous but impossible. Nonetheless, the backlash against the rapid growth of a mixed-race population on the Dominican side of Hispaniola, seen as a "darkening" of Dominican nationhood, was severe. As Wucker states, quoting the words of Trujillo-era political lackey Joaquín Balaguer, " 'The vegetation-like increase of the African race' was a dire threat to Dominican culture and values" (53). The diatribe of a priest named Father Romain, who is an old friend of Amabelle's but has since been imprisoned, tortured, and brainwashed by propaganda rhetoric, offers a summary of the fears and grievances of Dominican nationalists:

"They forced him to say these things that he says now whenever his mind wanders," she explained.

"On this island, walk too far in either direction and people speak a different language," continued Father Romain with aimless determination.

“Our motherland is Spain; theirs is darkest Africa, you understand? They once more came here only to cut sugarcane, but now there are more of them than there will ever be cane to cut, you understand? Our problem is one of dominion. Tell me, does anyone like to have their house flooded with visitors, to the point that the visitors replace their own children? How can a country be ours if we are in smaller numbers than the outsiders? Those of us who love our country are taking measures to keep it our own.”

“I cannot stop him once he begins,” the sister said, using her bare fingers to wipe the growing puddle of drool on either side of her brother’s chin.

“Sometimes I cannot believe that this one island produced two such different people,” Father Romain continued like a badly wound machine. “We, as Dominicans, must have our separate traditions and our own ways of living. If not, in less than three generations, we will all be Haitians. In three generations, our children and grandchildren will have their blood completely tainted unless we defend ourselves now, you understand?”

Perhaps finally tired of talking, he stopped and lowered his face, his chin down to his chest. (260-61)

As April Shemak, drawing from scholar Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain*, explains in her article “Re-Membering Hispaniola: Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*,” “Scarry notes the effects that physical torture has on the language of torture victims: ‘The question and answer [of the interrogation] also objectify the fact that while the prisoner

has almost no voice . . . the torturer and regime have *doubled their voice* since the prisoner is now speaking their words' ” (103, emphasis added). The fear runs deep in such thinking, exhibited through Father Romain as its mouthpiece.

There is no room for inclusivity when Dominican nationhood—and its associated racial supremacy—is at stake. To say the least, this line of reasoning—or fearful *lack* of reason—sees only black and white, which becomes black *versus* white in a struggle for the dominion of the island itself. Further, when such ideology becomes foremost in Dominican national identity, fueling the Dominican nationalist “machine,” it supplants the natural state of human co-existence and empathy, laying instead a blanket of indifference over relations between Dominicans and their darker-skinned fellow beings. As Frantz Fanon articulates in his landmark book on the dehumanizing effects of racism, *Black Skin, White Masks*, such fear-inspired thinking also supplants all logic: “I was not mistaken. It was hatred; I was hated, detested, and despised, not by my next-door neighbor or a close cousin, but by an entire race. I was up against something irrational” (97-98). The monstrous quality of racism emerges here in Fanon’s description, but we can also identify how Amabelle’s experience is distinct, her personal encounter with racism closer to home. It is, in fact, Haiti’s very neighbors who hate her, even those who are related by blood but are desperate to hide such a dark link behind their own “white mask” of Dominican national identity.

This fear of an African threat within the bloodlines of the Dominican people—and the need to control the source of such fear—yielded an obsessive, ordered, unnatural system of labeling and categorization that remains in effect. Writing about the Haitian Revolution, the late Trinidadian historian and cultural critic C. L. R. James asserts that

this “precise naming” can be attributed “to the whites’ fear of the slaves and to the desire to keep the black and mixed populations subject to the white” (qtd. in Wucker 34).

According to such factors as percentage of African blood, hair texture and color, and skin color, a Dominican individual can be ascribed any number of labels on a spectrum from that which is deemed *pure*, *white*, and *good* to the *dark*, the *black*, the *bad*. And to be truly *Dominican* is simply impossible if one shows visible signs of African heritage.

According to this system—one spawned by fear and spread through indifference—every person gets labeled from the outside and by the outside, rather than each feeling pride in her identity and valuing the diverse identities of others. In a world so unnaturally ordered, separated, and closed to self-definition as the caste system portrayed in *The God of Small Things*, each generation born under the reign of this ideology becomes another generation to inherit the unnatural state of postcolonial indifference.

This racism-turned-fear—and the tangled cycle inscribed therein—is of being tainted, of becoming unclean by association, of being seen as darker than you are or, perhaps, as dark as you really are. As Wucker explains, the infamous dictator Trujillo hid his true ancestry and covered his skin with pancake makeup: “The general, so proud of his looks, with every hair in place, was denying the one aspect of his appearance he could not change: a skin color darker than what he believed would have won him acceptance among the upper classes of Dominican society. Trujillo’s grandmother was Haitian” (51). Using words that could capture Trujillo’s own thoughts, Fanon makes the point explicit: “Whiten the race, save the race . . . ensure its whiteness” (*Black Skin* 30). Such fear of dark ancestry as Trujillo’s white mask represents is seething under the surface among Dominicans, as portrayed in *The Farming of Bones* when Amabelle’s employer gives

birth to twins. Like twins Rahel and Estha in *The God of Small Things*, we see a strong-willed sister and a vulnerable brother. The boy child has lighter skin like his Dominican family, while the girl child has darker skin. As new motherly love mixes with fear, Señora Valencia asks Amabelle, “My poor love, what if she’s mistaken for one of *your* people?” (12, emphasis added). When the doctor attending the newborn babies “boldly” comments on the “charcoal behind the ears” of the little girl, Señora Valencia’s father, Papi, sees this as a challenge to his family’s bloodline and chastises the doctor: “ ‘It must be from her father’s family,’ Papi interjected . . . ‘My daughter was born in the capital of this country. Her mother was of pure Spanish blood. She can trace her family to the Conquistadores, the line of El Almirante, Cristobal Colón. And I, myself, was born near a seaport in Valencia, Spain’ ” (17-18). We see that Papi associates even the emotionally charged memories of his dead wife with her “pure” ancestry, making their bloodlines, which converge in Señora Valencia and are transgressed by the dark baby, a valuable family possession. As Donette Francis explains, race, therefore, becomes an important means by which to “mark the bounds of national identity” and, ultimately, one’s personal identity. Francis continues, “The Dominican Republic imagines itself as primarily Anglo-Saxon by embracing Spain as motherland and disparaging Haiti because of its *visible* link to ‘darkest Africa’ ” (173, emphasis added).

Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* sheds light on this racism—and the anxiety and sensitivity it engenders here in the character of Papi—as a facet of “the near-pathological character of nationalism,” with “its roots in fear and hatred of the Other, and its affinities with racism” (141). Anderson further explains that “racism dreams of eternal contaminations, transmitted from the origins of time through an endless sequence of

loathsome copulations: outside history” (149). Papi is more than just concerned for the girl’s future; his own identity as a Dominican national subject is threatened by her existence, she with skin the color of “deep bronze, between the colors of tan Brazil nut shells and black salsify” (Danticat 11). The family’s—indeed, the Dominican nation’s—fear of dark blood is actualized in the newborn Rosalinda. It is fear of a reality that has been concealed, but not extinguished, by the Dominican national agenda. As Martin Munro explains in his article “Writing Disaster: Trauma, Memory, and History in Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*,” gender too plays an important role in this scene: “The symbolism of the twins’ struggle for life is all too evident: Rafael, the light-skinned male child named after Trujillo ‘tried to strangle’ Rosalinda, the darker, weaker girl, who nonetheless prevails and survives as her twin weakens and dies. Danticat thus plays out ‘in miniature’ the color (and gender) conflicts that plague the island of Hispaniola” (87). April Shemak’s reading of this scene echoes the symbolism Munro identifies: “Valencia’s twins signify the ‘true’ diverse racial origins of the Dominican people” (90-91). The fear over Rosalinda, then, is that her skin color speaks an irrefutable truth and that her life becomes abject for portraying that truth. Familial love is transected by fear, and the dark secret of a racially diverse national ancestry comes home to roost. As Caminero-Santangelo further asserts of the births’ significance in relation to such events as the killing of Joël, “It is precisely such racialized distinctions, the thrust of the plot suggests, that allow Haitian lives to be less valued than Dominican lives” (11). Just as the infant Rosalinda dominates her twin brother, her dark-skinned identity is devalued precisely because it has the power to unseat the myth of Dominican racial purity.

Inciting a Massacre

We lived in a time of massacres.

—Señora Valencia, *The Farming of Bones*⁵

Neither Amabelle's position in the household of her masters nor the Haitian laborers, as a driving force behind the Dominican economy, can stave off the racial cleansing that Trujillo incites. *The Farming of Bones* takes its title from a metaphor for the work of harvesting Dominican sugar cane, for which Haitian immigrants provided the backbreaking labor. As Father Romain describes of Amabelle's village, Alegría, the Spanish word for happiness, "Perhaps this is what its founders—those who named it—had in mind. Perhaps there had been joy for them in finding sugar could be made from blood" (271). Indeed, the Haitian blood that has been poured out for Dominican prosperity will not save the Haitian people living there. Although the threat comes from within, it gives the Dominican people a common enemy against whom they can unite—against whom they have united for centuries. After a life of conditioning to being treated as racially, culturally, and socially inferior, Amabelle's indifference to this climate yields skepticism when she first learns of the rumors that eventually become the Parsley Massacre. She assumes, faultily, that the Haitian workers' valuable labor renders them indispensable rather than a threat that must be disposed of:

It couldn't be real. Rumors, I thought. There were always rumors, rumors of war, of land disputes, of one side of the island planning to invade the other. These were the grand fantasies of presidents wanting the whole

island to themselves. This could not touch people like me, nor people like Yves, Sebastien, and Kongo who worked the cane fields. They were giving labor to the land. The Dominicans needed the sugar from the cane for their cafecitos and dulce de leche. They needed money from the cane.

(140)

In their ties to the Dominican land, providing labor—and sugar for Dominican upper-class beverages—Amabelle sees her people in an inviolable relationship, one that protects them. It doesn't occur to Amabelle—or to Señora Valencia, as we see in her naïve, ambiguous description of the massacre in the epigraph above—that she already knows the people who would work for a Haitian genocide, that she already lives in such a world where this is possible. The skepticism is enabled by Amabelle's sense of "fictive kin," which Francis identifies as underlying "her hesitance when rumours of the slaughtering of Haitians in neighbouring towns first reach her at Señora Valencia's home" (172).

But, against all logic, the centuries-old fear puts a horrific chain of events in motion. This Dominican fear of a growing African-descended population—and of the African heritage secretly, already in one's own midst—fueled what scholar Howard Wiarda identifies as President Trujillo's fervent effort at "the whitening of the population to make it increasingly distinguishable from neighboring Haiti" (qtd. in Novak 96). In his book *Race and Politics in the Dominican Republic*, Ernesto Sagás discusses the effectiveness of Trujillo's campaign as undoubtedly owing to a long-standing tension that predated his leadership: "The Trujillo regime and its intellectuals did not invent antihaitianismo; it already was an integral part of Dominican culture" (46). Although Trujillo indeed fomented these racist fears to an outright frenzy, carefully orchestrating

the events leading up to the Parsley Massacre of 1937, Amy Novak explains the cultural and historical context at hand, reminding us in her article “ ‘A Marred Testament’: Cultural Trauma and Narrative in Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*” that the clever dictator only capitalized on existing anti-Haitian sentiment:

The political tensions of this period though had their roots in centuries of conflict between the two nations and were confounded by the dissimilarity of the two cultures residing in close proximity to one another: the Dominicans a predominantly mestizo, Spanish-speaking, Catholic population, and the Haitians largely black, Creole-speaking, Voodoo practicing people governed by a light-skinned, French-speaking upper class. (96).

Caminero-Santangelo too discusses Trujillo as the leading figure associated with the massacre but also reminds us of “a larger Dominican responsibility” (9). As the hard economic times of the Great Depression hit the Dominican Republic, which was still a fledgling nation, Trujillo capitalized on the cultural differences between his people and the Haitians, uniting Dominican citizens against a common, preexisting enemy through the *antihaitianismo* Sagás references. Ultimately, Trujillo made the problem of the Haitian population within his country its own solution: his “scapegoating of the Haitian workers tapped into longstanding racism and prejudice directed against the poverty stricken Haitians” (Novak 96). Drawing from Sagás, Novak describes Trujillo’s propaganda initiative⁶ against the Haitian migrant workers as a “national myth [that] ‘concocted the hitherto loose and unorganized ideas of antihaitianismo into a full-fledged ideology that perceived Haitians as inferior beings and enemies of the Dominican

nation”” (96). With the fear and racism for such violence already in place, Trujillo carefully directs Dominican unrest toward the Haitian scapegoats.

