

**NEGOTIATING THE SPACES OF ADULTERY: DOMESTICITY AND THE FEMINIST
ADULTERY NARRATIVE**

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the representation of spatiality in female adultery novels by women. I explore the ways in which the characters of female adulterers negotiate public and private space, and how adultery affects women's access and mobility in terms of domesticity and acceptable forms of femininity. I argue that in representation there are often multiple and conflicting spatial frameworks and that for women, negotiating these spaces can be a feminist act. I examine four novels within this framework that all deal with female adultery and spatiality—*Possession* by A.S. Byatt, *Other Women* by Evelyn Lau, *Written on the Body* by Jeanette Winterson, and *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali. There is an anxiety present in these narratives concerning the ways that public and private space inter-relate and the gendered body negotiates that space. This anxiety is represented in these texts as a spectral presence - in terms of ghosts, haunting, or a warning of what is to come. The repetition and reproduction of this anxiety binds the narratives to a repressive and sexist literary tradition where Victorian values linger in the lives of the characters, their actions, and the spaces that they occupy; the female adulterers' narrative spaces remain haunted by their literary forbears.

The feminist negotiation of space in these adultery narratives is undermined through the creation of binaries—the presence and repetition of a failed domesticity suggests that there may be a successful way to produce domesticity—a model that cannot include the female adulterer. Further, failed domesticity and women's relationship to public and private space, especially in relation to marriage, can be linked to literary constructions of feminine respectability. The female adulterer becomes a site for all of these conflicts, contradictions, and anxieties and her relationship to spatiality becomes key for understanding her narrative function in a feminist literary canon. I argue that she is a feminist figure because her negotiation of space actually reveals the extent to which women are still limited by patriarchal discourses that espouse

heteronormative constructions of marriage, fidelity, and family as the only socially acceptable and viable norms for women.

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I

INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation I examine the representation of spatiality in some contemporary adultery novels by women. I explore the ways in which the characters of female adulterers negotiate space with a focus on the dynamics between public and private space and the history of women's association with these spaces in terms of property, marriage and domesticity. In "Gender and Colonial Space" Sara Mills analyzes "the gendered nature of colonial space" through an exploration of how women understand their "position[s] within spatial frameworks" (692). Mills seeks to explore how men and women negotiate space in the context of their "respective social positions" (694), suggesting that we occupy "many social spaces negotiated within one geographical space and time" (693). Mills explores gender and representational space beyond the contention that confinement (in opposition to mobility) is a defining factor for women and an inherent factor in the ways in which women can position or define themselves. I want to assert, as Mills does, that in representation there are often multiple and conflicting spatial frameworks and that for women, negotiating these spaces - in the form of confinement, transgression, disruption - can constitute a feminist act. The texts examined here all deal with female adultery and spatiality and I identify some interrelated themes that are present in each novel and that relate to spatiality and adultery in the larger context of gendered notions of public and private space. First, there is an anxiety present in these texts concerning the ways that public and private space inter-relate and the ways that gendered and colonized bodies negotiate those spaces. Second, this discomfort is represented in these texts as a spectral presence - in terms of ghosts, haunting, or a warning of what is to come. The ways that the female adulterers in these narratives negotiate space may, in themselves, constitute feminist acts. However, the repetition and reproduction of this anxiety concerning public and private inter-relations binds the narratives

to a limited and sexist literary tradition where the decay of the Victorian, in terms of the construction and traditions of feminine purity, lingers in the lives of the characters, their actions, and the space they occupy; the female adulterers' narrative spaces remain haunted by their literary forbears. A feminist negotiation of space is undermined through the creation of binaries—the presence and repetition of a failed domesticity suggests that there may be a successful way to produce domesticity—a model that traditionally cannot include the female adulterer. Finally, failed domesticity and women's relationship to public and private space, especially in relation to marriage, can be linked to literary constructions of feminine respectability, which is especially important for narratives that discuss the role of motherhood in relation to femininity and domesticity. The female adulterer, then, becomes a site for all of these conflicts, contradictions, and anxieties and her relationship to spatiality becomes key for understanding her narrative function in a contemporary feminist literary canon. Through an analysis of the female adulterer from a feminist perspective, I will trace the ways in which she has persisted in literature from her representation in the nineteenth century to her contemporary incarnations. The female adulterer is a feminist figure in contemporary literature, but not because she successfully redefines space and mobility in the texts. Rather, as I will show, she is a feminist figure because her negotiation of space reveals the extent to which women are still limited by patriarchal discourses that espouse heteronormative constructions of marriage, fidelity, and family as the only socially acceptable and viable norms for women.

Adultery narratives have a long history in many literary traditions, especially in Europe and North America and much has been written about them. In this dissertation, I explore the particular construction of the female adulterer that became pervasive in Victorian literature, and how this resonates in contemporary adultery narratives. However, I am not focusing on specific Victorian texts, but rather on the ways in which Victorian constructions of marriage, domesticity

and adultery haunt contemporary texts. While there have also been many studies of adultery in nineteenth-century literature that focus on women and female adultery, there have been few feminist approaches to the subject, especially in terms of why the female adulterer has persisted in literature. I will be concentrating on four twentieth- and twenty first-century novels of female adultery that I consider to be feminist—either in the ways that the characters negotiate space within the text, or in the ways that their actions reveal the deep-rooted patriarchal structures that can be negotiated but not necessarily transgressed. The novels—A.S Byatt’s *Possession* (1990), Evelyn Lau’s *Other Women* (1995), Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body* (1992), and Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003)—all have female adulterers as central characters.

My definition of the female adulterer is developed from some of the major comprehensive studies of female adultery in nineteenth-century literature, particularly Tony Tanner’s *Adultery in the Novel* and Bill Overton’s *The Novel of Female Adultery* and *Fictions of Female Adultery*. Both Tanner and Overton discuss the ways in which adultery is an act that is usually constructed as a transgression of marriage and family. They also agree that most literary representations of adultery focus on women and women’s sexual transgressions—as the moral centre of the family, women were also burdened with bearing the responsibility of this transgression. However, as Tanner notes, the specific act of transgressing the marriage contract and what constitutes adultery can often be hard to categorize, especially when it comes to women (12). Overton’s later work revises his concept of female adultery and renames it wifely adultery in order to describe what he considers to be the central plot and definition of the most common type of adultery novel (3). He suggests that although adultery plays different roles in different narratives—such as novels of prostitution, novels about mistresses, and other fallen women narratives—female/wifely adultery narratives have a specific formula: “Each is based on a plot in which, with minor variations, a married woman from the middle or upper classes is seduced by an unmarried man of the same

class and comes to grief" (Overton, *Fictions of Female Adultery* 3-4). Not only is this the most common form of adultery narrative, it also emphasizes the gendered "moral and ideological consequence[s]" of adultery in socio-political and cultural contexts (3-4).

Tanner agrees that there can be some confusion in the category of female adulterer and what she represents:

Lover, mistress, whore—no matter how each may suffer from being thus categorized—are all at least recognized as having an existence and a definition that is not incompatible with the social terminology and economy in which they live.... *Adulteress* points to an activity, not an identity; an unfaithful wife, and usually by implication a bad mother, is an unassimilable conflation of what society insists should be separate categories and functions. The wife and the mother in one set of social circumstances should not, and cannot be, the mistress and lover in another. (12).

Although I disagree that "adulteress" points to an activity and not an identity, Tanner makes the point that women, especially in bourgeois societies, are expected to conform to "unitary roles" (13). The female adulterer challenges these narrow roles that women are expected to follow and in contemporary adultery narratives these roles are exposed as socially constructed and unattainable ideals. The female adulterer, then, is traditionally a middle- or upper-class married woman who transgresses marriage with an unmarried middle- or upper-class man. Other forms of sexual and marital transgressions such as becoming a mistress and prostitution usually involve working-class women who are not held to the same standards as bourgeois wives and mothers; their transgressions are not considered valid as they do not hold the same cultural weight due to their class. However, as I explore later on, narratives that do include other forms of female sexual transgression *do* hold women to the same standards when it comes to normative discourses of

heterosexuality, femininity, and domesticity. In particular, I explore the mistress as an important figure in adultery narratives because she destabilizes marriage in similar ways to the adulterous wife but, traditionally, she is not held in the same moral or social regard as the wife and therefore her actions do not have the same consequences. In this way, it is also easier for her character to become disposable in traditional narratives. However, in contemporary adultery narratives the mistress is not necessarily of a lower class and does not always fit comfortably into the common stereotype of the “kept woman.” In these cases, she becomes an interesting character to consider in the category of female adultery because she may not bear the same moral burden of the wife, but she is held to the same standards when it comes to socially acceptable forms of feminine respectability.

This dissertation, then, explores four novels that each have different constructions of the female adulterer, a term that here includes the mistress and the married woman. Christabel LaMotte in *Possession* lives in a domestic partnership with another woman and has an affair with a married man; Christabel can be seen as a mistress and an adulterous wife. In *Other Women*, Fiona is an unmarried woman involved in an affair with a married man. In some ways, she is the stereotype of a mistress, but she is not of a lower class and is not “kept” by her lover. *Written on the Body* also plays with the stereotype of the mistress and the lover in this text is genderless. Louise, the female adulterer, is married and having an affair with an unnamed narrator who betrays a domestic partnership to be with Louise. Finally, *Brick Lane*, has the most conventional construction of female adultery: Nazneen is married with children and has an affair with a younger, unmarried man. In terms of class, these four novels seem, at first, to fit the standard trope: men and women of the same class transgressing marriage where the women are held responsible for the affairs. However, as Overton stated, the character of the female adulterer and adultery itself can signify something different for each narrative and, in these novels, so can

class. Class takes on very different meanings in each narrative but is always inextricably linked to gendered notions of space and women's mobility and agency in public and private space.

Feminism and Space

The issue of space has always been a fundamental and complex aspect of feminist theory, feminist literary criticism, and the women's movement in general. Women's relationship to space, in terms of gender, race, class and sexuality is central to many key feminist analyses, especially women's relationship to public and private space. Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose suggest that western feminism has long been concerned with the ways in which space is "central to both masculinist power and to feminist resistance" (1). Blunt and Rose discuss the "'social map' of patriarchy" that determines the behaviour of men and women, allows for spaces to be constructed in terms of masculine or feminine, and genders the activities within those spaces accordingly: "[g]ender difference was thus seen as inscribing spatial difference" (1). Gendered spaces, then, became defined according to a division of public and private space—where the private, or domestic, space was seen as the realm of women and the public was associated with men, the realm of politics, culture and economy (2).¹ As Blunt and Rose point out, the "social construction of gender differences establishes some spaces as women's and others as men's; those meanings then serve to reconstitute the power relations of gendered identity" (3).

The dichotomy between public and private space and the gendering of these spaces has

¹ In feminist discourse the term domesticity is often used to describe the limited mobility and social expectations that kept women in the home space and associated them with "housework." The notion of domesticity that developed over the course of the women's movement associates women with nurture, child-rearing, housekeeping, cooking etc. and has come to be associated with the idea of the fifties housewife who was supposed to aspire to being the feminine ideal of housekeeper, wife and mother (as discussed by Betty Friedan in her groundbreaking feminist text *The Feminine Mystique*). However, as discussed later on, the notion of separate spheres that took shape in the nineteenth century was much more of an ideology based on class. Bourgeois women were supposed to uphold the ideal of the perfect private and domestic life and to hold themselves as morally superior to working-class women. Ironically, middle-class women would have had servants to fulfill many of the domestic duties associated with ideal femininity - middle-class women ran the household and were meant to be icons of domestic virtue and purity but it was working-class women who would actually fulfill all the roles of the domestic ideal as we now understand it.

been central to many western feminist debates, especially in terms of women's access to public spaces, education, employment, child custody, motherhood, marriage and property issues. Historians have focused on the ideological distinction between the two spheres, looking at how the social order, particularly in terms of class, affects the shaping and gendering of these spaces (Higonnet & Templeton 3), while literary critics explore the connection between the social ordering of public and private and the privileging of the domestic in writing by women (Lloyd & O'Brien xix). In fact, Carole Pateman suggests that "the dichotomy between the private and the public is central to almost two centuries of feminist struggle; it is, ultimately, what the feminist movement is about" (qtd in Blunt & Rose 3).

However, as Blunt and Rose point out, recent feminist criticism suggests that the dichotomy between public and private is more important for some women's lives than others and "thus that the struggles over the public and private are typical not of all feminisms but rather of particular kinds of feminism" (3). And, I would argue, of a particular class of women. Of interest to this study is the division between public and private space that was identified by feminist historians as emerging in the nineteenth century in Europe and North America with the development of a middle-class ideology that caused anxiety about women's roles in family, marriage, and property issues. Legal, moral and social structures aimed to produce the private sphere as the "natural" realm for women during this era with more urgency than before (Gamble 218). However, the nineteenth century was also a time when feminism began to take shape and women began to question their roles and rights, especially in regards to marriage. In Britain in the nineteenth century Caroline Norton was one of the first women to publicly challenge the way that the law treated women in divorce and custody cases and her own legal battles were instrumental in the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 that allowed British women easier access to

divorce.² Further, the nineteenth century saw many more women enter the public sphere as activists for women's rights especially in Britain and the United States. Victorian women, particularly single women, began to seek economic independence and access to employment, leading to many social and legislative changes and providing women with alternatives to marriage and motherhood in the domestic sphere, while women in the United States were fighting for women's rights alongside the fight to abolish slavery (Sanders 20-23). As feminist determination to support women's presence in the public sphere increased, it clashed with the ideal of the expanding middle class, a middle class that placed a great importance on particular models of familial relations and demanded that women remain at home, especially in Victorian England. As Karen Chase and Michael Levenson argue, the space of the home, with a focus on the private interior, was designed to keep the public world out: "Victorian domesticity was as much a spatial as an affective obsession. Increasingly, to imagine a flourishing private life was to articulate space, to secure boundaries, and to distribute bodies" (144). Women were responsible for maintaining the sanctity and purity of the home but they were also the bodies that were distributed and controlled by the ideology of separate spheres; the burdens of the domestic space and what it signified culturally lay mostly on women, especially middle- and upper-class women.

Much of this struggle played out in the pages of literature, and many of the anxieties around women were of particular interest to women writers and, in turn, feminist literary critics. The pressure to maintain a preferred model of the perfect family fell to the "womanly woman" who is "powerfully present, as a standard for judging by" with "extreme emotional sensitivity,

² Norton was active in fighting for her own (and other's) rights when it came to divorce and child custody. Her struggles, public legal battles, letter-writing campaigns, pamphlet publishing, and subsequent novel writing, all highlight the injustices that women faced in court and the lack of legal rights women had in regards to child custody, filing for divorce, and property rights. Her voice was instrumental in the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act in England that gave women easier access to divorce and marked the beginning of gradual changes for women in terms of marriage. For more information on Caroline Norton and the Matrimonial Causes Act see Karen Chase & Michael Levenson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family* (Princeton University Press, 2000), Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (University of Chicago Press, 1988), and Caroline Norton, *Lost & Saved* (Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1988).

weakness of intellect, unlimited selflessness, and, crucially, a lack of ‘animal’ passion” (Ingham 22). Focusing on Victorian England, Patricia Ingham points out that there were also class implications for this construction of the “womanly woman” as the social construction of the middle class required an essential difference between middle- and lower-class women (20-22). The distinction between private and public spaces was also heightened in terms of class because the notion of separate spheres was not an issue for working-class women who worked outside of the home and whose access to these spaces was gained on different terms. Ingham also explores how many of these debates over women’s agency were reproduced in literature and suggests that literature played an important role in inscribing and reinforcing these ideas about women: “the attempts to reaccent the signs of both the *womanly* and the *fallen* woman succeeded in rewriting their significance” (20). Ingham places the focus on sexuality and desire—middle-class femininity was virtuous and chaste, upholding the purity and values of the family and written in contrast to the deviant, transgressive sexuality of the lower-class woman, the prostitute, the fallen woman, and, most importantly for this study, the mistress and the female adulterer.

It is important to note here that there has been much debate over the actual reality of separate spheres. In *Apartment Stories*, Sharon Marcus suggests that in the nineteenth century, the notion of separate spheres is an ideology that has more to do with the ways that theorists, historians and critics have interpreted the role of the public and private in social life than the reality of how men and women actually lived. She is skeptical about the hegemonic nature of contemporary theories about the division between public and private space. By refusing to collapse the political, the construction of gender, and the organization of space, what she calls “theoretically autonomous domains” (7), Marcus draws attention to the variable and tenuous nature of the split between spheres. Marcus, instead, encourages an exploration of the “domains of politics, gender, and space as theoretically distinct and the relationship between their

categorical terms as historically variable” (8). This analysis provides a means to complicate our understanding of the public/private split and to emphasize that it was an ideal that some men and women in the nineteenth century struggled to aspire to and that has been used, by feminist theorists particularly, as a means to emphasize gender oppression in contemporary comprehensible terms. Therefore, while the general social and cultural climate of the nineteenth century may have encouraged some women to stay at home for a number of reasons, Marcus reminds us that there are many instances that trouble this reading especially in terms of class and the organization of architecture and space.

It is important, then, to understand the notion of separate spheres in the nineteenth century, not as something definitive but as an ideology that was reinforced in gendered terms, that shifts over time, and is both challenged and reinforced by women’s participation and role in social life. Rita Felski suggests that the notion of separate spheres undermines women’s roles in the shaping of social change and that many nineteenth-century texts “revealed a profound awareness of the conflicts and crises engendered by processes of modernization” (145). It is equally important for this study to acknowledge that, in this context, women were faced with a double burden. While women were beginning to participate in feminist activities and act as agents of social change in terms of issues such as suffrage, child custody rights, and property rights, they were also being viewed in terms of a nostalgia for the past. Therefore, women were often constructed as scapegoats for the anxieties that were produced by these “processes of modernization.” As Bruce Robbins points out in the introduction to *The Phantom Public Sphere*, women’s power and agency cannot be measured by their exclusion or access to the public - to what was considered “proper” society: “their placement on the public/private axis and their power to affect their destiny are complicated by their activities in the market, which is at least potentially a site of hidden, new, controversial, or otherwise interesting publicness” (xiv).

Robbins uses the examples of women as voters and as consumers: women with agency in their public lives. As well, Felski points out that the figure of the prostitute so common in late nineteenth-century representation is not just a commodity, but also an agent in the public sphere (47). Much of the anxiety around performing what Felski calls “bourgeois individualism” was felt by men who were allowed the privilege of being in the public sphere and participating in social life without the burden of being represented in terms of the multiple and contradictory discourses that women faced. While men faced many of the same troubles as women when it came to negotiating social change at the turn of the century, they still maintained the privileges of power in ways that women did not—a power that may, as Felski, Marcus and others point out, be shifted and challenged by images and representations of women’s participation in public and social life, but is often also reinforced by these images.

Felski makes this point well in her discussion of what she calls “cultural cross-dressing” in late nineteenth-century narratives where men became fascinated with feminine aesthetics and women appropriated masculinist discourse (154). However, the male fascination with the feminine came in the form of a nostalgia for and an essentialist identification of women with a more natural and authentic “unity,” closer to nature and outside of the “subject-object dualism” that defines the shift to modernity and capitalism (146). As well, we see representations of women and sexuality that “defined the feminine as emblematic of, rather than opposed to the modern” (147). These representations also revealed the ways in which changing cultural mores allowed for a heightened sense of the aesthetic, erotic and non-rational elements of social life and the ambiguous boundary between public and private when it came to desire (147). These images—prostitutes, female performers, women as consumers—are representative of the ways in which women were participating in the public sphere: what Kathy Peiss calls “extradomestic activities” (818). But, they are also constructed within misogynist and essentialist frameworks

that posit women's bodies as sites for the anxieties of the age. While this anxiety, most often, came in the form of representations that associated women's desire and sexuality with disease, corruption and destruction of the home, these images also point to the ambiguous boundaries that separate the spheres when it comes to gender and expose the artifice of the emerging commodification of social life (Felski 147-148). The prostitute is the ultimate symbol of this commodification and she also symbolizes modernity's great contradiction - she represents the difficult coexistence of the unease with emerging forms of desire and eroticism and the exhilarating freedom that came with these changes. The prostitute becomes a site for all the concerns about modernity, femininity and sexuality.³ She may be demonized and represent female sexuality as a form of "cultural disorder" but her sexuality—and all forms of erotic life that were being expressed with the blurring of the boundary between public and private—is "a product of the modern social conditions that it simultaneously threatens to undermine" (Felski 148).⁴

This feminine aesthetic that men were taking up at the turn-of-the century may have been a way to address women's emerging presence in the public sphere but it also, ultimately, reinforced the notion that this presence was threatening especially in terms of sexuality. However, women also faced anxieties of their own when it came to representation. As Felski points out, representation was one of the few places where women's access to the public space could be seen and the boundary between public and private became blurred (149). She notes that women were producing many different types of writing in the late nineteenth century but that the most revealing were utopian fiction and non-fiction writing such as essays and pamphlets: "the emancipation of women [in essays and utopic fiction] is presented as inseparably linked to their movement into the workplace and the public sphere" (151). As well, she suggests that, like

³ Felski is not suggesting that prostitution itself is new or an invention of modernity, but that the figure of the prostitute became a public symbol, a cultural marker who embodied the notion of the new but also became a scapegoat for the anxiety that these changes brought.

⁴ In her essay "The Gender of Modernity" Felski discusses the demonizing of female sexuality through the image of the prostitute, the emergence of a public erotic aesthetic in the nineteenth century, and the notion of women in the public sphere as consumers through an analysis of Emile Zola's novel, *Nana*.

male representations of women, women's writing also contained conflicting images that highlight their own struggle with the changes at the turn of the century and also raise awareness about the ways in which they were being represented, and scapegoated, by men. These writings by women emphasize their frustration with being middle-class subjects who were both products and victims of the changing social climate at the turn-of-the-century. Their presence in the public sphere was most often represented in terms of corruption of the family, greedy consumers, and dangerous sexuality (as with images of prostitutes). As well, much women's work that constituted "feminine" skills was being replaced by growing industrialization and technology.⁵ With the ever-present burden of maintaining proper respectable femininity and domesticity, preferably in the home, it was no wonder that women felt the pressure of the changing social rules, rules in which they were only beginning to have agency. However, as Felski points out, there was also the image of the New Woman often present in late nineteenth-century texts putting forth the spectre of feminism that was to take shape over the next few years (151).⁶ Here, Felski suggests that women writers took up the masculinist discourse and constructed themselves as full subjects, symbols of modernity, agents of social change (151). Feminism was becoming a reality that challenged the notion of public and private spheres and contributed to the overall anxiety of the changing social climate. As Felski says: "Women's positioning at the margins of the social and public world meant that their appropriation of existing ideals of progress and equality had potentially threatening implications in challenging the authority of traditional sex roles" (152).

The nineteenth century is an important subject for feminist literary studies, not just

⁵ In *The Victorian House*, Judith Flanders explains that with industrial and technological changes, work that was previously done by women of both the lower and middle classes in the home, was being moved outside of the domestic sphere. Middle-class women found themselves increasingly separated from their husbands' labour and "became solely housekeepers" (xxii).