Once Trujillo launches his extermination campaign, not only his soldiers but also Dominican civilians attack and kill their Haitian neighbors. Having been interpellated by the anti-Haitian ideology that is inextricably linked to Trujillo-era Dominican nationalism, the people who brutally beat Amabelle are now the ones enforcing that ideology. As Richard Turits articulates in his article “A World Destroyed, A Nation Imposed: The 1937 Haitian Massacre in the Dominican Republic,” “The extraordinary violence of this baneful episode provides a terrifying image not only of the brutality, ruthlessness, and Caligulesque features of the infamous Trujillo dictatorship, but also of the potential depths of Dominican anti-Haitianism” (591-92). Amabelle and her traveling companions are attacked by the civilians-turned-accomplices, who apply a shibboleth to them, demanding that they identify the Spanish word for parsley with the knowledge that Haitians “could not manage to trill their ‘r’ and utter a throaty ‘j’ to ask for parsley, to say perejil” (114). When the Haitians cannot say the word with the proper pronunciation, the Dominicans show the depths of their hate and form a dehumanized swarm, beating the Haitians and stuffing impossible amounts of parsley into their mouths. Although these violent citizens act, pointedly and specifically, to brutalize Amabelle and the others, they disappear from Amabelle’s consciousness; only the pain is present:

The faces in the crowd were streaming in and out of my vision. A sharp blow to my side nearly stopped my breath. The pain was like a stab from a knife or an ice pick, but when I reached down I felt no blood. Rolling myself into a ball, I tried to get away from the worst of the kicking horde.

I screamed, thinking I was going to die. My screams slowed them a bit. But after a while I had less and less strength with which to make a sound. My ears were ringing; I tried to cover my head with my hands. My whole body was numbing; I sensed the vibration of the blows, but no longer the pain. My mouth filled with blood. I tried to swallow the sharp bitter parsley bubbling in my throat. Some of the parsley had been peppered before it was given to us. Maybe there was poison in it. What was the use of fighting? (194)

After the Massacre: Amabelle's Silent Testimony

As Scarry articulates in her landmark book on torture, "Intense pain is world-destroying" (29). True to Scarry's description, Amabelle's world in the passage above narrows to only her physical body in pain; the pain destroys any sense of a larger world. She can no longer speak, ask for mercy, scream, and, at the extreme end of her physical torture, make any sound at all. As Scarry further explains, "Intense pain is also language-destroying: as the content of one's world disintegrates, so the content of one's language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject" (35). The inexpressible bodily trauma Amabelle experiences eventually becomes her silence, even while other survivors eagerly share their stories. Amabelle's encounter with the violence of the massacre may be relatively short-lived, but the lingering trauma envelopes her and buries itself deep inside her. However, because she recognizes and values her female body itself as testimony, Amabelle is able to maintain an important connection to her memories of physical and emotional intimacy.

As such, these painful and pleasurable memories alike serve as a testament to her survival, her existence, and her embodied humanity as set against a cruel, indifferent world.

Upon barely escaping with her life and making it across the border to Haiti, Amabelle is faced with opportunities to tell, perhaps even to sell, her story of the violence, as a fellow survivor explains: “I hear . . . that the priests at the cathedral listen and mark down testimonials of the slaughter. . . . They don’t promise you money. . . . They’re collecting tales for newspapers and radio men. The Generalissimo has found ways to buy and sell the ones here” (246). But such opportunities are not a safe space for Amabelle’s trauma. Even sitting among a group of other survivors, Amabelle doesn’t share in their “hunger to tell.” We hear “a man,” “another group of voices,” “a woman,” “another man,” “a voice,” all clamoring for attention. But your story, Amabelle realizes, must be told *their* way: “The group grew impatient with that one. He took too long to arrive at the center of his tale” (209-11). Later, Amabelle, who listens with what seems to be utmost empathy, even to the point of feeling physical pain as others tell their stories, finds she has “conjured up” the stories of the survivors from the group at her will and “imagined them” as she chooses (246-47). Amabelle identifies the issue at the heart of being an audience for others’ pain, that is, “each person’s story did nothing except bring you closer to your own pain” (177). In the context of this world, where everyone carries a burden of pain and grief, one person’s painful story serves as a touchstone for another person’s traumatic memories.

After all the horror, Amabelle will not offer up her story for the purpose of anyone else’s purging. In essence, by allowing her story, her inheritance of trauma, to be

given up to others, Amabelle's experience would become something it's not, something it never was. It becomes another's—a voyeur of trauma who wants to enter someone else's pain—intruding, violating the experience. As Danticat tell us through the voice of another Haitian survivor, the harm is great when a woman, a person, any person, gives up to others the only possession she has: "You tell the story, and then it's retold as they wish, written in words you do not understand, in a language that is theirs, and not yours" (246). Gerise Herndon identifies this danger as part of a larger postcolonial context of stolen histories: "Neither language nor translation nor transcription can be trusted" (5). And the issue of literal translation between different languages—here French, Creole, and Spanish—reminds us that the emotional language of one's own pain is a native language only to oneself. It can, at best, be only a second language to anyone else. We can apply here Scarry's own creation of language, the idea of "unsharability," to identify the personal nature of such a possession as pain: "Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language" (4).

Regardless of the audience, even one made up of people with seemingly shared experiences, Amabelle acknowledges that people must guard their inheritance of pain, that "some sorrows were simply too individual to share" (252). That pain is her sole possession. She says, "The slaughter is the only thing that is mine enough to pass on. All I want to do is find a place to lay it down now and again, a safe nest where it will neither be scattered by the winds, nor remain forever buried beneath the sod" (266). Whether she chooses to pass her story on, it is enough that it belongs to her; it is "mine enough." The "safe nest" for it lies neither with the priests collecting stories as commodities nor with

her fellow survivors. For a life lived as an orphaned child, an always-almost invisible servant, and one of thousands of living dead who have survived the massacre, Amabelle ultimately retains something that is “mine enough.” Giving spoken testimony, then, is not a way for Amabelle to unlock and heal her traumatic memories, those recent or those from years before, and also keep them safe as her possessions.

What remains is the testimony of Amabelle’s physically scarred body, which is far from fiction. Wucker describes the reaction of an American journalist who arrived in Haiti shortly after the historical massacre occurred: “[H]e saw hundreds of victims who had survived. At hospitals, he stared horrified at machete wounds, deep, jagged, crude caverns in the flesh of children with mangled hands and disfigured heads” (51). For the journalist, this bodily testimony serves as irrefutable evidence of brutality, making Trujillo’s smooth words in denial of the massacre impossibly hard to swallow. As Michel Foucault explains regarding displays of violence in the realm of the political in his book *Discipline and Punish*, such bodies have been used. He argues that the body is “directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (25). While the victims’ bodies have, indeed, been marked and tortured, beyond that point, Amabelle refuses to “perform ceremonies” that purge or cleanse others; neither will she “emit signs” by submitting normative testimony of her traumatic experiences to the world. Therefore, her silence serves as an act of political rebellion against the Dominican nation and its aggressive nationalism. Her marked body becomes what she chooses; she makes its meaning.

Though Amabelle tires of the constraints and pitfalls of verbal language, choosing

to never speak of her trauma in the expected way, she identifies a “cord between desperate women” that functions without language, simply by a look, an exchange of felt emotion between women (169). Considering the realm of the violent, masculine political battlefield that Foucault describes, female victims in particular, like Amabelle, are left with inscrutable bodily testimony and inexpressible trauma. Coming to terms with her new body, Amabelle says,

I went out to the yard, found the cooking fire and basin of water, bathed myself . . . I could hear some of the courtyard children giggling as they peered at me through the holes in their doorways. In spite of their curiosity, I knew that my body could no longer be a tempting spectacle, nor would I ever be truly young or beautiful, if ever I had been. Now my flesh was simply a map of scars and bruises, a marred testament. (226-27)

After what she has survived, it is fitting for Amabelle’s body to be a “testament” rather than a mere feminine “spectacle.” And in this moment, “Amabelle anchors together the physical pain of her body with the act of testifying. It is her body that bears the record of the past, and the story it tells is not seamless but disfigured, flawed, even imperfect” (Novak 103). As Shemak also explains, “Whereas the survivors’ oral testimonies are vulnerable to misinterpretation, the bodies of the survivors appear to offer more enduring testimonies to the massacre. . . . Amabelle’s body is a historiographic archive that retains the history of the events of the massacre” (103). While the visible marks on her body speak to a traumatic past, Amabelle knows her body represents more than pain, for within it she has also experienced joy and pleasure. Though she feels an initial loss of youth and feminine beauty, when Amabelle later refuses to offer a spoken, digestible version of her

story as the transcript to read along with the “map” of her scarred body, Amabelle commits a subversive act of claiming and guarding her scarred female body as testimony that cannot be repurposed or rewritten by another. As Novak explains regarding such silent stories—and their inscrutability, their incompleteness—among “official” cultural narratives, “Staging the contrast between voice and voicelessness, the ambiguity . . . urges readers to consider silence and to embrace the unsettling of what they might like to be authoritative” (95). Providing an answer to the victims, the voyeurs, the politicians, the journalists, the historians, and even to herself, Amabelle tells us, “Perhaps there was no story that could truly satisfy” (305). Amabelle pulls away from having her testimony, bodily or other, painful or pleasurable, separated from her. Such utter, exposed vulnerability of the body, laid bare in Amabelle and other victims of the massacre but not navigated, translated, or mediated for an audience through authoritative narration or any language-driven constructs, remains in silence and, ultimately, “stages for the reader the act of listening for the unheard, allowing the past to remain open” (Novak 116).

Amabelle and Sebastien: Reaching for Wholeness

While new trauma batters Amabelle, reinscribing the ceaselessness of her grief, we understand that she has borne testimony to a moment in Haitian and Dominican history that cannot be articulated simply by words, that has been almost entirely excluded from records but has overreached attempts to bury it completely. In this section, I give the relationship between Amabelle and Sebastien, which we see in the early section of the novel, the closing words in this chapter. The transgressing work Amabelle performs within this relationship reveals how an individual can overturn indifference through

remarkable moments of feeling, desire, and intimacy. As Francis identifies, this “love story” is “at the heart of the novel” (170).

In encounters reminiscent of the “hideous grief” shared between Estha and Rahel in *The God of Small Things*, Amabelle and her lover Sebastien share each other’s sorrows. Their relationship is unique and complex but loving and equitable. At times, Sebastien is the midwife of Amabelle’s traumatic memories, at other times her nurse, and even her parent. Amid all the indifference of their world, Sebastien helps Amabelle unlock and feel for the things that are hers and hers alone. In the context of trauma, the work they do together is incredibly important as an avenue to healing and recovery. Indifference helps to keep traumatic memories walled off, locked out of time—only to be as painful when they do intrude as the day they were borne—and “prevent[s] the *integration* necessary for healing” (Herman 45, emphasis added). The act of integration, which Amabelle and Sebastien perform together, answers back to such indifference; it honors the memories of that past in the present but soothes their sting. Like Ammu and Velutha joining together to transgress the Love Laws and their history of indifference, Amabelle and Sebastien engage in intimate acts that are both primal and spiritual. For example, in the novel’s opening scene, Amabelle has her recurring nightmare of her parents’ deaths: “[Sebastien] comes most nights to put an end to my nightmare . . . I lurch at him and stumble, trying to rise. He levels my balance with the tips of his long but curled fingers, each of them alive on its own as they crawl toward me. I grab his body, my head barely reaching the center of his chest.” As a young child walking, lurching toward her mother, Amabelle seeks refuge in the reassuring body of Sebastien. He teaches her lessons that ease her separation anxiety, her fear that she will “cease to exist

when he's not there." He says, "It is good for you to learn and trust that I am near you even when you can't place the balls of your eyes on me" (1-2). These exercises in trust are important acts of recovery as Amabelle forges her first intimate relationship since the death of her mother and father.