⁶ The New Woman was a term that emerged in the 1890s to describe middle-class women's discontent with the domestic ideology that encouraged them to stay at home as wives and mothers (Gamble 283). The "New Woman" demanded the right to education, economic independence, and sexual autonomy; she is epitomized by popular images of women participating in "unfeminine" behaviour such as smoking cigarettes and riding bicycles (Gamble 283). She was a popular figure in much late nineteenth-century literature - for more information on New Woman in literature see *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siecle* by Sally Ledger (St. Martins, 1997) and *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siecle* by Elaine Showalter (Viking, 1990).

because of the frustrations and growing restlessness of nineteenth-century women, but because, as Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert point out, it was the first era in which women writers were not marginalized as an anomaly. They argue that women were “literally and figuratively confined” by the physical spaces that they occupied and by the literary constructs that restricted them to male-authored literary traditions and histories (xi). The nineteenth century, then, was a time when women were not only beginning to resist the ways in which they may have felt pressured to remain in the domestic sphere, but also to write about the anxieties that their presence in the public sphere engendered. As Gilbert and Gubar suggest, “the sexual ideology of the era was in many ways particularly oppressive, confining women ... to the ‘Private House’ ... but on the other hand, its aesthetic and political imperatives were especially inspiring, engendering not just a range of revolutionary movements but some of the richest productions of the female imaginary” (xxxix). What is of importance to this study is the fact that the sexual ideology, the aesthetic and political imperatives, the ways that women were oppressed and resisted oppression, can all be connected and explored through an analysis of space in literature, especially adultery novels. The anxiety of an era is present in the spaces of literature and it is possible to “trace the ways writers inscribe gender onto the symbolic representations of space within texts, whether through images of physical confinement, of exile and exclusions, of property and territoriality, or of the body as the interface between individual and communal identities” (Higonnet 2).

The Spaces and Faces of Adultery

Why choose the notion of space as a theoretical framework to explore adultery? And, why adultery in the first place? In her 2003 study, *Against Love: A Polemic*, Laura Kipnis suggests that “anywhere the commitment to monogamy reigns, adultery provides its structural

transgression” (15). Adultery is a pervasive theme in one of the most influential forms of cultural representation—literature. It has been a prominent theme in everything from the Bible and ancient mythologies from around the world to mainstream contemporary culture and politics. And, while women are usually the central focus of adultery narratives—real and imagined—there has been relatively little feminist scholarship on the subject of women’s relationship to the representation of adultery and the ways in which adultery narratives reproduce an anxiety about women, marriage, respectable femininity and domesticity. As a literary critic and a feminist, I take a feminist approach to reading representations of adultery and I believe that this can be facilitated through an analysis of space and how women negotiate such space in adultery narratives and what limits there may be to this negotiation.

The basis for an analysis of space starts with what I call the “spaces of adultery” - spaces where the actual adultery takes place - such as hotels, restaurants, movie theatres, etc. , that are set up in direct contrast to domestic or marital spaces (in adultery narratives the notions of domestic spaces and marital spaces are often collapsed).⁷ There are also the spaces in between - cabs, cars, elevators, hotel lobbies, etc. - that move and stand between the “spaces of adultery” and complicate traditional notions of public and private space and issues of marital property.⁸

While many feminist critics writing about the nineteenth century have used multiple social discourses to explore the representation of women and by women in the nineteenth century, in general feminist perspectives on women and adultery have largely been absent.

However, discussions of female sexual transgression that include the female adulterer have been

⁷ The actual act of adultery is most often defined as sexual intercourse where one or both parties are married to other people. However, in the four novels that I am discussing, adultery is not always clearly linked to sex; sexual intercourse may not be a given but is often assumed in adultery narratives. While infidelity, betrayal of marriage, or cheating may be better terms here, I choose to use adultery. The term adultery implies a direct relationship to marriage which, in turn, is connected to social constructions of domesticity. As much of my argument about adultery focuses on the ways in which it destabilizes marriage and domestic discourses, I use the term adultery.

⁸ The notion of the “spaces of adultery” emerged during my research for my MA thesis entitled: *Deconstructing the Other Woman: Evelyn Lau and the Feminist Adulterer*. This dissertation takes up those ideas more fully and explores the theoretical aspects of space and adultery more thoroughly.

the subject of literary and feminist criticism, particularly as part of analyses of the fallen woman. For example, Lynda Nead discusses the fallen woman in Victorian painting and focuses on that ways in which female adultery has been represented as a form of female deviancy; Amanda Anderson explores the cultural rhetoric of fallen women and focuses her attention on prostitution, and Nina Auerbach writes about the paradigms of womanhood in the Victorian cultural imagination. The term “fallen woman” is often used to describe a woman whose sexual or romantic transgressions are exposed and who is subsequently shamed by society. Her fate is usually unpleasant—exile from her community, death (usually by suicide), madness or other illnesses—she is punished for defying the social and sexual mores of bourgeois society. Amanda Anderson suggests that the term fallen woman can be considered as an umbrella term, “the designation cuts across class lines and signifies a complex of tabooed behaviours and degraded conditions” (2). Although she focuses mostly on prostitutes in the nineteenth century, Anderson applies the term more fluidly to encompass not only prostitutes, but “unmarried women who engage in sexual relations with men, victims of seduction, adulteresses, as well as variously delinquent lower-class women” (2).

Anderson, Lynda Nead, Bill Overton and others use the term adulteress. I prefer the term female adulterer, the term that most resonates with the identification of female adultery as a literary genre and a term that I feel is more inclusive when including the mistress within the definition of female adultery. Adulteress suggests a married woman and, as I discuss later, my analysis includes the mistress and her role in adultery narratives—the term female adultery includes women who transgress the boundary of marriage but who may not be married themselves. Although the mistress and the female adulterer are both considered fallen women according to Anderson, I want to distinguish them in terms of their relationship to marriage. The terms female adultery and adulteress are both gendered, but while I am discussing women’s

relationship to adultery, I also discuss the importance of the act of adultery, its consequences, its relation to marriage, property, family and heteronormative discourses. Adulteress not only elides male participation in adultery, it focuses on the female figure rather than the act - while this may be relevant to nineteenth-century representations, I choose to move away from this term and use the terms female adulterer and female adultery.

While Lynda Nead and Amanda Anderson both talk about the female adulterer as a fallen woman, I want to distinguish the female adulterer from this category. As Anderson points out, the rhetoric of the fallen woman takes on a life of its own in the late nineteenth century and I think that female adultery does too. Both Anderson and Nead discuss the ways in which the fallen woman embodies the threat and fear that female sexuality posed in the Victorian period, especially in terms of its emergence in public. Public expressions of sexuality were seen to be in conflict with Victorian notions of respectable femininity and domesticity. As previously discussed, the anxiety about women's participation in public life in the nineteenth century was evident in the ways that women were represented and how women represented themselves. As Anderson discusses, there are many women who are included under the umbrella of "fallen women." Many of these relationships could be considered adulterous relationships. For example, the prostitute is an interesting figure to discuss in terms of adultery because she fulfills the sexual obligations of the wife but does not require the "maintenance" of a relationship that a mistress may demand; she does not actively transgress marriage and, arguably, she could be a welcome relief to a wife. In this way, she may actually stabilize marriage. Other fallen women, such as the young, seduced woman, also have adulterous relationships but in these narratives the naivety and innocence of the woman is maintained and she is often morally redeemable in ways that the mistress and female adulterer are not. Thus, while there are many other interesting and valid adulterous relationships within the category of fallen women I am focusing on the female

adulterer and the mistress.

The difference between Anderson's and Nead's analyses of the fallen woman is how they define the fall in terms of class and public and private space. Anderson's argument crosses class lines and the figure of the prostitute figures highly in her analysis of fallenness. Nead, on the other hand, analyzes the notion of respectable femininity and suggests that the very concept of "falling" means that there was a place to fall from, in this case, being a member of respectable society (Anderson 2). Nead's analysis of the fall from respectable femininity relegates the fallen woman to her domestic role and her relationship to heterosexual constructions of family and marriage - she discusses notions of illegitimacy, the contamination of the family, child custody, divorce and so on (48-53). Sexual transgression is the key to these contaminations. While Anderson acknowledges that the fallen woman is constructed in terms of sexuality, she wants to incorporate this into an argument about how this figure, especially the prostitute, represents a threat to Victorian notions of autonomy and selfhood (47). She says:

I argue that fallenness should be understood principally in relation to a normative masculine identity seen to possess the capacity for autonomous action, enlightened rationality, and self-control. This argument raises the question of how fallenness fits into the broader opposition between masculine and feminine identity in Victorian culture, an opposition most powerfully expressed in the doctrine of the separate spheres. (13)

In her refusal to define the category of "fallen woman" in terms of sexuality, her analysis troubles the ways in which female sexuality is constructed and also the public/private split as the prostitute is very much a public figure exposing society's most private act (15).

The female adulterer is a complex figure and, as Anderson suggests, interrogates the category of fallenness in interesting ways. She is not only a challenge to the ideology of public

and private spheres, domesticity, and respectable femininity, she is also problematic for emerging feminists in the nineteenth century as she is ultimately a woman who subverts traditional gender norms but does so often at the expense of another woman and perhaps children. She was, and remains today, a difficult feminist subject and her complexities *do* work within the rhetoric of fallenness but also need to be explored and analyzed as a separate category.

This is especially true for one of the major questions about the fallen woman - whether or not she is redeemable. In most nineteenth-century representations, women who “fall” from virtue can never be returned to “proper” society. Nead suggests that in most forms of female sexual deviancy, and especially with the female adulterer, the fall was permanent and although there was the possibility of some kind of reclamation of the previous life, the “fallen” identity was absolute and the effects of her sexual “deviancy” were permanent (49-50). However, while the fallen woman may be irredeemable in terms of moral character and social currency, there are many instances where her punishment is not absolute - that is, she does not die, by her own hand or otherwise, at the end of the narrative. For example, Anderson discusses the role of sympathy in representations of fallenness and Sally Mitchell discusses the ways in which strict Victorian moral codes allowed for constructions of seduced women, women who fall due to victimization at the hands of men and may be forgiven, but not redeemed. Mitchell also points out that the fallen woman’s redemption is often decided by class—the lower-class fallen woman was frequently forgiven because she was judged according to different social standards and moral codes - her motives and actions can be justified as part of her class and her purity does not matter (63). Overton actually makes a distinction between the treatment of the fallen woman and the female adulterer suggesting that the fallen woman is, ultimately, redeemable as her act of transgression is usually a result of corrupted innocence rather than a conscious acting on her own desire. He addresses the different punishments that women faced in adultery narratives compared to fallen

women narratives, stating that female adulterers were more likely to be killed off as their final punishment and that men were rarely, if ever, held accountable for any sexual transgressions in nineteenth-century literature.

In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy, Tess, the protagonist, becomes pregnant after she is raped by Alec. She returns to her family and gives birth, but her child dies. She attempts to start a new life, free from the label of "fallen woman," but ultimately she is unsuccessful: the man she loves and eventually marries abandons her when he learns of her past, she ends up penniless, is forced to live as a mistress to the man who raped her, and is eventually hanged for murder. Tess is a fallen woman because of the actions of a man who is not held responsible—she has limited control over her circumstances, especially as a working-class woman, and although Alec is responsible for her "fall," she must face the consequences alone. Hardy's narrative represents the fate of many fallen women in literature - tragic lives that are filled with shame, guilt and remorse and that ultimately end in early death. Hardy makes his readers aware that Tess is a victim of circumstance and a victim of male privilege. But while we can feel sorry for her, Hardy's narrative suggests that she is only partially redeemable; she is still not permitted to survive because, willingly or not, she has committed the ultimate transgression: adultery. Another example is George Eliot's *Adam Bede* where Hetty Sorrel is seduced, becomes pregnant, and is abandoned by her lover. When Hetty's baby dies of exposure, she is sentenced to death. Saved at the last minute by the man who impregnated her, Hetty's sentence is reduced and she is exiled from the community. Again, the fallen woman is depicted as a young, naive woman whose innocence is corrupted at the hands of a philandering man, making the fall inevitable. Although Hetty may be seen as a victim she is only partly redeemable because she can never return to her community. There, she will always be a fallen woman and a murderer but perhaps she can be redeemed elsewhere. Unlike Tess, Hetty's innocence is maintained throughout the novel; she

does not actually transgress marriage and she survives. Both Eliot and Hardy draw their readers' attention to the unfair treatment of women and the double standards that they faced when it came to adultery. However, while their narratives may be critical, they are also representative of the ways that many fallen women were depicted.