As Herman explains of recovery from trauma, "Because the survivor is focusing on issues of identity and intimacy, she often feels at this stage as though she is in a second adolescence" (205). From emotional infancy to hesitant first steps of trust to the discovery of her adult body and the embracing of her sexuality, Amabelle seems to be reliving her whole life—or the life she would have had, without numbing trauma and grief—during her time with Sebastien. The boundaries of their relationship are blurry, and the description of the physicality of their bodies is not characterized by sex alone but also by the sacred and a deep core of human emotional vulnerability. They make love, but they also "lie unclothed alone the way one came out of the womb" because Sebastien tells Amabelle this is an act like prayer (94). More than gender-identified heterosexual partners, Amabelle and Sebastien are both sexual and sexless, mother and child, soul-twins, making what efforts they can to cross over into spiritual wholeness. Their intimate acts are both acts of atonement for surviving death when their loved ones did not and acts that celebrate life.

This relationship transcends the environment of indifference surrounding them, giving Amabelle something to believe in and hold onto beyond herself. She tells Sebastien's sister, Mimi, "Yesterday Juana called me a nonbeliever because I don't normally pray to the saints . . . She asked me if I believed in anything, and all I could think was to say Sebastien" (65). With Sebastien as her guide, Amabelle reaches beyond

the relentless “treadmill of grief” that was her life before him. Her life is split between the before and after of meeting and loving him, much like a born-again Christian might find a savior and feel assured of spiritual salvation. Even surviving a massacre doesn’t make as distinct of a dividing line between parts of Amabelle’s life as does her relationship with Sebastien. “Before Sebastien,” Amabelle says, “all my dreams had been of the past: of the old country, of places and people I might never see again” (32). This relationship enables Amabelle to rewrite her past, to have a more lived-in present life of love and desire, as well as a potential future.

The magic of physical touch serves a crucial role in these sacred transgressions of indifference. Nadège Clitandre explains the value Sebastien places on a bodily existence as well as a psychic one: “For Sebastien, to be flesh does not connote disempowerment. On the contrary, ‘to be flesh’ connotes empowerment and control of self” (38). Drawing from Jacques Derrida, Herndon finds that Danticat’s narrative “[insists] that memories are held in the flesh,” that “[m]emory and trauma live in the physical self, inseparable from the present moment” (8). Indeed, the interaction of their physical bodies, flesh to flesh, provides the spark to lay bare their deep, painful memories in the light of a loving relationship. Sebastien knows just the right touch and words to keep Amabelle safe when she is haunted by the sadness of her past, when that same memory of her parents’ deaths intrudes:

“You’re sweating,” he said, letting his fingers slide along my spine.”

“I had my dream of my parents again,” I said.

“I don’t want you to have this dream again,” he said.

“I always see it precisely the way it took place.”

“We’ll have to change this thing, starting now.” He blew out the lamp. The room was pitch black. I squeezed my eyes shut and listened for his voice.

“I don’t want you to dream of that river again,” he said. “Give yourself a pleasant dream. Remember not only the end, but the middle, and the beginning, the things they did when they were breathing. Let us say that the river was still that day.”

“And my parents?”

“They died natural deaths many years later.”

“And why did you come here?”

“Even though you were a girl when you left and I was already a man when I arrived and our families did not know each other, you came here to meet me.”

His back and shoulders became firm and rigid as he was concocting a new life for me.

“Yes,” I said, going along. “I did wander here simply to meet you.”

(54-55)

This exchange ends with the romantic trope of a destined meeting, but it is impossible to dismiss the important healing work the couple does within the realm of their romance, where the spiritual, physical, and emotional intertwine.

With her emotional life rekindled, Amabelle is able to help Sebastien, easing his pain when his mind drifts and he talks of sad thoughts: “I reached up and pressed my

hands against his lips. We had made a pact to change our unhappy tales into happy ones” (56). Moreover, their relationship breaks Sebastien free from indifference to his state as an undervalued, even despised, human labor machine in the cane fields. Because they have a stake in one another’s happiness, they each have a reason to look ahead to something better and work for their own freedom from a soul-crushing life. Thinking of their future together, Sebastien tells Amabelle, “I don’t give you much . . . but I want you to know that tomorrow begins my last zafrá. Next year, I work away from the cane fields, in coffee, rice, tobacco, corn, an onion farm, even yucca grating, anything but the cane. . . . I swear it to you, Amabelle, this will be my last cane harvest, just as it was Joël’s” (55). His friend’s death has touched him deeply, but it is Amabelle’s love that pushes him to seek a future of his own choosing and holds him accountable for his own freedom and happiness, an audacious thought in such an indifferent world. From an infant to a partner and a fellow healer, Amabelle’s emotional growth in the course of this relationship is remarkable. She has found a safe place to exist, one where emotional vulnerability and desire coexist, and both prove necessary for the integration and healing of old wounds, which indifference has long since covered but never healed.

As Francis explains, their relationship is both ordinary and far from it:

In Alegría, Sebastien meets Amabelle. As one might expect, they fall in love and he proposes marriage. This plot line is meant to illustrate the ordinariness of the event and the life-altering potential of love, which would enable two people to rebuild their lives. Amabelle learns to be vulnerable with Sebastien. This romantic love, the reader wants to believe, has the potential to override Amabelle’s overwhelming sense of parental

loss. (170)

This healthy, loving relationship *would* be unremarkable—it should be something available to any human being—but it is something aberrant in their world. Amabelle and Sebastien have formed a loving partnership, and while their love itself wouldn't otherwise be a daring action, they have been dehumanized in the context of postcolonial indifference—and reaching for something human and emotional and vulnerable is a remarkable feat of free will. Sebastien gives Amabelle what her position in Valencia's family, because of her sense of indebtedness to them, could never give her: “But it is precisely the gratitude that Amabelle feels for Papi and Valencia that does not allow her to explore the social dimensions of her psychological scar” (Dhar 191). Within the family she and Sebastien create, on the other hand, there is ultimately equity and the mutual exchange of love and compassion.

Even the massacre cannot rob Amabelle of her connection to the man she loves. She dreams of Sebastien coming to heal her: “ ‘Amabelle, it is Sebastien, come to see you,’ he says. ‘I have brought remedies for your wounds’ ” (282). Although he lists remedies such as ginger and turmeric for her physical ailments, he also brings “tea for pleasant dreams,” reminding us that he did much more than soothe and touch and heal her physical body. Those healing touches were a conduit to deeply felt emotion, to the sacred, and to freedom from the cage of indifference. Amabelle continues to draw from the education in living and feeling and loving and honoring painful memories of the past that she undertook with Sebastien, even after he has long disappeared from her life. It is this extraordinary brush with desire in an indifferent world that ensures Amabelle will never be fully numb, as much as she may want, at times, to return to that state: “All I

wanted was a routine, a series of sterile acts that I could perform without dedication or effort, a life where everything was constantly the same, where every day passed exactly like the one before” (262). She longs for a “sterile” life of mundane indifference, free of feeling too much, but we also know this feeling is what makes her—and constantly reminds her, through her dreams and memories of Sebastien, that she is—human. That she lives. That she survived a massacre. That she loved deeply, still loves, and neither could nor would return to the life of a person who never knew love and desire.

When she returns to her former home of Alegría at the end of the novel, Amabelle most yearns to find the waterfall where Sebastien took her the first time they were physically intimate: “What had become of the waterfall and the stream? They couldn’t have disappeared. Some wishes sound too foolish when uttered out loud. But this is why I had come back to this place, to see a waterfall” (296). Recalling her original memory of the waterfall, Amabelle tells us in one of the novel’s bolded chapters,

On the inside of the cave, there is always light, day and night. You who know the cave’s secret, for a time, you are also held captive in this prism, this curiosity of nature that makes you want to celebrate yourself in ways that you hope the cave will show you, that the emptiness in your bones will show you, or that the breath in your blood will show you, in ways that you hope your body knows better than yourself. (100)

Here, in a cave sheltered by the waterfall, light and life mingle with loss and emptiness, and Amabelle’s body leads her to forge a connection with Sebastien and create a memory that will outlast and overreach the unspeakable pain she later encounters. Although Amabelle is unsure she has found that very waterfall so many years later, the memory

itself, complete with its vivid physical sensations, remains intact in her mind and alive within her body. Just as their physical intimacy served as a conduit for Amabelle to integrate her painful past, Amabelle's newly scarred body houses both pleasurable and painful memories. By valuing her body as such a sacred vessel, she preserves her moments of deeply felt human emotion and desire, which challenge the indifference around her.

Rather than fully close off and isolate themselves in the easy numbness of this indifferent world, Amabelle and Sebastien reach for each other—spiritually, emotionally, and physically—reminding themselves of the most important fact of all: that they are alive, that they are human, that they exist. When they cannot touch, Amabelle says, “We must talk to remind each other that we are not yet in the slumbering dark, which is an endless death, like a darkened cave” (13). Whether this is the cave of literal death or the cave of a numb, indifferent existence, Amabelle and Sebastien instead claim their own cave, not one of death but of life, of desire, of light—a cave that never gets fully dark, where a waterfall preserves memories of the love that took place there.

Conclusion

In some ways it is a miracle, like being loved . . .⁷

—Amabelle, *The Farming of Bones*

Amabelle's pursuit of love and desire is extraordinary in the numbness of her world, a postcolonial world of wealth and power set against servitude and powerlessness. These

gaps, reinforced by centuries-old racism, are immense, and challenging them is futile. And such impossible gaps breed indifference to the system itself, to others, and even to oneself. As a woman, Amabelle is especially subjugated to such powerlessness. Normal desires, hopes, and emotions are off-limits to her. From a young age, her life has been lived for and controlled by outsiders with the autonomy she lacks. She is taken to live with a family of strangers, and there she has remained until her very life is threatened. Then the massacre pushes her across the border, to a place that no longer feels like home, to live among strangers who all have pain but can never truly share it.

Rather than using an easily accessible, linear narrative as testimony of the trauma Amabelle has experienced, Danticat offers silence. And in that silence we find pain but also Amabelle's truest joy: her emotional and physical intimacy with Sebastien, more touch than words, more desire than indifference. His name, Sebastien Onius, opens the novel and remains a potent talisman, a touchstone for Amabelle's painful and wonderful memories and for the physical sensations that his presence and absence engender:

His name is Sebastien Onius and his story is like a fish with no tail, a dress with no hem, a drop with no fall, a body in the sunlight with no shadow.

His absence is my shadow; his breath my dreams. New dreams seem a waste, needless annoyances, too much to crowd into the tiny space that remains. . . .

His name is Sebastien Onius. Sometimes this is all I know. My back aches now in all those places that he claimed for himself, arches of bare skin that belonged to him, pockets where the flesh remains fragile, seared like unhealed burns where each fallen scab uncovers a deeper

wound. (281)

While Sebastien has long disappeared from Amabelle's life—killed during the chaos of the massacre, we presume—she tells us, “Men with names never truly die” (282).

Amabelle's last name, Désir, desire, is its own amulet—a prophecy fulfilled, really—that reminds us, despite the indifference of her world, that she felt desire, intimacy, and love with Sebastien, its own sort of wonderful miracle in a cruel postcolonial world.

Chapter 4 Notes

1. Danticat 2.

2. *Death in Life* 483.

3. The Haitian *restavek*, or *restavec*, system, drawing from the French words *reste avec*, which literally translates as *one who remains with*, is largely considered by human rights groups to be a modern form of slavery. Well-to-do families take in—or simply take—children, typically girls, from poor areas, often feigning to care for and educate them. Such children are overworked and frequently abused. See, for example, rfahaiti.org and restavekfreedom.org.

Although we are given the impression in the novel that Amabelle is relatively well treated—considering her circumstances as an orphaned Haitian girl—Nandini Dhar explains how the “act of rescuing by Papi . . . did not put an end to the relationship of power between the upper class Dominicans and black Haitians, but rather reinforced and reconstituted the social hierarchy” (191).

4. It is worth noting that Amabelle is rescued by male children, who may be older than she is but have a greater measure of autonomy because of their gender. While they get to be “river boys,” Amabelle must become a *restavek* servant girl after she is “rescued” at the river a second time by Señora Valencia’s father. Amabelle’s lack of agency is evident from this early moment in her life. As Spivak explains, “Clearly, if you are poor, black and female you get it in three ways” (90).

5. Danticat 300.

6. Indeed reminiscent of the propaganda machine of Nazi Germany that was deployed at this same time in history, Trujillo’s own work, as Wucker explains, was molded by Adolf

Hitler himself: “In the months leading up to the horrible deed, Trujillo had tightened his ties with Nazi Germany. He publicly accepted a gift of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, whose racial theories it was quite clear he agreed with” (52).

7. Danticat 67.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion: A Framework of Postcolonial Indifference

An emancipated imagination is a rich and powerful thing. Colonizers know this well, which is why colonialism tries to deprive the colonized of independent access to cultural institutions, particularly to the means of representing themselves to themselves.

—Mary Louise Pratt¹

In this chapter, I will extend my study of indifference from the previous chapters on *The God of Small Things*, *The Map of Love*, and *The Farming of Bones*, linking the ideas therein to propose and shape a framework of postcolonial indifference. Through the following sections, I will explore the nature of the indifference itself and how it is employed to the benefit of those with power. All the while acknowledging the distinct context and nature of the postcolonial conflicts each author depicts, I will also examine the similar ways in which Roy, Soueif, and Danticat have crafted narratives and characters that are able to transgress such a culture of postcolonial indifference. As this dissertation contends, desire, sexuality, and the intimacy of human relationships play an important role in such liberation from indifference. This chapter will also consider additional implications of the approach through other possible avenues of inquiry that follow the theme of indifference in postcolonial literature.

Fear and Order

Anxiety about race, sex, and national identity runs underneath the placid surface of indifference in the novels. As I establish in my introduction chapter, colonial and nationalist fears over unregulated sexuality and reproduction made women particularly suspect and subject to oppression and control. As revealed to various degrees in each novel, indifference serves as the lid that keeps all such wild fears bottled up. As such, postcolonial indifference is both aided by and an aid to the ordered systems of patriarchy, class, caste, and racial hierarchy, and colonial and imperial power. When at its most oppressive, postcolonial subjects are so locked into this system of systems that they are incapacitated and, finally, rendered indifferent to their oppression and lack of agency. While the authors themselves are removed by several generations from the initial colonial traumas of their homelands, they portray the impact of the systems that perpetuate postcolonial indifference. We see through the novels how even minor effects—what may seem like indifference in its least harmful manifestations—enable order to gain privilege over human relationships, emotional recovery, and empathetic capacity.

Those given a measure of power by the indifferent system—consider Lord Cromer, Inspector Matthews in *The God of Small Things*, and Dominican president Trujillo—are those most invested in it. As Fanon explains of postcolonial nationalist enterprises in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, the danger is that the formerly colonized subjects replace the colonizer as violent enforcers of order. He states,

The colonized subject will first train this aggressiveness sedimented in his muscles against his own people. This is the period when black turns on black, and police officers and magistrates don't know which way to turn. .

. . The muscles of the colonized are always tensed. It is not that he is anxious or terrorized, but he is always ready to change his role . . . The colonized subject is a persecuted man who is forever dreaming of becoming the persecutor. . . . The colonized are caught in the tightly knit web of colonialism. (15-17)

This description of how postcolonial nation-builders supplant the original colonizer can certainly be applied to Trujillo, as a Haitian-descended Dominican turning on other Haitians, and to Inspector Matthews, who, as a police officer, has been trained to “turn” on those potential transgressors at the fringes of the system. On a smaller scale, the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man’s “sedimented” rage makes him the persecutor of his vulnerable fellow citizen. And while Fanon asserts that the colonized subject is confused rather than “anxious or terrorized,” I would argue that the colonized becomes just that when he replaces the colonizer, for now he has something to lose. These representatives of the initial colonizers, official or not, must maintain the system at all costs. Such order—be it through caste classifications, racial labeling, or other categorization of human identities—ultimately keeps the fear at bay while giving shape, definition, and color to the fearful unknowns of a world made more global than ever by colonialism and imperialism. In short, the rationale goes, “If we name and label those we fear, we know them better and can keep them under control and locked into their proper places, ensuring our own power.” Those individuals who would potentially transgress the system, including unmarried women, racial minorities, and other outcasts, are those who would gain the most by transgressing, like Ammu, who was “already damned, now had little left to lose, and could therefore be dangerous” (Roy 44). In that way, their aberrance gives

them power.

In the three novels, the sum of all fears, that worst of labels, is *darkness*. In *The Farming of Bones*, we see the highest death toll, the most violent result of indifference to fellow human lives among all the traumas depicted in the three novels. Danticat's portrayals of the threat of African blood to Dominican nationhood, the fear of the hidden darkness in Dominican identity, and the violent efforts to vanquish that darkness expertly capture the nature of racial fear in postcolonial relations. Fanon's description of a "collective immersion in a fratricidal bloodbath" is certainly apt to the brutal Parsley Massacre (*Wretched* 17). By carefully uncorking the fear, Trujillo is able to use it as a tool, inciting both soldiers and civilians to channel their fear onto the bodies of Haitian people, to lay waste to thousands of human lives. After five days, Trujillo carefully recaps the fear, and indifference again becomes the order of the day. According to Wucker, the "unctuous dictator insisted that the incident has been exaggerated" (51).

In *The God of Small Things*, Velutha, with his ironic name, "which means white in Malayalam—because he was so black" (70), represents the known threat. Rather than depicting a genocidal massacre as Danticat does, Roy portrays the enacting of every worst colonial and postcolonial fear onto the body of Velutha: "[Rahel and Estha] heard the thud of wood on flesh. Boot on bone. On teeth. The muffled 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). Although the children will never fully recover from witnessing this violence, what they are seeing is "a clinical demonstration in controlled conditions (this was not war after all, or genocide) of human nature's pursuit of ascendancy. Structure. Order. . . . They were not arresting a man, they were exorcising fear" (292-93). Velutha

pays the highest price; he symbolizes all that can undo the carefully ordered postcolonial world of the novel. Indeed, Velutha and his fellow Marxist party marchers “carried a keg of ancient anger, lit with a recent fuse” after centuries of expected indifference to their inequality, while “Cardamon Kings, Coffee Counts and Rubber Barons . . . sniggered to hide their rising panic” (67). Baby Kochamma, like others that have much to lose from the dismantling of the present indifferent system, has the same “ancient, age-old fear. The fear of being dispossessed” (67). Even Velutha’s father, seeing himself “torn between Loyalty and Love,” reinforces the system by telling Ammu’s mother of her affair with his son: “So Vellya Paapen has come to tell Mammachi himself. As a Paravan and a man with mortgaged body parts, he considered it his duty. . . . Vellya Paapen lying in the slush, wet, weeping, groveling. Offering to kill his son” (242-43). As Lanone explains of this incident, “Both Vellya Paapen and Mammachi consider that those who transgress social and sexual ethics deserve to be punished within an inch of their lives” (135). But it is Ammu, with “the reckless rage of a suicide bomber,” whom Roy most portrays as enacting the destructive power of what Velutha and his comrades represent. It is not the Marxist party that engenders a revolution but Ammu herself, in her own “Small” way. As a desiring, transgressive woman with a dark heart, “like a witch,” Ammu wants more than is her portion. She is drawn to a fellow dark soul, one who has been cast out of the light and order of a carefully constructed world.

Leaving behind her polite, feminine life in *The Map of Love*, Anna applies her transgressive desires to the dark person of Sharif. While racism against dark-skinned Arabs can’t be attributed entirely to British colonial rule, the Empire capitalized on existing Western sentiments about race, which associated darkness with barbarity. As

Layla describes her on first sight, Anna, on the other hand, is a “beautiful European woman, her hair flowing to her shoulders in free golden waves” (137). For all that her fair beauty represents, Anna’s intimacy with an Arab, a “wicked Pasha,” not only violates Western colonial discourses about race and sex but also subverts literary representations which frequently characterized such interracial unions in terms of violence and rape. While Anna’s class positioning ultimately protects both her and the reader from directly encountering the more violent clashes of a British-colonized Egypt, we know the tension of colonial occupation shapes virtually every facet of Egyptian life at this time. As portrayed in the three novels, these cases illustrate that when women willfully link themselves to and define themselves by what their postcolonial cultures deem as *dark*—that which is to be feared and controlled—racial and sexual anxiety converge, and their transgressions are all the more subversive.

While these fears are certainly real to those who hold them—and real justifications for oppressive systems—they serve another purpose: uniting and deploying the dominant group against a perceived threat.² Robbed of self-representation, such “barbarians” serve a higher purpose: validating the empires of dominant nations. As I discuss using the case of *antihaitianismo* in Chapter 4, a common threat serves as a scapegoat for the problems facing the nation, and having that scapegoat justifies any form of retaliation against those potentially threatening subjects who are outside the prescribed order. In his 1904 poem “Waiting for the Barbarians,” Greek writer Constantine Cavafy articulates how such powers actually *need* their scapegoats, their so-called barbarians: “And now, what’s going to happen to us without barbarians? / They were, those people, a kind of solution.”

In *The God of Small Things*, Baby Kochamma makes Velutha her barbarian, the scapegoat for her humiliation during the Marxist march: “Baby Kochamma focused all her fury in her public humiliation on Velutha. She sharpened it like a pencil. In her mind he grew to represent the march” (78). Although Baby Kochamma’s anger has a specific target, it represents a larger ideology in her world: all things detestable, backward, and abject are ascribed to the identity of the so-called Untouchable. Mammachi pictures Velutha’s “coarse black hand” and his “black hips,” attributing a “particular Paravan smell” to him and almost vomiting at the thought of his coupling with her daughter (244). Caste and sexual anxiety are written onto Velutha’s body, which is then violently punished for its transgression of its proper place, which is *apart* and *away* from the Touchables.

In the colonized Egypt of Anna Winterbourne’s time, the British take and maintain power by establishing the Egyptians as the Other, as everything they are not and against whom they can better define themselves, as people of “savage nations” with no “right to exist” let alone govern themselves (13). In the contemporary portion of *The Map of Love*, the character Deena articulates how such a manufactured threat comes into play in the current struggles over ancient Egyptian land: “If someone is close to the authorities and he wants people off his land, he can use the ‘terrorist’ issue and get rid of them” (228). Crying “wolf”—or crying “terrorist,” in this case—is far from a new strategy. Indeed, we see how the exaggeration or outright manufacturing of a threat, which is work often drawn along the lines of race, nation, and class, continues to function in the political world of our day.

The Unnaturalness of Indifference

The obsessive categorization of fellow humans, as *Other*, as *Untouchable*, as *Oriental*, as *black* or *Haitian* or *Arab* or even *feminine* (and, therefore, potentially *weak* and *hysterical*), yields an unnaturally ordered and indifferent world, where individuals have no means of self-definition. In a description applicable to the indifference depicted in all three novels, Roy's narrator explains that Velutha's murderers are driven by "civilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness" (292). Patriarchy, postcolonial order, and the fear of losing one's measure of power—all are clearly linked here to the dichotomy of civilization versus nature. As such, perpetuated, inherited postcolonial indifference separates and isolates rather than unites. It kills and buries natural emotion and neutralizes the instinct to seek out and connect to others through shared emotion. By isolating postcolonial subjects, the indifferent order of things can better keep emotions and desires buried deep enough to be benign.

Rather than seeing himself as *father* first and choosing love over duty, Vellya Paapen follows the unnatural order of things, making himself "History's deputy" and setting in motion "the Terror" that results in his son's death (Roy 190). In its associations with carefully structured societies that breed gender inequality, violence, corruption, and a lack of empathetic capacity, postcolonial indifference is an isolating, unnatural human state, cutting between fellow human beings, even between families. As revealed through the thoughts and actions of Ammu, Anna, and Amabelle, however, human nature cannot be fully emptied of desire and the capacity to feel, so their ordered, indifferent worlds are engaged in a constant battle with natural human emotions.

As they open themselves up to desire, the women transgress indifference against

the backdrop of the natural world. As Ammu rushes to meet Velutha by the river, she returns to an instinctive state associated with nature and childhood: “She moved quickly through the darkness, like an insect following a chemical trail. She knew the path to the river as well as her children did and could have found her way there blindfolded” (Roy 314). Ammu then finds refuge in “the cave of his body” (320). The comings and goings of tiny creatures accompany Ammu and Velutha’s intimacy, and natural images punctuate their nights together. When Anna goes into the Sinai desert, she frees herself from the constraints of gender, class, and nationality and finds liberation under a star-lit sky: “It is a vastness which I have never before experienced—the land, the sea and the sky, all stretching unbroken and united” (Soueif 190). Anna unifies the formerly fractured parts of her soul, finding both freedom and peace there in the desert. After losing her parents to the river, Amabelle faces a world that is indifferent to her personal trauma and expects her to be so. Many years later, Amabelle searches for a waterfall and the cave where she and Sebastien first made love. At the end of the novel, Amabelle finds solace by accepting the river for its role not in washing away her pain but in bearing testimony to it. The novel’s dedication is directed from Amabelle herself, “In confidence to you, Metrès Dlo, Mother of the Rivers.” Ever linked to the flowing water, Amabelle performs ablutions that allow her to reconcile her past trauma and lost love with her present, safely committing her story to Metrès Dlo.