With most fallen women, the taboo of transgressing marriage and family has not been overtly or willingly crossed. The female adulterer, however, consciously acts on her own desire and transgresses marriage. Her connection to marriage means that she can never be redeemed and this is something that has not changed in twentieth-century representations of adultery. It is clear from feminist analyses that the fate of any woman in nineteenth-century literature who transgresses the social sexual boundary is unpleasant. As Maria Rippon points out, these women are "punished for their differences, for their failure to abide by the codes of the herd, of society proper" (xii). While the treatment of female adulterers, fallen women and prostitutes in literature are all interconnected and have been studied by feminist critics such as Lynda Nead, Sally Mitchell, and Amanda Anderson, female adultery deserves focused attention. The figure of the female adulterer has evolved and persisted in contemporary literature in ways that other fallen women have not. The other women described by Anderson as being under the umbrella of fallenness no longer hold the same cultural, moral or literary weight that they did in the nineteenth century. Despite the growing number of "chick lit" and "mommy lit" novels being produced, there is no longer a moral urgency or shock value involved with a narrative about the typical Victorian fallen woman: a young woman who is seduced, impregnated and abandoned. Female adulterers, however, do still have cultural weight and their persistent presence needs further exploring.

The role of the mistress in adultery narratives, with the mistress usually a young, unmarried woman, is often collapsed into the category of fallen woman. Part of the reason for

this is a class distinction - female adultery narratives usually depict middle-class families and the act of transgressing that marriage is also a transgression of marital property and, in turn, society - making a private matter public. Mistresses were usually constructed as of a lower class than their married male lovers and therefore their violation of domestic discourses is not as shocking as when a wife commits adultery. As Mary Poovey points out, adultery threatened to reveal the “artificiality of the separate spheres, which was the foundation for the middle class’s image of itself and its economic consolidation” (52). The middle-class ideology of separate spheres relied on (and generated) a social arrangement that depended on women being economically dependent and morally superior (Poovey 52). Adultery not only represented women’s agency but also constituted a public mockery of the private marriage. Unlike wives, unmarried women were not burdened with being the moral centre of the “middle class’s image of itself” (52). Mistresses were also not usually included in the definition of female adultery because of the definition of adultery itself. As Overton points out, adultery does not have a universal application and varies across cultures and time periods (*Novel* 2). However, he also makes the point that, in general, the act of committing adultery is defined as something that can only be done by someone who is married; the act of sexual intercourse between a married person and someone other than their spouse (2). For Overton, female adultery is the act of a married woman having sexual relations with someone other than her husband. He uses a dictionary definition as the starting point for his discussion and says that it provides a frame for his focus, “adultery as a social, an ideological and a legal fact” (3). While I am less interested in the legal technicalities of adultery, my study does look at the social and ideological implications of female adultery in relation to domesticity, femininity and space. Therefore, I am including the mistress or “other woman” in the term “female adultery” because she (usually) actively transgresses the boundary of marriage in the same way that the adulterous wife does and exposes the middle-class anxiety around separate

spheres in comparable ways. Including her as a female adulterer troubles the ideology of public and private spheres even more than does the adulterous wife.

Literary Space in the Victorian Era

In *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life*, Victoria Rosner discusses the changing attitudes towards, and representations of, public and private space in literature at the end of the nineteenth century - a period that marks a shift to Modernism but that sees the Victorian “lingering past its time” (Rosner 2). Rosner suggests that, in terms of public and private spheres, the social, sexual and cultural pressures and anxieties that were forming at the turn of the nineteenth century were central to the way that post-Victorian spaces were defined and “What took its place was a far more provisional, more embodied, more unstructured kind of private life - the kind of private life that we still call ‘modern’” (3). Rosner defines private life as being broad and flexible, able to encompass “the physical setting of the household, the social network of family relations, the routines of the household, and the habits of the body” (5)—many of the same things that women in the nineteenth century were fighting against. Her assertion is that the notion of the modern that took shape—especially in terms of anxieties around family and domesticity—at the end of the nineteenth century still retained many Victorian ghosts.⁹ She says: “In modernist texts whatever smacks of the radical—transgressive sexuality, feminism, or the spirit of the avant-garde—is either accommodated with difficulty by the domestic or simply shunted indoors” (2). Modernist writers attempted to revitalize and redefine domestic space while being critical of “the gender- and class-based hierarchies of Victorian domesticity and the doctrine of separate spheres” (13). However, while Rosner’s work traces the ways in which

⁹ Rosner cites Sharon Marcus’s work in this context suggesting that Marcus’s analysis of haunted house fiction in the nineteenth century reveals a notion of “failed domesticity” and an anxiety that manifests itself in stories of haunted spaces (8). I take up Marcus here and later in terms of the metaphor the haunted house presents in terms of the ghosts of the nineteenth century and the ways that this anxiety around failed domesticity still lingers in contemporary adultery narratives today.

modernist writers set about dismantling the Victorian home and its gendered traditions, her work also points to something else. The shift from Victorian values to modernist ideals was fraught with anxiety and the “old-fashioned rooms” may have been unsatisfying, but they were also “hard to think beyond and hard to leave behind” (2). It is my contention that the trace of this cultural discontent still lingers—from the nineteenth century to today—especially in literary representation and the concept of interiority. Rosner says: “By ‘interiority’ I refer to a cluster of interconnected concepts that extend from the representation of consciousness to the reorganization of home life; revised definitions of personal privacy, intimacy, and space; and new assessments of the sexualized and gendered body” (11). This reorganization and revising of definitions is also reflective of the women’s movement in the nineteenth century and the ways in which women’s presence in the public sphere both undermines and reinforces social constructions of respectable femininity and domesticity.¹⁰

Space, then, is a key element to defining women’s roles in the nineteenth century and a key element as to how and why they changed. Rosner suggests that what became defined as modern in early twentieth century literature is what we still consider to be modern today—and much of the anxiety, the shifting and redefining that took place can still be felt—haunting the space of the text. I will take up the idea that these “new assessments of the sexualized and gendered body” (Rosner 11) that began in the nineteenth century, were the cause of much anxiety, an anxiety that plays out on the pages of the literature of both male and female authors. It is this shifting cultural moment that allows for adultery narratives to become a means of talking about gender in regards to the home, marriage, and property. And, following Sharon Marcus and Victoria Rosner’s notion that the ghosts of the nineteenth century can still be felt in literature,

¹⁰ Rosner is primarily interested in modernist British writers, especially Virginia Woolf. Her book seeks to explore the ways in which modernist writers move away from and redefine notions of Victorian domesticity. However, her work is useful for understanding how this shift in ideals was wrought with anxiety, especially in terms of gender and class. I believe that domesticity in this context is not so much redefined as it is reworked and that the uneasiness that defines the shift from Victorian values to modernist ideals still lingers in the way that women and the domestic space are represented.

especially through the descriptions of public and private space, it is my assertion that the ghosts of traditional adultery narratives still haunt contemporary adultery narratives and the spaces within them. It is the way that female characters negotiate these spaces that has changed.

Adultery Narratives and the Trace of Englishness

The persistent underlying reference to the nineteenth century adultery narratives can also be felt in another way—the trace of Englishness or “a residual Victorian culture” (Gikandi 158). In terms of literary language, the nineteenth century was a fascinating cultural moment where a canonical language around women and adultery emerged. The canon of adultery narratives includes the so-called “classic” texts of adultery such as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* or Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. These texts, produced in the nineteenth century, have ways of representing women that are rooted in women’s association with limited notions of marriage, fidelity and heterosexuality. Literary critics such as Tony Tanner, Bill Overton, Naomi Segal and others suggest that the theme of adultery became a prominent literary device in the nineteenth century and was used to such an extent that it became “canonized”— a literary genre in its own right that, as Overton argues, is about women, specifically women engaged in female (wifely) adultery (*The Novel of Female Adultery* 3-6).

Tony Tanner’s *Adultery in the Novel* (1979) is one of the first comprehensive studies of the phenomenon of adultery in literature, especially the reasons why it became such a central trope in nineteenth-century literature. He says:

Adultery as a phenomenon is evidenced in literature from the earliest times, as in Homer (and indeed we might suggest that it is the unstable triangularity of adultery, rather than the static symmetry of marriage, that is the generative form of Western literature as we know it). It is a dominant feature of chivalric

literature; and it becomes a major concern in Shakespeare's last plays.... It appears in such genres as Restoration drama as a sort of social game, just as it may be found in many contemporary novels. But it seems to me that adultery takes on a very special importance in the late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel.

(12)

Tanner argues that this genre of literature was specific to the nineteenth century because of the distinct ways in which women's associations with marriage and fidelity were constructed and viewed then. As he says, marriage, with all of its "social and domestic ramifications," becomes the central subject in literature; "marriage is the mythology" (15). Other critics, such as Barbara Leckie, explore gender in the adultery novel in a way that is more inclusive of women's actual movements and participation in society than other critics allow. Leckie's "epistemology of adultery" (35) looks at how a novel is not only an author's idiosyncratic creation but also a product of culture. An "epistemology of adultery" (35) is an exploration that encompasses multiple cultural and social discourses of adultery that are outside of literary traditions, but inextricably linked to them.¹¹ While adultery narratives have a long history in many literary traditions, especially in Europe and North America, I am interested in the legacy of Victorian literature and the trace of Englishness and colonialism that resonates in many contemporary adultery narratives. For this reason, I am not focusing on specific Victorian texts but rather on the ways in which Victorian constructions of marriage, domesticity and adultery haunt contemporary texts.

In an essay called "Modernity and Culture, the Victorians and Cultural Studies," John McGowan says that even though the Victorian era is in the past, it is the period against which we gauge our own modernity (11). Much like Rosner, McGowan is fascinated with the ways in

¹¹ Leckie uses the work of Caroline Norton as an example of these multiple cultural discourses that includes literature, newspapers, legal documents, public records and court proceedings. For more information, see Leckie's *Culture and Adultery: The Novel, the Newspaper and the Law, 1857 - 1914*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

which Modernism attempts to move away from Victorian values but is essentially defined and haunted by them. While McGowan is careful with generalizations about what makes something “Victorian” or “modernist” he does suggest that there is some benefit to identifying certain conditions that are specific to historical moments (22). While these conditions may exist in ever-changing relationships to each other, his question remains:

Who ... is trying to make what kind of connection between what elements of the past and what elements of the present, and how, and why? Relationships and meanings are forged through various (contingent) human actions, one of which is the telling of stories in fiction and film.... In other words, the Victorians as a group characterized by certain shared features do not exist except insofar as they are produced in that similarity by a discourse that has aims on its audience.

(22-23)

Simon Gikandi also explores the ways in which Victorian values persist and are reformulated in post-Victorian cultures. He describes a “Victorian colonialism” in which he discusses the idea that colonial subjects were perhaps more invested in Victorian values than the Victorians themselves but that they also transformed Victorian categories in the process (159). Gikandi argues that “the process by which the colonized imagined themselves to be Victorian and the way they adopted the idiom of Victorianism to understand and inscribe their cultural and moral universe” represents the post-Victorian culture present in our postmodern and postcolonial world (159)—and in the literature that it produces. While this idea has obvious implications for a novel such as Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* which locates an adultery narrative in postcolonial London where the characters attempt, unsuccessfully, to reinscribe these Victorian categories, it can also be applied to the post-Victorian construction of gender and public and private space in other adultery narratives. Gikandi asserts that it is the experience of the colonial Victorian

subject that gets appropriated, rehearsed, and reformulated in a kind of “belated Victorianism” (159). I believe that it is much the same for the appropriation and reformulation of adultery narratives and women’s association with space in post-Victorian literature. Women have been repeatedly oppressed with limited means of escaping their literary ghosts and female adulterers continue to be constructed with this trace of a certain kind of Englishness, living in haunted spaces.