Ammu’s children, Rahel and Estha, further illustrate the contrast between indifference as an unnatural state and the natural world with its links to human emotion and intimacy. The home Rahel returns to as an adult in *The God of Small Things* has gone awry, as represented both by her broken link to her brother and the poisoned natural

world around them.³ The narrator describes the river as Estha goes for his endless walks: “Some days he walked along the banks of the river that smelled of shit and pesticides bought with World Bank loans. Most of the fish had died. The ones that survived suffered from fin-rot and had broken out in boils” (14). The only way to set things right and to break from the unnatural indifference between them is for the twins to physically rejoin, in an intimate sexual encounter that connects them to a world before and free from cultural taboos. Their connection has always been undeniable, as even Baby Kochamma begrudgingly observes, so their childhood separation is an ongoing trauma. A “Twin Expert” Ammu consults offers the advice that Rahel and Estha, as “two-egg twins were no different from ordinary siblings” and would not experience “out of the ordinary” pain upon being separated (31-32). Even Ammu fails to detect “their single Siamese soul,” and Rahel’s husband never identifies “a hollow where Estha’s words had been” (40, 20). No one else sees “[t]hat the emptiness in one twin was only a version of the quietness in the other. That the two things fitted together. Like stacked spoons. Like familiar lovers’ bodies” (20-21). Roy’s careful handling of the incestuous scene, one of the last in the novel, reinforces the bond of the twins, their shared pain, and the natural inevitability of their encounter:

They had known each other before Life began.

There is very little that anyone could say to clarify what happened
next. . . .

But what was there to say?

Only that there were tears. Only that Quietness and Emptiness
fitted together like stacked spoons. . . . Only that what they shared that

night was not happiness, but hideous grief.

Only that once again they broke the Love Laws. That lay down
who should be loved. And how. And how much. (310-11)

Estha and Rahel are crossing over, breaking, indeed, *transgressing* the unnatural “Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks and Limits” that have separated their lives (5), reclaiming their places as the other’s soul mate—each the other’s soul-twin. As Chanda asserts of this important physical and spiritual reconciling, “The subject is thus redefined through the Self’s integration with its lost body” (43).

Even though what they are experiencing is “hideous grief,” the twins put off that indifference which pulled Estha into his own silent world, “Unspeakable. Numb,” and made Rahel so distant from her husband (13, 20). Through a circular coming-together of the beginning and end of the novel, the twins experience an emotional awakening and become “fitted together” in a reclaiming of their instinctual desire for each other as the soul-twins that they are. Almeida tells us, “Rahel and Estha’s rejection of the sacred laws while still intimate and private represents a transgression in cultural terms and a return to natural states before the establishment of the laws of culture” (271). Indeed, the transgressive “togetherness” that the twins embrace is as outside the norm, as off-record as the histories of Untouchables like Velutha, for whom there is no place in official history. Their love is *pre*-history. There is neither a name nor a definition for it that others will understand; their relationship is “one that defies definition by its inability to categorise itself in the conventional norms” (Pushpiner 92). For Rahel and Estha, this return to their natural state of the past is a return to feelings unbounded by the Love Laws, unbounded by indifference to the natural desires that run between caste and class

and against cultural traditions—even against history.

Although all their losses can never be recovered, Rahel and Estha recover a measure of that natural, intimate connection that was broken by a destructive family and a cruel world. And, in some ways, nature itself has worked to reclaim some of its lost ground, growing over a symbol of the family's past cruelty and indifference, the blue Plymouth as "Pappachi's revenge" (47). The narrator describes, "With every monsoon, the old car settled more firmly into the ground. . . . Grass grew around its flat tires. The PARADISE PICKLES & PRESERVES signboard rotted and fell inward like a collapsed crown" (280). The "collapsed crown" of the family's cruelty is an apt representation of Rahel and Estha's acts, which transgress the unnatural order of indifference that has ruled their lives since birth.

Revising History

The colonist makes history. His life is an epic, an odyssey. . . . The history he writes is therefore not the history of the country he is despoiling, but the history of his own nation's looting, raping, and starving to death . . . [of] the colonized subject.

—Frantz Fanon⁴

The most significant commonality across these three postcolonial novels is their reopening of history to account for new voices and stories. Each novel was published in the late 1990s, and their authors have the ability to revisit and re-envision history with the

perspective of postcolonial subjects who are many generations removed from initial colonial encounters and traumas. The authors embrace new ways of using English, as a former language of the colonizer, to accommodate new voices. As postcolonial writers have done since the earliest manifestations of postcolonial literature, they reshape the language, showing their command of it and repurposing it to house the stories of those formerly disenfranchised and marginalized by oppressive forces. In *The Map of Love*, Soueif interjects English with Arabic words and phrases, creating a new “hybridized” narrative language:

The hybridized English that Soueif deploys and produces allows the conscious feminist narrative voice to infiltrate taboo terrains . . . to broach and delve into issues such as feminine sexuality, politics of power and gender, and the disenfranchisement of the poor. English here accords a liberating lexical storehouse and semantic sanctuary. . . . Accordingly, even though the English language *is* readily associated in the collective memory of many “third-world” nations with the colonialist and neo-colonialist experiences, Soueif’s adoption of it as a medium of expression dehegemonizes it and transforms it into an instrument of resistance to the discourses of both arrogant colonialism and exclusionist ultra-nationalism. (Malak 161, emphasis in the original).

By transforming English, Soueif appropriates it for new stories. Roy, too, creates a new form of English to accommodate the voices and perspectives of her characters. Set against the family’s ironic Anglophilia, *The God of Small Things* subverts the revered English language at every turn, through the perspectives of her young protagonists Rahel

and Estha, adapting it to a linguistic form that illuminates “the clash between the world of childhood and violence” and allows these stories of postcolonial trauma to be told (Lanone 141). As she plays with standard British English, Roy makes proper nouns of ordinary words, fuses phrases into single words, and purposefully misspells words according to their sound or perceived meaning. As Lanone explains, “Roy builds pillars of sounds through which the narration meanders” (140). These new words become intense, thematic ideas, for example, Ammu’s “No Locusts Stand I” and Rahel’s identification of the potential for sadness within “Infinite Joy.” Roy also pushes complex ideas, such as “the History House” or “a hole in the Universe,” into intense, repetitive references that carry far more meaning than a lengthy explanation that uses the English language traditionally. Even her nontraditional syntax and sentence structure, particularly the use of powerfully short fragments, work to establish linguistic power and narrative freedom in the novel. These linguistic strategies allow the characters to explore complicated states of postcolonial being that cannot be contained within standard English.

All three authors also use narrative strategies that render linear time irrelevant as they account for the consideration of new histories. These new approaches to a seemingly closed historical record render the past open, and *open to revision*, through the authors’ narratives. *The Farming of Bones* uses narrative form as its own sort of emotional language, which allows Amabelle to write her personal history as one based on memory—a story that is more silence than words, one that is not accommodated within the official public history that downplays the massacre. As Novak explains, Danticat’s novel is “an act of memory, as an attempt to remember a forgotten history,” and the

narrative mirrors “the shifting, fragmentary voice of memory” (95). Just as the bolded chapters containing Amabelle’s memories and dreams cut into the chronological narrative, Soueif’s novel moves back and forth in time, from the beginning of the twentieth century to the end of it, using letters, journals, and other artifacts to create a multi-layered palimpsest of revised history. Similarly uninhibited by chronological time, Roy’s narrative has a gyroscopic effect that keeps the past open, ever-present, ever with us as readers just as it remains potent and present with the characters themselves. With these narrative strategies, the authors rewrite the master narrative of history, bending it to accommodate personal stories that challenge a history of postcolonial indifference.

Each of the novels’ respective postcolonial contexts is unique—with continuing racial, patriarchal, and social oppression experienced to varying degrees in those modern nations—and each act of writing-as-recovery is distinct, but Roy, Soueif, and Danticat undertake a common endeavor. As the authors reopen history to allow for new stories, they belie what Herndon calls “historical amnesia,” as the “active forgetting of a shameful past” (7). Indeed, Wynne describes *The Map of Love* as “Soueif’s revisionist project” and “her imagined recovery” of history from the colonial agenda (57, 65). If not for these recovery efforts, such characters would be spoken for by a historical record that elides them. As Deena explains, “The problem is that we are allowing other people to make our history” (Soueif 228). Not just history written and circulated by Western colonial powers but *all* national histories mute certain voices, as Loomba asserts: “Thus, nations are communities created not simply by forging certain bonds but by fracturing or disallowing others; not merely by invoking and remembering certain versions of the past, but making sure that others are forgotten or repressed” (202). These three narratives give

voice to those Others, characters who perform important transgressing work that allows us to re-see the past, rather than “settle and pin down the past in ways that hide it” (Novak 95). As such, the voices Roy, Soueif, and Danticat contribute through their characters work to recover lost histories, revise dominant histories, and reopen closed histories.

Other Implications for the Study of Indifference

While I have chosen to focus on female characters who engage in heterosexual relationships, the approach of indifference is valid for other explorations. Male characters such as *The Map of Love*’s Sharif and Omar certainly transgress postcolonial norms in their own ways. One might also explore homosocial or homosexual relationships with the aim of situating the desires and intimacy therein within a context of hegemonic indifference. Indeed, Loomba explains that “colonial relations cannot be projected always or straightforwardly in terms of patriarchal or heterosexual domination” (78). As widely circulated modern novels written in English, *The God of Small Things*, *The Map of Love*, and *The Farming of Bones* are poised for attention while many texts of other genres and languages are not. And, by their very nature, *non-literary* texts are where we are most apt to hear truly marginalized voices that reshape our sense of history.⁵ My aim is not to argue that only female characters can transgress indifference—and only in the ways and texts I’ve discussed—but that they are particularly poised to do so and that their transgressions are remarkable in the context of so many oppressive systems that act upon them.

Final Remarks

What is indifference? Etymologically, the word means “no difference.” A strange and unnatural state in which the lines blur between light and darkness, dusk and dawn, crime and punishment, cruelty and compassion, good and evil. What are its courses and inescapable consequences? . . .

Of course, indifference can be tempting—more than that, seductive. It is so much easier to look away from victims. . . . Yet, for the person who is indifferent, his or her neighbor are of no consequence. And, therefore, their lives are meaningless. Their hidden or even visible anguish is of no interest. Indifference reduces the Other to an abstraction. . . . Even hatred at times may elicit a response. You fight it. You denounce it. You disarm it.

Indifference elicits no response. Indifference is not a response.

—Elie Wiesel⁶

In their private spaces and with their personal desires, Ammu, Anna, and Amabelle subvert the indifference of the larger world. Even history itself is not so impossibly weighty that these women cannot achieve their own varying measures of freedom from the cruel apathy that surrounds them. Undoubtedly, they do not emerge from the endeavor unscathed; even privileged Anna is widowed a second time. However, as they dare to want, find empowerment within their positions rather than fear, and willingly

exile themselves from the safe, ordered world, they transgress indifference. As something vague and shapeless, indifference goes unrecognized because, by its very nature, it replicates and reinforces itself. Each in their own way, these women respond to the *non-response* of indifference that Wiesel describes by reclaiming the intimacy of human emotion and interpersonal relationships—by seeking the satisfaction of their desires when others don't dare even want. In those relationships, we see three women who experience companionship, equality, happiness, passion, and love with a fellow human, all remarkable feats in the context of postcolonial indifference.