Failed Domesticity and Feminine Respectability

Connected to this anxiety that manifests itself through a repetition and through images of haunting, ghosts, and a connection to the lingering Victorian, are the interrelated themes of failed domesticity and feminine respectability. I take the term failed domesticity from Sharon Marcus who discusses constructions of domesticity in her work about haunted houses in Victorian literature. She says that haunted houses, usually rented houses, indicate the family’s inability and failure to meet the middle-class ideal of owning property (122). The haunted house is a metaphor for the ways in which the middle-class house failed “to secure the qualities advertised in the domestic ideal” (124). Victoria Rosner takes up this notion in her work, alluding to the idea that Victorian values linger in post-Victorian fiction, haunting texts due to the anxieties that emerged with the pressure of changing social, sexual, and cultural values at the turn-of-the-century, especially in terms of domesticity (3).

Marcus defines domesticity as it developed in the nineteenth century in terms that most feminists have come to understand as the ideology of separate spheres:

Domestic ideology dictated that women were to be self-sacrificing and virtuous, men enterprising, protective of their families, and susceptible to women’s softening influences. Women were to guarantee the neatness, order, and comfort

of the home by managing household finances and supervising servants; men were to earn the money with which women created the domestic comfort that would restore their husbands at the end of each working day. The home was to be a physically enclosed refuge that isolated its inhabitants from contact with other households, the street, and the city's public spaces and institutions. (90)

However, as Marcus, Felski and others have also pointed out, this domestic ideology was challenged by the lived reality of women's experiences and women's actual participation in both public and private life (Marcus 90). The boundary between public and private was tenuous, and although the ideal of nineteenth-century bourgeois subjectivity depended on upholding its tenets, the lives of both men and women did not fit neatly into either category. The public/private split may not have been an absolute opposition but was still an ideology that people of all classes strove to maintain and became a hegemonic ideal, one that, Marcus argues, both the lower and middle classes failed to achieve (n21, 236). I take up this idea in my work, positing that the notion of failed domesticity is especially important in adultery narratives and that this idea "haunts" contemporary adultery narratives, affecting the way that women negotiate public and private space, marriage and property and reproducing an anxiety about women's mobility in relation to space.

I want to acknowledge here that while I am using the term failed domesticity to discuss the representation of women in adultery narratives, it is a term that could be seen to have limits in this context. The notion of a failed domesticity suggests two things: that there is a successful way to perform or produce domesticity and that domesticity is something that is actually being sought out. The characters in this study all have complex relationships to domesticity and, with perhaps with the exception of Chanu in *Brick Lane*, none of them really attempts to access traditional domestic ideals or to actively desire domestic lives. The notion of failure suggests an

attempt to succeed or belong on the part of the female adulterers. Striving for the domestic ideal is certainly relevant to Marcus's original conception of failed domesticity as she is discussing the representation of families whose choice of domestic abode signals their ability to belong to a middle-class ideal. The domestic space in this context also determines their failure to access this ideal and the notion of failed domesticity is prominent.

However, in terms of adultery and domesticity I think that it is also a relevant term not because the characters are represented as desiring or attempting to access the domestic ideal, but because the term indicates the social expectations and assumptions that *all* women desire the heteronormative domestic ideal simply because they are women. Failure in this context becomes more of a social failure—women are supposed to want traditional domesticity and should they deviate from this norm they are seen as failing in their social contract to be domestic and therefore failing as women. I think that the term failed domesticity works to expose these social expectations. The four novels explored here also expose this socially constructed notion of failure through the representation of women who do not necessarily desire the domestic ideal and whose relationships to domesticity are complicated and often subversive. The fact that their relationships to domesticity, and of course to marriage and adultery, can be read in terms of failed domesticity also emphasizes the impossibility of actually realizing the domestic ideal. As Marcus says, it is an unattainable ideal and failure is inevitable.

I also believe that failed domesticity is relevant for an exploration of adultery narratives in contemporary social and feminist contexts. Arguably, women, especially Western women, do not have the same pressures to conform to heteronormative constructions of marriage and domesticity that they once faced. There are many different definitions of family and it is far more acceptable now for women to be single mothers, lesbian mothers, adoptive mothers, unmarried, or childless by design. In fact, there is a general conception that it is women's ability

to make these choices on an individual and private level that indicates that we are living in a post-feminist world; feminism has done its job. However, it is precisely arguments like these that I feel ultimately undermine feminism and only serve to centralize socially constructed norms when it comes to gender. These choices may be made on an individual, private level but they have public and social repercussions, especially for women. While women are encouraged to be autonomous in their sexual and romantic choices there is still a general expectation that women will choose the traditional heteronormative route; deep inside, it is assumed all women are looking for a husband. Contemporary television programs and much contemporary literature marketed towards women focus on the single girl and her struggle to find love. While these narratives focus on self-esteem, sexual autonomy and equality and encourage women to simply date and have fun, the feminist message is ultimately undermined. The subtext is that women are allowed to have fun, but ultimately should choose to settle down in a heterosexual marriage and have children. The assumption is that all women desire this model and that they are somehow failing as women if they choose something else. Choice in this context is also interesting—women are constructed as *choosing* to be single and date but the underlying message is that it should be a step towards something bigger and that if you don't ultimately want to get married, you are doing something wrong; you are only "choosing" the single life because you failed at the real thing. These contradictory messages about sexual autonomy are everywhere masked as feminism, but they ultimately send the message that marriage and domesticity are the choices that women should be making; marriage, domesticity and heterosexuality are maintained as social norms. As I argue later, alternative constructions of marriage such as same-sex marriage may challenge heterosexist norms but they too maintain marriage as a central social discourse. It is for these reasons that I argue the female adulterer still holds cultural weight in representation and it is also the reason that I think the term failed domesticity works in this context and why the female adulterer is a

provocative feminist figure.

Returning to Marcus, while the notion of haunted houses pointing to both a failed domesticity and the anxiety produced by the impossibility of living up to these ideals is not restricted to representations of women, the addition of an anxiety about proper feminine respectability and the ideal of women staying in the private sphere means that these representations are often gendered. As Marcus points out, although the ideology of separate spheres may not have accurately described the reality of women's lives, there was still the pressure of these "abstract moral attributes" and a domestic ideology that associated the domestic space with the feminine (89-90).¹²

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sarah Ahmed discusses domestic ideology in terms of fear. She argues that women are made to feel afraid if they are to leave the safety of the domestic space and are also made to feel ashamed of themselves for violating the rules of feminine respectability if they do leave the private sphere. Domestic ideology and the ideology of separate spheres, then, are constructed around the idea that women are vulnerable and need to be sheltered even though it is primarily the ideology of separate spheres that functions to make them feel vulnerable. Ahmed discusses the ways in which domestic ideology and its connection to notions of feminine respectability restrict women's mobility: "So women, if they are to have access to feminine respectability, must either stay at home (femininity as domestication), or be careful in how they move and appear in public (femininity as a constrained mobility)" (70). Fear and vulnerability are not inherent in women but are effects of these ideologies that seek to control and manipulate women's mobility in both public and private spaces (70). As Ahmed says, "the production of the 'fearsome' is also bound up with the authorization of legitimate spaces: for

¹² Marcus goes on to explore how the scholarship on gender and the domestic space in Victorian representation does not examine the ways in which architecture and city planning was organized around such domestic ideology - the domestic ideal was physically realized through architecture as the middle-class attempted to give notions of femininity and domesticity material form (89-91). See Chapter 3, "The Haunted London House, 1840-1880" in Marcus's *Apartment Stories* for a fuller analysis.

example, in the construction of home as safe, ‘appropriate’ forms of femininity become bound up with the reproduction of domestic space” (70). The female adulterer transgresses the boundary of feminine respectability and also of the construction of home as a safe space. However, her respectable femininity is also tied to notions of failed domesticity that allow her to decentralize and challenge these ideologies, but not to fully participate in anything beyond setting up the indictment of a failed domesticity. The repetition of the female adulterer as site for anxiety about these ideologies limits her agency as a feminist figure with the ability to reconceptualize the constructions of femininity and domesticity.

The Feminist Adultery Narrative

The problem with a feminist analysis of adultery narratives is the paradoxical nature of the inquiry itself. It could be argued that while marriage has long been a focus of feminist analyses, adultery as a feminist act is a taboo that feminists do not want to tackle. Feminist adultery is a paradox because it appears to pit women against each other and undermine the tenets of feminism itself. However, as Laura Kipnis points out, the institution of marriage is both threatened and sustained by adultery—its “structural transgression” (15). And, if feminists have long been concerned with the ways in which the institution of marriage and heteronormative constructions of monogamy have oppressed women, does female adultery not provide the perfect vehicle of subversion?¹³ While I am not passing judgment on or exploring personal stories and real experiences of adultery, I am interested in the ways in which representations of female adultery can be read as feminist: the structural transgression of marriage also maintains

¹³ I want to acknowledge here that there are other subversive ways that women have destabilized marriage in literature such as representations of lesbian relationships and women who choose to remain single. Some of these issues are addressed in the chapters on Jeanette Winterson and A.S. Byatt. The narrator in Winterson’s novel is not gendered and therefore many critics have interpreted the adulterous relationship as a same-sex relationship and the text as a lesbian novel. As I discuss in the chapter on Winterson, same-sex adultery, especially between women, is certainly a subversive challenge to traditional notions of domesticity and marriage. Byatt also addresses alternative domestic arrangements in *Possession* with the relationship between Blanche Glover and Christabel LaMotte. In this case, the adultery is heterosexual and one of the the marriages transgressed is between two women.

marriage, thereby revealing the ideal of marriage and domesticity as unattainable social constructions. I also want to explore the figures of the mistress and the female adulterer—both of whom represent their own paradox. The mistress is a paradox because she is outside the institution of marriage but inextricably linked to it - without marriage she would not exist. The female adulterer is much the same—she actively transgresses the boundaries of marriage while maintaining the illusion that it is a structurally sound edifice. However, marriage itself is very much a patriarchal institution—therefore, how do you subvert a patriarchal institution if you are inextricably tied to it, when a supposed transgression actually “participates in what it purports to subvert” (Žižek 215)?

Myra Jehlen suggests that feminism itself also presents a similar paradox and says that if feminists are going to dismantle western patriarchal practices, and “remove the ground from under their own feet” they will need “an alternative base” (Jehlen 75). Toril Moi further explores Jehlen’s paradox: “given that there is no space *outside* patriarchy from which women can speak, how do we explain the existence of a feminist, anti-patriarchal discourse at all?” (Moi 81). While some feminist theorists do attempt to find a space for women’s voices outside of patriarchal discourse, this dissertation focuses on ways in which patriarchal discourse—specifically around literary adultery narratives—can be negotiated and shifted through feminist analysis. Some adultery narratives open a space for female agency and feminist readings. The four major texts covered here all, in some way, deal with representations of women and adultery that I consider to be feminist not simply because, as Sarah Mills suggests, the female adulterers negotiate space in unexpected ways within the texts, but because of the specific ways that their mobility is represented in relation to the history of the female adultery narrative and the patriarchal discourses that have shaped it.

The female adulterer is a marker for the feminist possibilities of reading female adultery

narratives as feminist, but she also represents its limits. In A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, the female adulterer paradoxically exposes the patriarchal discourses that shaped nineteenth-century literary constructions, but in the process she becomes reinscribed by those discourses; she becomes irredeemable. Evelyn Lau's *Other Women* focuses on a mistress's desire to access heteronormative marriage thereby revealing the extent to which such ideals are socially constructed as unattainable. Lau's novel creates a binary between the spaces of adultery and domestic spaces, but it is only when the other woman accesses the heterotopic spaces in between that both discourses become decentralized. Similarly, Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* explores an adulterous relationship in subversive ways, with a genderless narrator troubling the binary between marriage and adultery and the socially understandable codes of sex and gender. However, through an attempt to rewrite the adultery story and free it from its literary roots, the narrator ultimately objectifies the female adulterer, Louise, and reveals the impossibility of this freedom. Finally, in *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali, Nazneen learns to negotiate the colonial spaces of London and the oppressive spaces of her marriage by finding autonomy through an affair. Her affair, again, reveals the impossibility of the domestic ideal that women are supposed to desire. In all of these texts, the female adulterers are representative of the anxieties that are produced concerning women's participation in social and domestic life and normalizing discourses of femininity, domesticity and marriage. As feminist figures, the female adulterers in these novels reveal the contradictions and limits of these discourses and also, through their negotiations of space within the texts, ways in which these frameworks can be subverted and challenged.