Chapter 5 Notes

1. “Daring to Dream: Re-Visioning Culture and Citizenship” 14.
2. Although I discuss this strategy as a common trend, a manufactured threat could be deployed even more effectively when a purposefully constructed body of knowledge about a specific group is active and circulating, as with the racial classifications and traits of Haitians that Michele Wucker discusses. See Stoler’s discussion of repression and anxiety in *Race and the Education of Desire*, 176 n. 42.
3. Lanone describes this desecration of the river: “Whereas in the late sixties the river was a force of Nature, an unpredictable, mysterious presence associated with the floods of desire and transgression, when Rahel returns twenty-three years later, it has shrunk into a landscape of death and decay, with steps which lead nowhere, poisoned fish and messy excrement” (126).
4. *The Wretched of the Earth* 14-15.
5. See Ketu H. Katrak’s call to close the gap between literary studies and texts of social protest by minority women in *Politics of the Female Body: Postcolonial Women Writers of the Third World*.
6. Quoted from Wiesel’s lecture, “The Perils of Indifference,” delivered as part of Bill and Hillary Clinton’s Millennium Lecture Series.

CHAPTER SIX

Embracing Discomfort and Reconsidering Empathy in the Postcolonial Literature Classroom: A Pedagogical Essay

[S]hould we read postcolonial texts differently? Should we even attempt to define or locate such a strategy? How do we as “outside” readers comment on the cultural and social practices of others? . . . Obviously none of these questions are suitably resolved and there are moments of absolute silence when the students are faced with such questions. . . . My students’ moments of silence are both an indication of their discomfort with such questions and an indication of the ambivalent nature of these questions.

—Kanishka Chowdhury¹

Conflict as a form of common ground? It sounds at first like a strange and threatening idea—we think of conflict as something that divides us when what we want is to come together; it smacks of traditional agonistic male competition. We need to distinguish, however, between unproductive conflict, which fails to rise above the level of antagonism and put-downs and the kind that can bind people into a new kind of community. In this latter sense, the term “conflict” is not opposed to “community” but presupposes it. I believe the conflicts that are now compounding the confusions of students have the potential to help those students make better sense of their education and the world.

—Gerald Graff²

To conclude this dissertation, I find it fitting to return to the post-secondary classroom, as this is where I first encountered the three novels, *The God of Small Things*, *The Map of Love*, and *The Farming of Bones*, as well as approaches to the study of postcolonial literature that fostered my desire to situate myself in this field. In this chapter, I propose and discuss an upper-division postcolonial literature course, envisioning it as many students' first encounters with the central ideas of postcolonial studies. However, I shape this course with the intention that the goals, texts, approaches, and assignments be adaptable to other courses, such as multiethnic and immigrant literature, senior seminar for English majors, research-based writing, or specific thematic literature and writing courses.

My overarching aim is that this course be particularly responsive to students. Although the instructor certainly needs to teach core concepts, especially when the students find themselves on new terrain, I give leeway to students' questions, insights, hesitations, and difficulties—aspects which I see linked to the conflict that Graff identifies—as important on-the-ground markers for assessing and steering the course through the goals I propose here. While this course is intentionally optimistic and ambitious in its scope,³ it acknowledges and addresses the likelihood that students will bristle as certain texts and concepts potentially reshape their sense of the world as they know it, as I feel a sincere engagement with postcolonial studies does. In the same way that I anticipate resistance, I anticipate indifference, which becomes its own challenging form of student resistance. As I discussed in the previous chapter, indifference is

underpinned by fear—of both the unknown and, as particularly applicable to this potential classroom, of *becoming* unknown to oneself through the destabilizing effects of encountering difference. In that way, the approaches to meeting and working through student resistance I discuss here include strategies that I feel are well suited to the specific obstacle of student indifference. Rather than ignoring these challenges, class discussions concerning our potential indifference and resistance can be helpful in themselves, asking students to step back and articulate more than a reflexive value judgment (e.g., “I hated this book”). In that way, students can transform their initial resistance into their own unique entry points into a text.

Student resistance to difficult texts is inevitable in the teaching field, and it can rise from a number of factors, all complicated in their own ways and often intersecting with one another. Students may find a text intellectually or stylistically foreign, as Matthew Brown explains of his experience teaching postcolonial literature and theory in “Reading the Difficult Text”:

In these classes we read many difficult texts, difficult because the writer’s cultural or historical references were often unfamiliar to students; difficult because the author’s or essayist’s style was opaque and frequently inaccessible; difficult because the work resisted clear alliances with any one political position; and difficult because the writer sought to elicit complex ideas through an inventive, challenging style. (9)

Similarly, as students encounter unfamiliar styles and perspectives, they may find their worldviews and their very identities challenged. As Lindsay Pentolfe Aegerter articulates, “[H]ackles rise, defenses are up. They start to realize that postcolonial and multicultural

literatures are not always benign celebrations of racial and cultural diversity; frequently they are harsh and quite scathing indictments” (142). Citing Norman Holland’s work on reader response theory, Mary Frances Pipino explains the relationship between student and text at the site of important meaning-making work as one which indeed puts identity in jeopardy: “[W]hen students read a text that makes such a transaction difficult—that is, some element(s) of the text poses obstacles to the reader’s drive to re-create her/his identity—resistant readings result” (179). As Mark Bracher further asserts, the “mere encounter with difference can be enough to threaten their identity-bearing beliefs and worldviews” (26).

The pain and loss that can result from identity-challenging experiences is something most literature courses are not designed to address; in fact, students may be unaware of such feelings themselves. But, as Louis Owens asserts of our task as educators in this regard,

It is our responsibility, as teachers and writers, to make sure that our texts and our classrooms are not “safe” spaces from which a reader or student may return unchanged or unthreatened. . . . It is our job . . . to make people listen well, to disrupt the discourse of dominance, to challenge and discomfit the reader, to ultimately startle that reader into real knowledge.
(46-47)

Keeping in mind this responsibility, which I agree is a crucial aim of teaching—and one that postcolonial studies is particularly situated to employ—I find a potential site of resistance emerges as students are asked to embrace such “real knowledge” and see, even indirectly, their own complicity in systems of oppression just by the very fact of their

subject positions within hegemonic, Western, and neoimperialist cultures. Some students will likely resent this realization, and the new, potentially unwelcome responsibility might seem an unfair burden. As such, sidestepping such issues—or flat-out apathy—becomes a much easier mode of operation for individual students and the classroom as a group.

In this chapter, I will discuss how postcolonial literature and certain teaching approaches can be employed to meet the challenge of student resistance, guide students to a better understanding of experiences of otherness in the postcolonial context, and foster empathy for others, whose difficult realities and unfamiliar worldviews and histories interrogate students' own realities and ways of being in the world. As Suzanne Keen discusses, empathy may be the result of encountering the experiences of others through literature—or perhaps empathy clears a path for openness to such encounters. The course I outline in this chapter doesn't attempt to answer that question; rather, it exists within the open, dynamic nature of the question itself.

Defining and (Re)Valuing Empathy

Before moving to a detailed consideration of goals for this type of course, I feel it necessary to address the embattled relationship literary studies has had with the idea of empathic response to textual encounters. In her book *Empathy and the Novel*, Keen acknowledges an “academic distrust of empathy,” which can be seen “as a typical manifestation of Western arrogance.” When linked to “the universalizing of human emotions,” an aim for a solely empathic approach to a text can indeed prove problematic in a postcolonial literature classroom (xxiv). Keen continues by explaining that “an

empathetic performance may appear condescending” and such posturing potentially serves as “the empathetic individual’s *erasure* of suffering others in a self-regarding emotional response that affronts others’ separate personhood” (xxiv, emphasis added). To summarize the critiques, Keen states, “Using empathy to get at supposed commonalities or to reach certain judgments about complex events exposes the empathizer to risks of oversimplification, misunderstanding, and inadvertent harm” (159). Encapsulating the very worst that empathetic response to narrated trauma can become, these views are bleak but useful. In emotional responses that process, and then dismiss—effectively *erasing* another being’s traumatic experience—only the reader benefits, superficially and very likely temporarily.

By way of definition, Keen explains empathy as “a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect,” which “can be provoked by witnessing another’s emotional state, by hearing about another’s condition, or even by reading. It need not be a conscious response” (4). We recognize *empathy* from *sympathy* by distinguishing the former as feeling *with* another and the former as feeling *for* another. As Keith Oatley articulates in *Such Stuff as Dreams: The Psychology of Fiction*, empathy involves “(a) having an emotion, that (b) is in some way similar to that of another person, that (c) is elicited by observation or imagination of the other’s emotion, and that involves (d) *knowing that the other is the source of one’s own emotion*” (113, emphasis added). This definition is complicated by the last facet. Can we fully *know* the source of our emotions? Can we be sure an emotion originates purely from another’s pain, with no hidden link to our own past pain?

Rather than facilitating a closed reading of another’s experience based on our perception of “shared affect,” the open, unanswerable nature of these questions can lead

to a more careful approach to empathy in the postcolonial literature classroom. In the article “Bearing Witness to the Ethics and Politics of Suffering,” Michalinos Zembylas focuses on J.M. Coetzee’s pedagogically difficult novel *Disgrace*,⁴ and I find his discussion of “inconsolable mourning” incredibly relevant as a potential answer to problematic empathy in the classroom. In contrast to readings that seek trite closure for others’ traumatic experiences, the work of never-ending, unsuccessful mourning, as Zembylas describes, refuses to participate in rendering a closed, definitive take on another’s suffering. That is, it eschews the tendencies to eulogize, historicize, or even sentimentalize such trauma, as such acts essentially digest the experience of another, making it forgettable. Rather, Zembylas asserts, witnessing to the perpetual, unrepresentable trauma of the Other is our first responsibility when encountering such texts.

In that way, I endow the working definition of *empathy* that I employ for use in this proposed course with the idea of a continual, open, even unsettling process of “bearing witness” to the trauma and suffering of others which one cannot fully understand and should not be complicit in digesting and dismissing. Just as the gaps and silences in Amabelle’s testimony in *The Farming of Bones* are even more important and truer to her experience than any written or spoken record, being *at a loss*—for words or an identifiable emotion or some other measurable takeaway—when encountering another’s trauma is a more apt response to *his or her loss*. We are reminded of Novak’s description of Amabelle, through whom ambiguity “urges readers to consider silence and to embrace the unsettling of what they might like to be authoritative” (95). Considering the unanswerable nature of many of the questions that arise from studying postcolonial

literature, as Chowdhury articulates in the epigraph above, the experience of unsettling, difficult, open-ended empathy is a more appropriate avenue of connecting to such stories than sentimentalizing that consumes another's personal experience. Identifying the potential of such a "pedagogy of discomfort"—whether such discomfort is of an intellectual or emotional nature—Megan Boler asserts, "Learning to live with ambiguity, discomfort, and uncertainty is a worthy educational ideal" (197-98). As such, even resistance, anger, or frustration are not unwelcome reactions as students struggle to situate themselves within the ambiguous rather than the authoritative. In other words, the empathetic attempt, which will always fail, should be its own goal, for it helps extend a reader's emotional capacity to include the un-nameable and the un-sayable.

Particularly in light of this more nuanced definition of empathy, Keen's description of what it actually *can* accomplish in a pedagogical setting is both reasonable and valuable: "Conscious cultivation of narrative empathy by teachers and discussion leaders could at least point toward the potential for novel reading to help citizens respond to real others with greater openness and consciousness of their shared humanity" (147). By embracing the *potential* of empathy in the classroom, then, teachers can lead the way in showing they are among those "who see value in emotional transactions across time and culture," transactions which challenge "the course of apathy and indifference to others" (Keen 167). Replicating in the classroom even a small measure of the subversion of indifference accomplished by the characters I discuss in this dissertation is, I feel, a worthy endeavor.

Course Goals

The overarching goal for this course is that students come to appreciate postcolonial literary texts in their capacity to help us reencounter the world and our place in it. Not only as great literary works but through their historical and cultural contexts, postcolonial texts can make students better readers, better critical thinkers, and more committed, responsible world citizens. Following this premise, I identify a trajectory of specific, interrelated goals. My first specific goal acknowledges postcolonial studies as a field of study and an approach to literary texts that will likely be largely unfamiliar to many students in the classroom. The goal is that students *understand the key concerns of postcolonial studies, learn important definitions within the field (such as colonialism, imperialism, postcolonial, and neocolonialism), and become familiar with its origins, revisions, and complications*. My intent here, in addition to providing students with vital foundations and terminology, is to show students the debates within the field, to teach the conflicts⁵ in an effort to foster their understanding of the complexity of postcolonial studies—and of the very process of colonization itself, which was a different incarnation at every site of contact. For example, I would provide students multiple entry-points into postcolonial studies through selections from the works of a number of postcolonial theorists. From the beginning, then, students would see the many ways in which even the term *postcolonial* is debated and interrogated, showing students the dynamic nature of the field, which is constantly interrogating itself. I believe this will prepare students for their own worldviews to be destabilized, hopefully rendering that process less threatening because they know it is the work of the field.