The Changing Literary Representations of Adultery: A.S Byatt's *Possession*.

Much has been written about nineteenth-century literature and the emergence of the "novel of female adultery" as a genre that focuses on women, and many literary critics have

explored adultery within this context but not necessarily from a feminist perspective.¹⁴ For this reason, I have chosen not to analyze nineteenth-century texts but instead will be focusing on a contemporary novel that specifically addresses constructions of gender and space in adultery narratives and does address feminism. A.S. Byatt's novel, *Possession*, not only references nineteenth-century narratives of adultery, it actually incorporates one as Byatt sets part of her novel in Victorian England. This intertextuality and mixing of genres works as a means of exploring the ways in which the trace of Victorianism and Englishness have continued to have influence and affect contemporary literature and the retelling of a "classic" adultery plot.

Victoria Rosner states that the spaces of private life as represented in literature "compose a kind of grid of social relations that shifts and slips, often upending the individuals who traverse it" (2). Specifically, Rosner is interested in the shifts and slips that occur in early twentieth-century literature and the ways in which literary representations of domestic space, public and private space, attempt to move beyond the lingering "decay" of the Victorian home to the "post-Victorian reorganization of private life to accord with changing social customs" (2). Rosner maps these representational shifts and asserts that "the Victorian household deteriorated, deformed by the pressure of changing social, sexual, and cultural mores" (3). My first chapter traces the links between nineteenth-century and contemporary representations of adultery. Rosner's assertion that the shift from the nineteenth to the twentieth century marks what we still call modern is crucial for my understanding of how women negotiate public and private space and how we might read changing literary representations of that negotiation.

The problematics of a feminist reading of adultery and adultery narratives can be addressed by taking up Myra Jehlen's questions about how to negotiate feminism in the pervasively patriarchal world that feminism must speak from. What are the political implications

¹⁴ For example, Bill Overton *The Novel of Female Adultery* and *Fictions of Female Adultery*, Barbara Leckie, *Culture and Adultery*, Tony Tanner, *Adultery in the Novel*, Naomi Segal, *Scarlet Letters* and *The Adulteress's Child*, Maria Rippon, *Judgment and Justification in the Nineteenth-Century Novel of Adultery*.

of reading a female adultery narrative as feminist? In this context, I explore the relationship between Christabel LaMotte and her female companion, Blanche, in *Possession*. It is through the character of Blanche that Byatt explores the nature of feminist scholarship itself and the problematics of trying to salvage a feminist reading or be a woman writer/artist in these male-dominated traditions that are overwhelmingly burdened by the history of patriarchy. Byatt makes reference to a backlash against feminism and through a reading of Blanche as key to a feminist analysis, Byatt suggests that there is, in fact, no way to produce a positive feminist adultery narrative. The story of Blanche and Christabel Lamotte also has interesting implications for the ways in which these women negotiate space, especially in terms of the “women’s space” that they occupy together compared to the public/private dichotomy that exists with LaMotte’s adulterous relationship. If *Possession* can be read as an example of how the burden of past traditions of representation may prevent a feminist reading or writing of an adultery narrative—or, simply, a narrative that allows for freedom from male-dominated literary traditions—how do we read contemporary literature that does deal with adultery?

Adultery and Failed Domesticity: Evelyn Lau’s *Other Women*

The writings of Michel Foucault and Elizabeth Grosz are important for a feminist analysis of space and representation. Foucault’s work has long been of interest to feminists and historians, specifically his theories about how complex structures of power, especially at institutional and state levels, create and control subjectivity (Gamble 234). Feminists such as Elizabeth Grosz have taken up Foucault in terms of the embodiment of these power structures and systems, furthering Foucault’s notion that power is an ideological system of beliefs that affects consciousness and suggesting that this consciousness of power can be seen in “the inscription of flesh and its conversion into a (social) body” (“Inscriptions and Body Maps” 63).

Embodiment is key for Grosz, especially in terms of gender and the specific ways in which women's bodies are marked by and through the social production of subjectivity. In *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, Grosz takes up the issues of sexuality and gender and space. She focuses on the ways in which architecture and space have always been conceived as sexually neutral, but notes that the way that we live in those spaces is not. She asks: "What does the fact that there are always and irreducibly (at least) two sexes have to do with how we understand and live space?" (*Architecture from the Outside* xix). Grosz attempts to understand "the subject's embodied relations to spatiality" especially in terms of sexuality, suggesting that body theorists such as Foucault have not considered the sexual specificity of the body in terms of the production of knowledge (40). Grosz also states that Foucault (and other male theorists interested in the history of the body) have not acknowledged their own sexual specificity in terms of the production of knowledge and are therefore complicit in reinforcing heterosexual patriarchy and repudiating the female sex (40-41). Much like Myra Jehlen, Grosz seeks to find a way out of this paradox—how to talk about embodiment and gender from a place outside of patriarchy when the knowledge of the body and its sexual history has been definitively produced by patriarchal discourse. The place to start, she says, is to understand that all cultural production is a result of patriarchal subjectivity and corporeality. Only then, can we start to think about creating "other kinds of productive space in which other kinds of corporeality—women's, among others—may also be able to develop their own positions, perspectives, interests, productions" (40).

Grosz's means of thinking about space in terms of embodiment can be used to address the construction of identity in female adultery narratives, particularly the gendered specificity of how bodies live and understand space. Evelyn Lau's novel *Other Women* can be read according to specific spaces - the spaces of adultery, domestic spaces and spaces in between. Grosz's

spatial analysis seeks to move beyond standard assumptions about space and the places that we occupy and she posits ways that we can think about architecture “beyond complementarity and binarization, beyond subjectivity and subjectification” (58). It is possible to read Lau’s novel as moving beyond these binarizations of space. This is especially true of the representation of adultery and the identity of the “other woman” whose negotiation of these spaces can be read as a shifting and subverting of gendered space in traditional adultery narratives.

Lau appears to create a binary, a clear distinction between the spaces of adultery (hotels, restaurants, etc.) and the domestic spaces associated with marriage, and the other woman’s subjectivity shifts according to the spaces that she occupies. Lau privileges the spaces of adultery and the other woman—marriage, the wife and “home,” are represented as abhorrent, decaying, and penetrable. Yet, Fiona, her main character, also desires the domestic, the home. While this is, itself, a transgression in terms of traditional adultery narratives, Lau further troubles the binary between marriage and adultery by including domestic symbols within the spaces of adultery. Using Grosz’s notion of how to force an encounter with difference and otherness through an infection of architecture with its outside (64), I want to explore these spaces in terms of a transgressing and troubling of binaries and how this affects Fiona’s negotiation of these spaces. While the boundaries may shift through this reading, Fiona’s identity is still somewhat static—she is always the other woman who is confined by and confined within the spaces of adultery.

The spaces in between are very important in terms of Fiona’s identity and a further destabilizing of boundaries. Lau includes many spaces in her novel that have no specific place, spaces that are often moving or transitory - the spaces of elevators, cabs, revolving doors, nameless streets. In his work on heterotopia, Foucault suggests that the spaces in which we live, where our time erodes, are heterogeneous spaces and that “we live inside a set of relations that

delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another” (23). Much like Grosz’s analysis of space, Foucault’s construction of the spaces that we occupy during our lifetimes can be seen as static. It is the spaces inbetween, spaces that, in a sense, may work to collapse time and space, that provide the opportunity to shift these binaries - what Foucault calls heterotopic space. Foucault’s conception of space is a useful deconstructive means to explore the binaries and dichotomous categories that Grosz contends govern the way that we understand embodied subjectivity and its relation to space. Foucault describes heterotopic space as a “simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live” where space takes the form of “relations among sites” (23-24). Heterotopias act as counter-sites “in which the real sites, all other real sites that can be found within culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted” (24). Foucault’s interest lies in spaces that are in relation to other spaces but “in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror or reflect” (24). It is within these heterotopic spaces that *both* the spaces of adultery and marital spaces are troubled and where Fiona’s identity remains in flux. I want to explore these spaces and the potential for a subversive reading of the other woman and domesticity that gives Fiona a identity beyond binaries and stereotypes and allows her to freely negotiate *all* spaces.

Adultery as Abjection in Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body*

Jeanette Winterson’s novel, *Written on the Body*, is unique in the sense that it has a genderless narrator who embarks on an affair with a married woman. The genderless narrator, and Winterson’s own identity as a lesbian, has prompted the novel to be read, most often, as a lesbian novel, with critics such as Andrea Harris and Carolyn Allen concluding that Winterson provides clues in the text that suggest that the narrator should be read as female and that *Written*

on the Body should be read primarily as a novel about lesbian desire.

I explore some of the major approaches to reading *Written on the Body* from a feminist perspective. Most feminist interpretations of *Written on the Body* rely heavily on theories of recognition, resemblance and likeness, especially those of Luce Irigaray. Read in this context, *Written on the Body* can only be about lesbian desire and ultimately provides its own theory of reading through the critics' insistence. Indeed, Carolyn Allen calls *Written on the Body* a "fiction of theory" (46) and suggests that Winterson is consciously creating a novel that can be read as a theory, or hermeneutics, of erotics (48) and can, as such, be used as its own cipher. The clues to understanding Winterson's meaning, Allen says, can be found in the novel and through a reading of Winterson's own sexuality which together create a fiction of theory - and a novel of lesbian desire (48). Her reading of the hermeneutics of erotics and the novel as an erotics of risk relies on theories of likeness and sameness to understand desire and insist on the novel being read as a lesbian novel.

Andrea Harris, too, reads *Written on the Body* as a novel about lesbian desire and sees it as being about a repudiation and recovery of the feminine in language and representation, a novel about the coming together of the self and the other, and the ethical ramifications of desiring and loving the other (130). Harris sees *Written on the Body* as representing love in two ways. First, the love between the narrator and Louise is an earthly, fleshy love that is located in the physical body and the lovers' desire to consume each other. Second, Winterson incorporates an almost spiritual element to the novel, with a love that transcends the mundane and earthly (130). Harris suggests that, this is reflective of Irigaray's concept of the sensible transcendental. However, she believes that as long as Irigaray's theory is grounded in heterosexual love it cannot be completely free of patriarchal and symbolic discourse. For a complete recovery of the feminine, Irigaray's theory would have to be developed to allow for true love between women - a potential that

Harris believes Irigaray leaves the possibility for and that is enacted in *Written on the Body*.

However, Irigaray has an interesting conception of feminist space in her “sensible transcendental” - she believes that in order to dismantle Western patriarchal discourses and means of representation, the whole economy of space-time must change (Irigaray 10-12). Traditionally, women (as mothers) represent a place or space for man, relegating her status to a “thing” and depriving the maternal-feminine of its own place (Irigaray 10). Women’s relation to spatiality is then constructed according to man’s nostalgia and women are exiled from their own “most archaic and constituent site” (11). Irigaray seeks to expose how a maternal and feminine space has been repressed, “leaving women’s bodies unrepresented or represented only as a weakness, disability, or lack” (Grosz 346). Irigaray says that women must take up a space of their own, as men have, in order to speak, write, and represent themselves and their desire - only when women have done so can there be “an encounter between, or touching of, the two sexes” (346).

The repression of the feminine and feminine space resides in the interval between space and time - Irigaray suggests that in this interval (“the dynamic reserve”) there is the possibility for a space-time that can mediate *between* space and time, it is where women can take up a space of their own; it is where desire and wonder occur and it is where the “false duality or symmetry of phallic domination—where woman is seen as man’s negative double, modeled on an *economy of the same*—can be shattered” (Grosz 347). Thus, Winterson’s novel can be read in this way as attempting to create a subjectivity for women outside of patriarchal discourse that does not constitute them as lack. Irigaray’s work lends itself well to this particular way of reading Winterson.

In many ways, the notion of a woman’s novel of likeness, an erotics of risk as Allen calls it, is similar to Kristeva’s notion of the semiotic, which is more emotive than rational and is where “bodily energy and affects make their way into language” (McAfee 17). Kristeva uses the

term semiotic to describe the pre-symbolic stage of development - before language when there is no separation from the mother, no autonomous subjectivity. The semiotic is thus connected to the rhythms and senses of the maternal/female body which are repressed when we enter the symbolic and language but never forgotten. This repression is the lack that Irigaray also explores. However, Kristeva and Irigaray both have similar conceptions of an in-between - a space where subjectivity remains ambiguous. For Kristeva, "meaning originates in the interplay between semiotic and symbolic, where one modality regulates the other" (Gamble 311). And for Irigaray a space-time that relies on difference as much as it does sameness can mediate between space and time.

It is this notion of a space-time that is in between, that can mediate between space and time, that interests me and is a space that I think is present in this text, and is a starting point for an exploration of the text as an ambiguous space. This space resists the gendering of the narrator and the insistence that the novel can only be a novel of lesbian desire. It allows for ambiguity and a blurring of boundaries that also has interesting implications for a reading of adultery in the novel. In a sense, Winterson's novel can be seen as a textual space-time that can mediate between space and time and that allows for an ambiguous reading of the adultery plot, its characters, its public and private spaces, and the performativity of the text. Adultery becomes a kind of queer performance in this context, constantly shifting the reader's expectations. At the centre of this performance is the abject body - I am particularly interested in the representation of the body in this "dynamic reserve"- and its ambiguous borders as read through Kristeva, especially the body of Louise, who is dying of cancer and whose body resists the narrator's attempt at objectification and "writing." While the semiotic presents an opportunity to reconstitute subjectivity through a feminine language, the abject "beseches and pulverizes the subject" (McAfee 46), allowing for an ambiguous embodiment and a breaking of boundaries. The

body also becomes a kind of textual space that refuses to be written into any literary clichés or stereotypes and refuses to be read in any one way. The ambiguity created by reading the novel against Kristeva's abject provides an alternate "queering" of the adultery narrative, one that does not insist on lesbian desire for its queerness but, rather, opens the novel up to other possible readings that disrupt the traditional adultery plot and trouble notions of domesticity and public and private space.

Shame and the Postcolonial City: Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

Following Jacqueline Rose's notion of shame as a public trauma that requires an audience, I discuss the ways in which the immigrant experience, especially for women, is represented as a trauma and how that trauma becomes a public narrative that relies on shame and shaming. This chapter explores how shame is constructed spatially with a feminist analysis of how postcolonial London is represented in *Brick Lane*. Shame in *Brick Lane* constitutes a discourse of exterior/interior and public and private that ties into the actual, physical and geographic spaces within the novel and that has specific implications for a gendered reading of shame and a gendered reading of Nazneen's adultery.

In *Imagining London*, John Ball attempts to unpack the complex representations of London in literature by "ex-colonials" that represent a kind of colonization in reverse (14). He challenges the basic theoretical approach to postcolonial literature that sees "all acts of writing by colonized or formerly colonized people in English" as "instances of postcolonial resistance against imperialism" (12). Ball's focus on London is relevant to my reading of *Brick Lane* because of his assertion that London's unique imperial history allows for an exploration of "transnational models of identity" (13) in representations of London and moves away from binary models such as the novel as resistance or rearticulation (13). Instead he is interested in

London as a decentred centre, a site for mutuality, diaspora and hybridity (13).

Ball outlines two approaches to reading London in literature. First, the representation of London as an “historically continuous” site that is redolent of and with empire (where empire means British rule) (16-17). And, second, London as “geographically or spatially continuous with and redolent of empire” (where empire means once-colonized immigrants who have “converged on, inhabited and transformed” the city) (17). While I think that *Brick Lane* can be read according to either approach, I am particularly interested in the second one. Ball asserts that when immigrants such as *Brick Lane*’s Nazneen and Chanu come to London, they “appropriate it and reterritorialize it” and that narratives such as *Brick Lane* reinscribe and reinvent the city (9). For Ball, exploring representations of London from a “spatial-geographical” rather than an historical perspective allows for a reading model of “diaspora, migrancy, transnational, cosmopolitanism, and ocean-spanning relationality” (17). *Brick Lane* can certainly be read in this context and Nazneen and Chanu work within Ball’s reading of representations of London as transformed by the presence of formerly colonized people. This also relates to Simon Gikandi’s notion that colonial subjects are constantly appropriating and reformulating a kind of “belated Victorianism” (159). In *Brick Lane*, this trace of Victorianism and Englishness plays out in terms of class and the unattainable middle-class ideal that Chanu wants for his family. It is an ideal that he constantly strives for and ultimately fails to achieve.

The spaces that Nazneen, Chanu and their friends inhabit could be representative of a certain kind of reterritorializing, even appropriating of the city, but it is also a novel about how the spaces of London itself resist this reterritorializing due to, as Ball says, its being a “historically continuous” site whose history resists a complete reinscribing of the city - something that is evident by the actual area of London called Brick Lane that is at once accepted as part of the larger London environment while also separated from it.

Brick Lane is also a novel about the promise of London and, as Ball points out, the ways in which London has been imagined and written. For Chanu, London is a disappointment and the city comes to represent his shame and the shame of the other immigrants in the novel whose dreams were not made a reality in the city of London. Turning to shame, I will use Jacqueline Rose's work and Elspeth Probyn's study of shame, especially her notion that shaming people is a way to "patrol the borders of normality" (xvi). I use the notion of shame to read *Brick Lane* in terms of, and to trouble, Ball's ideas about the city space of London in postcolonial literature. A gendered reading of this space, particularly how Nazneen negotiates the city space of London, complicates Ball's reading of that space. Further, the notion of shame is also tied to issues of public and private space and Nazneen's adultery. Conceiving shame as a kind of trauma, Rose says that shame is connected to the notion of public exposure and, at the same time, is secret and hidden, "crossing the boundary between our inner and outer worlds" (1-2). Adultery, then, acts in this context as the ultimate transgression associated with public/private and interior/exterior. Adultery is a private act that is constructed, in literature, as having public consequences and often women who commit adultery are punished on behalf of the community publicly rather than privately. Shame is also key in adultery narratives, as women who are exposed for their adultery are usually shamed in some way - humiliated and made to feel disposable. Nazneen's adultery is interesting to consider in the context of the "shame" associated with her experience in *Brick Lane* where the act of adultery becomes an act almost free of shame on Nazneen's part - her way of reclaiming her own agency and reinscribing the city of London as a gendered body.

II

THE CHANGING LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF ADULTERY: A.S. BYATT'S *POSSESSION*.

While the theme of adultery emerged as a genre specifically associated with women, the nineteenth century was also an era when women's roles began to change and the ways in which they were represented was central to cultural analysis in general. Adultery has largely been unexplored in terms of feminist literary criticism with the exception of the basic gendered readings that explore the moral and cultural implications of adultery and the fate (usually death) of the female adulterer as being representative of the repercussions of transgressing a moral boundary.¹⁵ Much has been written about nineteenth-century literature and the emergence of the "novel of adultery" as a genre that focuses on women. Many literary critics have explored adultery within this narrow context. I have chosen not to analyze specific nineteenth-century texts but instead will be focusing on the ways in which contemporary authors attempt to rewrite, represent, and reference adultery narratives that have their origins in the nineteenth century and that specifically address constructions of domesticity and space in adultery narratives. Many interesting rewrites of "classic" literature deal with adultery: Aritha van Herk's *Places Far from Ellesmere* retells the story of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and depicts her evading the nineteenth-century literary fate: instead of hurling herself under the train, she gets on it and leaves. Nancy Huston's *Mark of the Angel* could also be read as a reference to *Anna Karenina* - a female adulterer has left her husband and child to be with her lover and, in a scene reminiscent of a sexually transgressive woman's typical tragic end, the husband throws his son from a train as revenge for his wife's betrayal. Tama Janowitz's *Peyton Amberg* recasts *Madame Bovary* in contemporary New York City and Jane Hamilton's *Disobedience* features an adulterous woman whose book club discussions tend towards classic tragic heroines and female adulterers while the

¹⁵ For example, Eliot's *Adam Bede*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*.

protagonist desperately tries to rewrite her own ending. A.S. Byatt's novel, *Possession*, not only references nineteenth-century narratives of adultery, it actually incorporates one as Byatt sets part of her novel in Victorian England. This intertextuality is a good example of how Leckie's "epistemology of adultery" works, thus *Possession* can be read as an adultery narrative. It also works as a means of tracing the ways in which literary genres that focus on adultery have continued to have influence on contemporary literature and contemporary literary theory. *Possession* allows for an exploration of the changing literary representations of adultery from the nineteenth century onwards, and the representation of women's relationship to domesticity, marriage, intellectual and artistic life and the spaces associated with these relationships.

Victoria Rosner suggests that Victorian values linger in modern fiction, haunting texts due to the "pressure of changing social, sexual, and cultural mores" at the turn-of-the-century and the anxieties that resulted (3). These anxieties defined the shift from the Victorian era to Modernism and Rosner suggests that this transitional moment is what shapes, and what we still call, modern. She is especially interested in the representation of the spaces of private life and how literary representations attempted to move beyond the "decay" of the Victorian (2-3). *Possession* is most often considered as a postmodern text that resists fixed meanings and conclusions—it should also be read as a text that represents the tensions around the shift from Victorian ideals to modernity because of the specific ways that Byatt represents the anxiety around women and their social mobility, their participation in public, intellectual, and artistic life, and how they negotiate these spaces. What is important for a reading of the adultery plot is the way that the female adulterer, Christabel LaMotte, is framed in terms of acceptable notions of femininity and domesticity and how her affair affects *all* of the women in the text in terms of their personal and intellectual relationships in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. LaMotte's adultery is constructed as having specific repercussions for the women in the text and it is LaMotte who

ultimately bears this burden.

One of the prominent themes of Byatt's novel is that it is impossible to write the Victorian female characters out of their stereotypes and literary fate, a fate that is bound to be repeated in the contemporary character of Maud both through her scholarship and her actions. Byatt makes us aware of these issues through the frame story of the twentieth-century scholarship by emphasizing how the academics devalue each other's work. First, she focuses on the ways that Leonora's radical feminist theories are ridiculed and considered politically tired and, second, the character of Christabel is reframed and marginalized through heteronormative discourses by the end of the book. Byatt is, in a sense, questioning the value of revisiting these genres, of trying to understand and reclaim history. For women - writers, artists, and the women that they represent in their work - the burden of that history is too much to bear and there is no way to escape. She challenges us to ask, "what is the point" - especially for feminists who are fighting an uphill battle against constant backlash - in fiction, in reality, throughout history and in academic scholarship.