My second and very much related goal is that students *become knowledgeable of*

selected postcolonial theorists and theories and become versed in their application to primary texts. Here students will see the approaches of postcolonial studies applied to the sort of literary close reading they have encountered in other literature courses. And the very tasks of reading theory and literature don't need to be disparate ones. As Matthew Brown stresses, one major pedagogical strategy for circumventing resistance and helping students engage with difficult reading, especially theoretical texts, is to "emphasize the literary," that is, to search out "familiar literary devices like characters, plot, a setting, genre conventions, meaningful tropes and rhetorical figures" (10-11). Essentially, Brown advocates that instructors go back to the common roots of literary study in order to overcome student resistance to difficult reading. The familiarity of their literary reading, then, is partnered with the new frameworks of postcolonial theory, providing students' critical, self-conscious practice.

A third major goal for this type of postcolonial literature course is that students *understand the complex historical, political, cultural, and social contexts of the primary texts.* Context is key for postcolonial texts, as a number of pedagogical scholars, including Chowdhury and Lisa McNee, identify. Chowdhury asserts that, to prevent students from essentializing or exoticizing a postcolonial text, it "has to be studied in the context of its sociocultural politics . . . so that the specificities of a culture do not recede into the background and become a subtext." The "polyethnic and multilingual cultures" presented in a postcolonial literature class, rooted in their specificity, can be better understood—and less threatening or dismissible—to Western students (192-93). Whether maps, political or literary histories, news articles, or even the students' own research, acknowledging such crucial contexts helps students see the frictions and fissures of the

field. Context itself can be recognized as a distinct lens through which the class views a text, and this contextualization should not be taken for granted as an indisputable “truth-making” exercise.

An additional goal, very much linked to the contextualizing work of the course, is that students *be exposed to primary and secondary texts that challenge the Western literary canon and a “master narrative” of history, leading to the appreciation of unofficial personal and collective histories that contribute to a more complex understanding of literature, culture, and history.* Here students may find themselves most challenged conceptually. To cite the American context as an example, AnaLouise Keating relates how, from their very earliest years of formal and cultural education, American students are indoctrinated by Columbus Day and other contorted versions of colonial history in America such as the Pocahontas story, which render Native Americans “a monolithic stereotype relegated fully to the past, a past that has nothing to do with ‘us’ here today” (93). As Keating articulates further, this selective view of history is a protective maneuvering:

Many of us have been trained to regard history . . . as a linear timeline that clearly separates the present from the past and “us” from “them.” Locating the past entirely in a time before ourselves, we separate ourselves from historical injustices and so cannot recognize that the land theft, human bondage, and other forms of conquest which began in the past continue to inform the present. In short, this linear perspective erects boundaries that deny accountability. (99)

In “The Postcolonial Student: Learning the Ethics of Global Solidarity in an English

Classroom,” Masood Ashraf Raja asserts that, in a classroom of Western students, “teaching the complicity of their own nation in the imperial project is the biggest threat to their personal identity” (34). As students learn, perhaps for the very first time, that colonialism isn’t simply the positive idea they associate with the founding of America and that some of their school curriculum may have paraded outright racism, undetected and unobjected to, right under their noses, their sense of history is potentially unraveled.

Envisioning these goals more or less in the order in which I intend them to be employed in the classroom, I turn to the important work identified by Aegerter of dealing with student resistance. Students may feel overwhelmed, unnerved, threatened, even angry or just indifferent at this point in the course. I feel it is crucial to employ materials here that allow students to *explore and attempt to understand experiences of otherness, to allow for ambiguity and failure in that understanding, and to develop empathy for others*. Using approaches that encourage students to leave behind the rigid but comfortable perspectives that might hamper them, I draw from Jarad Zimbler’s article “Caring, Teaching, Knowing: Spivak, Coetzee and the Practice of Postcolonial Pedagogies.” Zimbler asserts: “To be dislodged from one’s subject-position and one’s position as subject, to take the place in the text of one I and then another, to experience oneself even as the you or the they of someone else—these are some of the tasks of careful reading” (20). In order to accomplish this “dislodging” of students from their perspectives, I will shift our attention to *understanding the emotional and psychological costs of colonialism, both personal and communal*, through a consideration of trauma, psychic colonization, and indifference.

My final goal is that students *understand the further implications of postcolonial*

critique, that is, see beyond the course and extend their examination of colonial discourse and postcolonial literature to the neocolonial and neoimperial world of the present. While their readings will have already introduced them to such concepts, this goal allows me to employ what Aegerter and Rhonda Frederick see as the most challenging primary texts of the postcolonial literature course: ones that establish students' possible complicity in the modern world. (See section to follow on specific texts.) Rather than avoid such difficult texts, I have postponed them to the end of the course, after what has hopefully been a productive semester of destabilizing work, including the reconsideration and reorientation of our own perspectives. I see the possible outcome in ending the course on this note as that of preventing students from simply digesting—and moving past—the material of the course which, so far, hasn't been explicitly *about them*, to evoke the pedagogy of Lisa Eck. My intention is that all of these interrelated goals will have allowed students to re-envision both the world and their place in it, with the texts considered reminding them, constantly and relentlessly, of the human costs of colonization and the human voices that testify to those losses.

Primary and Secondary Texts

To provide students their crucial entry-points into postcolonial studies, including an introduction to the terminology and debates within the field, I would use short readings selected from Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back*, Ania Loomba's *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, David Theo Goldberg and Ato Quayson's *Relocating Postcolonialism*, and Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather*. Such selections would map out the field from its origins through its

evolutions in recent decades, showing how the field has interrogated and resituated itself. From this early point in the semester, students could begin to piece together their own nuanced definitions of important terms from such sources. Adding an accessible article such as Ofelia Schutte's "Postcolonial Feminisms: Genealogies and Recent Directions" alongside Loomba and McClintock's work would allow for further consideration of how feminist critique has opened up the concerns of the field in a crucial way. Especially for students who intend to become English teachers themselves, Deepka Bahri's "Marginally Off-Center: Postcolonialism in the Teaching Machine" both teaches the conflicts of the field and examines the field's potential complicity in perpetuating the capitalist systems it seeks to dismantle. When examined and tested throughout the semester through guided class discussions, which may take on the nature of the debates in the field, these readings will certainly challenge upper-division students to meet the course goals as well as enter the realm of academic discourse at a postcolonial angle.

As students begin to orient themselves within theoretical concepts, the chapter on "Post-Colonial and Global English Studies" from Michael Ryan's *Literary Theory: A Practical Introduction* offers valuable, reader-friendly questions to guide students in their new postcolonial approach to critical reading. For example, leading a guided reading of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Ryan begins,

The reputation of this novel is a lesson in point of view. If you are white and an inhabitant of a formerly imperial country or a member of a colonizing group, you may be inclined to support those who for years thought this work a critique of imperialism. But some time ago, with the African write Wole Soyinka leading the way, people from former colonies

in Africa began to point out that the novel is in fact quite racist.

What do you think? Is it possible that the novel is both things at once? (197-98).

By encouraging students to engage a flexibility of perspective, theory becomes accessible rather than intimidating, and accepting the possibility of multiple, complex answers replaces the quest for one authoritative answer. When Ryan's sample postcolonial analysis is paired with Chinua Achebe's impassioned response to *Heart of Darkness* and Achebe's own novel *Things Fall Apart*, students meet the theory and literary texts of the course through a relational, comparative reading approach advocated by Keating and McNee. Such comparison contextualizes new voices among those that may already be familiar: "[S]tudents cannot assimilate and neutralize postcolonial voices as easily when they are contrasted—often violently—with canonical voices" (McNee 199). In this context, dominant canonical texts can also be destabilized, their authority rendered permeable by the contrasting voices of those disenfranchised by that authority. As our first primary text, the short novel *Things Fall Apart* allows for the application of postcolonial theory as well as postcolonial feminist critique as a lens to examine the male-dominated world of the novel. Not only will students encounter different ways of seeing a text but also different ways of responding to a text, all under the umbrella of postcolonial critique.

After setting the tone for the semester through these early sessions and readings, Ahdaf Soueif's novel *The Map of Love* will take center stage as an example of a postcolonial reopening and rewriting of history. As the character Amal pieces together a hundred-year-old love story within the text, her translating work mirrors Soueif's own as

a postcolonial Egyptian writer. An important avenue of inquiry for in-class discussion would be Soueif's choice to write in English and how that complicates the potential resisting work of postcolonial writers to the influences of a colonizing culture. It is also valid to consider Salman Rushdie's assertion, that "the English language ceased to be the sole possession of the English some time ago" (70). In consideration of *The Map of Love*, I would also employ Said's specific discussion, in the first chapter of *Orientalism*, of the history of British colonization in Egypt.⁶ Of such a reencountering of history as *The Map of Love* provides, Keating articulates, "Our worldviews . . . our interactions with those we define as 'Other,' are shaped by and shot through with earlier events, attitudes, values, and beliefs" (99). For Amal within the novel, this work is an act of reconnecting with her own family and her cultural heritage through a lineage of remarkable women; for students in the classroom, it is a realization of the complicated multiple histories that have shaped the modern world—and of the open relationship the colonial past indeed has with the postcolonial present. Perhaps students will seek to interrogate and refigure their sense of our post-9/11 relationship with the Arab world in light of such an encounter with the incredibly rich and complex religious, linguistic, political, and social culture evoked in *The Map of Love*.

With students' sense of history rendered more permeable, I find it vital at this point to provide them with a vocabulary to address the emotional and psychological costs of colonization on human lives. Valuable secondary readings here would include selected chapters from Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*, Kelly Oliver's *Psychic Colonization*, and Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. I feel these materials will prepare students to meet the postcolonial Other in the

course's remaining primary texts and better understand such experiences—of the otherness within the texts as well as their own complicated feelings toward these encounters. The evidence from the secondary texts is damning and allows colonialism to be seen for the utter violation that it is on every level and to the deepest corners of the human mind. Having personally encountered certain texts of postcolonial literature as a student within the context of similar readings, I know the effect is powerful. In light of these personal experiences and my own research and study, I would choose to place Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* as primary readings within the context of these secondary texts. Amabelle's resistance to offering authoritative testimony, even among fellow survivors, shows students the complicated nature of trauma and our inability, as outsiders, to fully translate the traumas of others into the digestible forms we might seek. The dichotomy of personal trauma ("Small God") versus public turmoil ("Big God") as Roy describes in her novel can serve as a valuable metaphor for an overarching theme within postcolonial literature. Moreover, selections from Danticat's and Roy's own bodies of non-fiction work would help to further situate the context of these novels as well as the aims of the authors as both activists and writers.

These difficult, emotional reading experiences, from a student perspective, can be powerful and revealing, yes, but overwhelming too, engendering the kinds of desensitization, numbness, and withdrawal—what psychologists call "compassion fatigue"⁷—which mirror initial resistance and indifference to postcolonial texts. In anticipation of this phenomenon—and to render the issue transparent to students—I would facilitate class discussion and reflective writing on such issues. For example, we

could draw from Nair's introduction to the concept of postcolonial indifference and Zembylas on "bearing witness" and "inconsolable mourning" as means of understanding both characters within literary texts and our own difficult relationships with such texts. Though these philosophical stances may be challenging, they can provide students a nuanced understanding of what empathy, that vaguely defined *feeling for another*, might more usefully entail when encountering depictions of postcolonial trauma. Choosing to place themselves between the extremes of aversion and overidentification, students can make appropriately self-conscious approaches to their reading, rather than rely on instinctive, often emotional reactions alone. Last but certainly not least in combating compassion fatigue, I would also guide students to consider the depictions of joy and humor in our texts. Simply put, these stories capture fully human worlds that are not defined solely by grief and loss, and the authors' creative uses of language often convey a playfulness that coexists with the deeply felt human emotions of these stories. As I have done in this dissertation, considering the intimate, loving relationships in *The God of Small Things*, *The Map of Love*, *The Farming of Bones*, as well as other texts can help students see how postcolonial subjects can break with sorrow and embrace joy, even hope.

Choosing the final readings requires careful thought. Jamaica Kincaid's much-discussed *A Small Place*⁸ and Haunani-Kay Trask's collection of poetry *Light in the Crevice Never Seen* implicate not simply the American nation but the individual through the activity of tourism. As such, these short texts would provide potent takeaways for the course, applying the ideas of colonial discourse critique and postcolonial studies to the neocolonial world in which students live. Employing a non-fiction text here, such as

Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* (2012), would also be valuable. Boo's work offers depictions of "ordinary lives," ones she calls "neither mythic nor pathetic" but that, through this ordinariness, render something of the emotional depth and breadth of a postcolonial world (251, 249). Using Boo's narrative also allows for the class to discuss the questions of whether an outsider, particularly a Westerner, can write postcolonial literature and whether she can truly represent the lives of the Other. As a recent work, this book also reminds students that postcolonial realities are very much alive in our present world.

By exposing students to a variety of genres, including short fiction, novels, poetry, and non-fiction, I seek to engage students with the themes of postcolonial literature from different entry points. The authors of these works show a command of their chosen forms and a mastery of language that challenges existing bodies of canonical literary texts. But the authors challenge their genres, too, as I discuss regarding the three novels I study in this dissertation. For another example, *A Small Place* is hard to categorize but makes a remarkable statement about the Western postcolonial world. Kincaid's extended essay—a rolling, emotional fusion of hypothetical narration, personal experience, historical description, argument, and simultaneous appeal to the second-person perspective and alienation from it—creates a nontraditional narrative form, a new structure for housing her particular use of language that essentially defies any one label and allows the author to narrate herself and her stance into existence on her own terms. For all these unique aesthetic choices among the varied genres studied in this course, the proposed texts direct constant attention to key questions within postcolonial studies.

Class Assignments

My proposed assignments for this course reflect its goals and attempt to render something lasting, something of a carry-away that we cannot easily put down upon leaving the classroom. I would employ regular informal writings, both in class and as pre- and post-discussion work, in the spirit of what Phoebe Jackson calls “low-stakes writing.” In a similar vein, Mary Salibrici and Richard Salter suggest ungraded “hidden writing” that allows students to explore, without anxiety, the complicated, challenging textual transactions they experience as a result of difficult reading. Such prompts might include, for instance, asking students to identify a character with whom they are unable to ally themselves as expected and explore why this sympathetic failure occurs. Formal writing assignments including papers and essay exams would offer students opportunities to draw a certain definition of colonization into conversation with a chosen text, to apply their vocabulary on trauma to an extended analysis of a specific character, or to discuss how traditional patriarchal and religious culture complicates a postcolonial experience, for some examples. Through group work, such as that employed in Raja’s concept of the “Community Reading Project,” I envision students collaborating in research efforts to become the class experts on a certain primary text, providing critical context through articles they select for the whole class to read and discuss.

Finally, in something of a service-learning project, I would ask students to synthesize and extrapolate our work in the course to construct their own individual reading lists⁹ for a potential future postcolonial literature class—or, perhaps more practically, for an informal reading group—with rationales for their selections according to what they have learned and what they see as the priorities of postcolonial studies. By

calling “our students’ attention to the politics of reading and writing,” as Min-Zhan Lu identifies, we can “help them locate their decisions over what texts to read and how to read these texts in the context of the power struggle about conflicting cultures” (73).

When asked to guide and educate others, students make and justify their own pedagogical choices, applying their critical and ideological thinking—which has, we hope, been shaped by the content of the course—to a project that extends beyond and outside the classroom.

Conclusion¹⁰

Idealistic as the course I have described may be, I feel it is a reasonable rendering of the best of what postcolonial studies can offer in the literature classroom. Raja identifies truly effective postcolonial pedagogies as those that “nourish a global ethic of care” (33). I argue that our complicity, unintentional as it is, is one important factor that makes postcolonial literature a potential site to facilitate student engagement, that “ethic of care,” urging students to rewrite their positions and reinvest their stakes in a global society, as it were. Instead of fostering guilt, I see this as facilitating, perhaps renewing, a sense of responsibility to the cause of empathy. Though empathy itself, as Keen asserts, may not be proven to yield altruistic behaviors, perhaps a student’s sense of her preexisting involvement, really, *all of ours*, in global power structures can guide her to socially responsible action—or, at the least, to share what she’s read with others. By drawing on the important specificity of context as well as the potential insights that can be gained by exploring the connectedness of postcolonial texts, this proposed course reflects the scope and nature of my dissertation project, with three novels that depict the

potential to overturn postcolonial indifference—and the potential *within* that act—at its center.

Chapter 6 Notes

1. “Teaching the Postcolonial Text: Strategies and Interventions” 194.
2. “Organizing the Conflicts in the Curriculum” 132.
3. The practical application of this course may necessitate the scaling back of primary and secondary texts or being especially *selective* when choosing selections from postcolonial theorists and secondary sources.
4. In addition to the observations of Zembylas and other pedagogical scholars, my personal experiences as a graduate student and teaching intern speak to the difficulty of using *Disgrace* in the classroom. I observed students unable to articulate the nature of their discomfort with the novel’s themes (e.g. racism and misogyny). However, the predominant objection is to the idea of David Lurie as a protagonist with whom we are expected to ally ourselves. I’ve seen students wonder why their teacher expects them to sympathize with a rapist, and some students indict the novel for depicting rape at all, missing the ethical and philosophical difficulties that call attention to the complex world of post-apartheid South Africa. Their objections to Lurie’s character serve as a roadblock to engaging with the novel at any deeper level. A blog post I encountered titled “Required Reading: Disgrace” captures the nature of objections to *Disgrace* as a “rape-y” book; see <http://bitchmagazine.org/post/required-reading-disgrace-books-feminism>.
5. I draw here from Graff’s idea of “teaching the controversy,” outlined in his book *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* (1993).
6. As Wail S. Hassan and Mohammed Abdullah Hussein Muharram assert, works by Arabic writers have been virtually ignored within the formalized field of postcolonial

literature, as exemplified by such exclusion in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back*. Using *The Map of Love* in my course both addresses this issue and returns postcolonial theory to its roots, so to speak, when connected to the work of Said.

7. See, for example, Zembylas 233-34 and Pipino 177-78.

8. Aegerter ("A Pedagogy of Postcolonial Literature") and Frederick ("What If You're an 'Incredibly Unattractive, Fat, Pastrylike-fleshed Man'?": Teaching Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*") specifically discuss *A Small Place* as a difficult text to teach students.

9. See Karen Cardozo's "At the Museum of Natural Theory: The Experiential Syllabus (Or, What Happens When Students Act Like Professors)" for a similar concept in which students are asked, in groups, to construct a syllabus for an introduction to literature course and select readings based on their prioritized criteria.

10. See Appendix for a sample postcolonial literature course syllabus with weekly schedule for covering some of the readings I propose.

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Appendix

English 470
Idaho State University
Spring 2014

Course Name:	Postcolonial Literature
Course Credit:	Three (3) units
Instructor:	Kelly Meyer

Catalog Course Description:

- Study of post-colonial literary texts, with attention to the role of literature in history, political resistance, and social movements of one or more colonized cultures.

What this means in our class:

- In this course, we will consider the stories of those “writing back” to colonial rule, imperialism, and their legacies from a variety of locations and through both primary and secondary texts. Our overarching goal for the course is that students come to appreciate postcolonial literary texts in their capacity to help us reencounter the world and our place in it, becoming better world citizens as well as better critical readers and thinkers.

What does “postcolonial” mean?

- It would be difficult to pin down a hard line that demarcates the *before* and *after* of colonialism. More than simply coming *after* the era of colonialism, **postcolonialism** can be defined as an ongoing process of responding to colonialism from its onset through to our present day. The *post* in **postcolonial** can be interpreted as illustrative of a new world that is irrevocably changed *post* earliest colonial encounters.

Specific Goals for the Course:

Students will...

- 1) Understand the key concerns of postcolonial studies, learn important definitions within the field, and become familiar with the field’s origins, revisions, and complications.
- 2) Become knowledgeable of selected postcolonial theorists and theories and become versed in their application to primary texts.
- 3) Understand the complex historical, political, cultural, and social contexts of the primary texts.
- 4) Be exposed to texts that challenge the Western literary canon and the “master narrative” of history, leading to the appreciation of unofficial personal and collective histories that contribute to a more complex understanding of literature, culture, and history.

- 5) Explore and attempt to understand experiences of otherness; understand the emotional and psychological costs of colonialism, both personal and communal.
- 6) Understand the further implications of postcolonial critique in the present world.

Required Texts and Materials:

- Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*
- Aimé Césaire, *A Tempest*
- Edwidge Danticat, *The Farming of Bones*
- Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*
- Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place*
- Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*
- Ahdaf Soueif, *The Map of Love*
- Haunani-Kay Trask, *Light in the Crevice Never Seen*
- Additional readings posted to Moodle

Recommended Reading:

- Katherine Boo, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*

Grading Criteria:

In this course, students are expected to write complex, sophisticated essays in consideration of themes across multiple primary texts. Students will also be expected to make thoughtful contributions to class discussion based on critical reading and thinking.

Participation, Informal Writing, and Quizzes	15%
Paper 1	15%
Paper 2	15%
Paper 3	20%
Midterm Exam	10%
Final Exam	15%
Reading List Project	10%

Grading System:

English 470 is graded on the traditional A, B, C, D, F marking system.

A = 90% and above **B** = 80 to 89.9% **C** = 70 to 79.9% **D** = 60 to 69.9% **F** = below 60%

Note: This syllabus is subject to change at the discretion of the instructor.

Weekly Schedule for English 470 Postcolonial Literature

Note: Readings should be done by the class period for which they are listed, and additional reading assignments may be added throughout the semester. Brief in-class writing assignments and short quizzes will be given throughout the semester without notice.

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| Week 1 | Introduction to the course, the syllabus, and each other; brief introductory readings (Loomba, Said, and others)
<u>Questions to consider:</u> <i>What are colonialism and imperialism? What are postcolonialism and postcolonial literature?</i> |
| Week 2 | Readings from Moodle (Ryan and Conrad); <i>Things Fall Apart</i> and related essays
<u>Question to consider:</u> <i>What are some characteristics of early colonial encounters as seen in the novel?</i> |
| Week 3 | <i>Black Skin, White Masks</i> and other selected Fanon
<u>Question to consider:</u> <i>What is the psychological impact of colonialism and racism on those who are colonized and oppressed?</i> |
| Week 4 | Readings from Moodle (Said and McClintock); <i>The Map of Love</i> ; prepare for Paper 1
<u>Questions to consider:</u> <i>How is Soueif's use of form and language suited to a postcolonial world? How does gender complicate colonial and postcolonial experiences?</i> |
| Week 5 | Paper 1 due
<i>The Map of Love</i> continued; critical essays on the novel |
| Week 6 | Readings from Moodle (Herman, Caruth); <i>The Farming of Bones</i>
<u>Questions to consider:</u> <i>How is trauma portrayed in the novel? What are the emotional costs of a postcolonial existence as seen through Amabelle's narration?</i> |
| Week 7 | <i>The Farming of Bones</i> continued; critical essays on the novel; prepare for Midterm Exam |
| Week 8 | Midterm Exam |
| Week 9 | Readings from Moodle (Oliver); <i>The God of Small Things</i> ; prepare for Paper 2
<u>Questions to consider:</u> <i>What depictions of cruelty and trauma, both large and small, do we see in the novel? What elements of joy and humor also emerge? How does Roy's unique use of language and form affect our</i> |

reading and our engagement with the novel's themes?

- Week 10 **Paper 2 due**
The God of Small Things continued; critical essays on the novel
- Week 11 Spring Break (no classes)
- Week 12 *A Tempest*
Questions to consider: *How does Césaire transform Caliban? How does this revision draw Shakespeare's play into a postcolonial conversation?*
- Week 13 *A Tempest* continued; prepare for Paper 3
- Week 14 **Paper 3 due**
Light in the Crevice Never Seen and *A Small Place*
Questions to consider: *How do the authors implicate tourism in their chosen forms? What other postcolonial concerns and hopes do they portray?*
- Week 15 *Light in the Crevice Never Seen* and *A Small Place* continued; critical essays on teaching difficult texts; prepare for Final Exam
- Closed Week: Continue review for Final Exam
- Finals Week: **Final Exam**

Schedule is tentative and subject to change.
I will provide an updated schedule should any major changes occur.