Byatt is consciously undermining the possibility of the past being revived and rewritten and it points to her larger concerns about women's history, women's community and women's creative processes. That Blanche becomes expendable in the plot and that LaMotte becomes historically inscribed as Ash's lover rather than as an independent artist are indicative of Byatt's attempt to explore the ways in which women and women artists have been excluded from history through patriarchal processes. Frederick Holmes suggests that *Possession* is a novel that "grapples with... the ways in which we know the past and the uses to which we can put that knowledge" (319). He asks many questions that are relevant to a discussion of women in literature and history: "What does it mean to possess the past? Is such an act possible, or is the past irretrievably separate and other? By what means can we know the past? ... do the particular

limitations of our own historical embeddedness necessarily cause us to filter previously-existing representations of the past through the ideological distortions of the present” (319)? Holmes is concerned with the morality of retrieving the past and thinks that our efforts to make the past live could be “an escapist urge to indulge in nostalgia” or “a means of encountering significant realities” (319). Like Holmes, I think that Byatt attempts to address many of these issues in *Possession*. I also believe that, in terms of gender, she answers some of these questions, questions that relate to the larger context of the paradox of feminist literary and historical research. Can the story of Blanche and LaMotte be retrieved and what is the value in this, especially when this retrieval means rewriting their stories? Is it possible to rewrite these characters outside of our “historical embeddedness” and what happens when that historical embeddedness is an inescapably patriarchal one? Finally, Holmes’ question of nostalgia raises the issue of a gendered reading of adultery narratives and what it means to “possess the past” when that past is haunted by anxious ghosts.

While I am reading *Possession* as a novel that has potential for a feminist reading of adultery and a feminist critique of the ways in which history and literary scholarship are often written at the expense of women, I want to acknowledge here that I don’t necessarily think that Byatt is self-consciously creating a feminist text. However, there are many ways to read her novel as feminist and, like Jane Campbell, I want to focus on the “feminist power and relevance of her fiction” (2). Byatt’s own relationship to feminism is ambivalent—she acknowledges that her books are feminist because she is concerned with women’s lives, women’s art and the patriarchal practices that have oppressed women (Campbell 1-2). However, she is also cautious when it comes to feminist theory and wants to avoid being categorized as a woman writer or “ghettoized by modern feminists” (Byatt qtd in Campbell, 17). As the character of Leonora Stern reveals, Byatt is critical of feminist theories, particularly feminist literary criticisms that are

too one-dimensional, and she wants to avoid replacing one totalizing discourse with another. As Campbell points out, Byatt's work about women artists and literary theory is always in dialogue with male creativity and she constantly tries to create a balance (2). But in many ways, her attempt to avoid gendered dichotomies and totalizing discourses contradicts the attention she gives to the ways in which women have systematically been ignored or erased by history and how their lives and experiences are burdened by patriarchal practices. *Possession* becomes an example of the very paradox that she is trying to avoid—how do you write about women's history without reinscribing the patriarchal processes that you are criticizing. Many critics see Byatt's novel as intertextual, fragmented and as a destabilizing of history. In this way it is a successful postmodern—and perhaps postfeminist—text that achieves a self-conscious balance between fiction and theory and moves beyond gendered paradigms. Alexa Alfer and Michael Noble suggest that: "Feminist polemic and/or post-postmodern critique, literary metacriticism and/or artistic-scientific postulation, Byatt's fiction is, and inspires, not 'either-or' but emphatically 'both-and'" (11). Further, Campbell says that Byatt's novels are "open texts that, by eschewing dogmatism, deconstructing binaries of all kinds, and encouraging a plurality of readings, serve women well" (25). I agree that *Possession* serves women well not because it successfully deconstructs gendered binaries, but because Byatt draws our attention to the impossibility of breaking down those binaries. I think that Byatt is self-consciously creating a text that aspires to Campbell's plurality of readings and encourages the reader to be wary of totalizing discourses when it comes to women's history, creativity and feminism. However, what critics may see as open-endedness, I see as a reminder that we are not free of patriarchal practices, especially when it comes to literary representation. On the one hand, she appears to be critical of feminist literary theory and mocks women's studies programs, but on the other her text reinforces the ongoing need for feminist analysis and scholarship. In this context, female

adultery becomes the catalyst for this feminist paradox. The female adulterer has a long literary history and is pervasive in contemporary literature. Byatt's novel reveals her potential as a subversive figure whose negotiation of gendered spaces can be read as feminist, but also reminds us that she is haunted by her past, by her literary history. I believe that Byatt is aware of this paradox and while she may be wary of feminism, she has created a text that is relevant to a feminist reading of adultery narratives.

Adultery as Intertext: Rewriting the past/reliving the past

Possession contains two interconnected stories—one uncovers a relationship between two Victorian poets, Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte, whose affair has been kept hidden for many years. Their adultery is discovered by two twentieth-century scholars—Roland Michell, an Ash scholar, and Maud Bailey, a feminist scholar of LaMotte. As they pursue the truth about Ash's and LaMotte's relationship, Byatt includes elements of the Victorian story that resemble the traditional Victorian narratives around female adultery and she also critiques the ways in which female characters, such as Christabel LaMotte, are read, constructed and reconstructed through academic scholarship. As Campbell says, Byatt is “always fascinated by the infringement of the past on the present - as well as by the impossibility of reconstructing the past” (107). Roland and Maud literally become possessed by the ghosts of Ash and LaMotte and their actions in the past have great effect on Roland's and Maud's actions in the present. While Campbell and others suggest that the intertextuality of the novel and the discovery of letters that essentially debunks many years of scholarship may raise questions about truth and authenticity and how we can truly know the past, it also forces us to ask questions about the nature of women's history and the impossibility of freeing poets such as Christabel LaMotte from the burden of patriarchal history or freeing her descendants (literary or otherwise) from

being fated to repeat the same scripts. Campbell believes that Byatt actually blurs the line between the past and the present and destabilizes the text to the extent where neither is central or privileged but where “her twentieth-century characters repeat the experiences of their predecessors” (111). I don’t think that this repetition destabilizes the past and present but, in fact, privileges a Victorian model suggesting that the Victorian narrative continues to hold some power and is doomed to be repeated, especially by women. As Jackie Buxton says: “The text seems to suggest that Victorian fictions are somehow dictating contemporary realities” (97). This is precisely Byatt’s point - the repetition of the same acts also reproduces the anxiety around women that is present in the Victorian story in terms of marriage, adultery, heterosexuality and domestic space.

Campbell suggests that Maud and Roland’s romance, one that develops because of the uncovered relationship between Ash and LaMotte and is consummated after Maud learns that she is a descendant of both, is hopeful and that they have unlearned the patriarchal language that they had been taught by their Victorian predecessors (135). Through this unlearning, Maud’s autonomy is retained while they pursue an equal relationship that is freed from the “orthodoxies they have been taught” (135). She says that “they must construct a new morality and a new language. Their future is still to be imagined” and compares their seemingly egalitarian affair to the “possessive” affair of LaMotte and Ash (135). Maud’s and Roland’s relationship could perhaps be seen as progressive and hopeful if it weren’t for Byatt’s privileging of Victorian values and the blood ties that Maud has to Christabel. It is true that these scholars have had to reevaluate their understanding of Ash and LaMotte and their respective bodies of work and they have also had to learn a different means of approaching history and academics that allows them to become personally involved without losing their intellectual rigour or status.¹⁶ However, Tim

¹⁶ The nature of academic scholarship in *Possession* is discussed at length in many texts about the novel. The notion of becoming personally involved as a new way to read and analyze history is discussed in Jane Campbell’s text, *A.S. Byatt and the Heliotropic Imagination* and in Tim Gauthier’s *Narrative Desire and Historical Reparations*.

Gauthier suggests that while the academic scholarship may have to be revised, Maud and Roland are far from being progressive or postmodern (32). Like Buxton, he reads *Possession* as a privileging of Victorian tropes and as a text that shows not only how the past affects the present but how the twentieth century scholars affect the past, making it static rather than destabilizing it as Campbell suggests (32-33).

However, it is not just Byatt's nostalgia for the Victorian past and her delight in recreating a Victorian novel that idealizes the past, it is the fact, Gauthier says, that Maud and Roland are characterized as the type of scholars who privilege the past and they, in turn, are themselves privileged as "those individuals who... try to form some sort of respectful relationship" with the past rather than those who "use the past for what it can give them" (32). While there are larger arguments to be made about the nature of historiographic fiction, Gauthier makes an interesting point and argues that the personal relationship and need to "possess" the past that both Maud and Roland have creates a reciprocal relationship with the past that also allows for their romantic passion for the Victorian, its values and beliefs, to be the driving force in the novel (33). He believes that through their scholarship, the past "remains a fairly stable, and desired, homogenous entity" (26) that ultimately leads to the conclusion that Byatt (and Maud and Roland) yearns for the values of the Victorian period : "The novel testifies to the possibility of order and coherence in the modern world, one entirely dependent on Victorian conventions and constructions" (39). By juxtaposing the Victorian and modern narratives, Byatt is suggesting that the contemporary concerns and anxieties in the novel are not so different from those prevalent in the Victorian era (Gauthier 41).

Maud's and Roland's ability to change and adapt their philosophies when it comes to their scholarly methodology and their desire to develop a reciprocal relationship with the past may be considered progressive as Campbell suggests, or as a privileging of Victorian values as

Gauthier suggests, but Byatt's text also points to something else. First, by having Maud and Roland privilege the past, Gauthier says that Byatt is depicting them as doing an ideal kind of scholarly work around the Victorians that makes their work different from other rigid and fixed scholarship (32). He makes the comparison between Maud and Roland and Fergus Wolff and Leonora Stern and says that the former academics evolve from being "self-involved" and become "emotionally involved and developed individuals who intuit the past" (32). Maud and Roland do develop a reciprocal relationship with the past where their lives become entangled with the lives of Ash and LaMotte in complex but permanent ways. Byatt, he says, is critical of scholars such as Stern and Wolff whose focus on theory and "turning inwards" in terms of feminism and psychoanalysis makes the truth of the past inaccessible (32). This is not the way that Byatt wants to revive a passion for the Victorian (33). However, Gauthier's reading of academic scholarship in *Possession* essentially dismisses feminist theory, suggesting that when LaMotte is studied from a feminist perspective that there is only one way to read her, that feminism only allows for one understanding of LaMotte as a lesbian feminist poet, and that this kind of scholarship ultimately leads to a misreading of the past.

Indeed, Byatt does have fun with the character of Stern and is, in a sense, poking fun at a specific type of feminist analysis, but I don't believe that she is suggesting that all feminism is one-dimensional. She may be wary of totalizing discourses but, if anything, she is critical of this reading precisely because of the reevaluation of the scholarship that takes place after Maud undergoes her academic transformation. Many of LaMotte's poems will have to be reread in light of the revelation that she and Ash were lovers - this is a fact. But, this does not mean that LaMotte cannot still be a feminist poet or that her poetry cannot be read within the frameworks that already exist. At the end of the novel, when the scholars are discussing all of the new information about LaMotte and Ash and how their work will have to be reread, Stern says that

LaMotte “has always been cited as a lesbian-feminist poet. Which she was, but not exclusively, it appears” (Byatt 485). She points to the fact that simply because LaMotte had a heterosexual affair this does not mean that previous scholarship on her should be dismissed, that we cannot know the whole truth. Gauthier suggests that Byatt’s description of feminist theory is one that claims it is too rigid and one-dimensional and that there is no way to “read” the truth in this way. I think that Byatt is actually pointing to this notion in the novel and wants us to think about the fact that, with the exception of Stern, no one considers LaMotte as a feminist poet once her affair is revealed. Byatt leads us to believe that Maud, as a descendant of LaMotte and as a major LaMotte scholar, will have control of the Ash-LaMotte papers and the fate of future scholarship is in her hands. The relationship between Maud and Roland, and the way that their relationship mirrors the affair between Ash and LaMotte, implies that Maud will not return to her feminist analysis of LaMotte’s poetry. Byatt is suggesting that feminist scholarship is marginal at best and only acceptable when analysing the work of a lesbian poet who lived in a female community with her lover. Once LaMotte is revealed to be following the heterosexual path, this relationship becomes privileged above all else and seems to be the focus for future scholarship about LaMotte. In this way, LaMotte is rewritten in terms of heteronormative discourses and her place in history is redefined. She no longer occupies a subversive place in the literary canon or in the textual space of *Possession*.

Gauthier disagrees with criticism about *Possession* that reads it as a postmodern text that destabilizes both the past and the present as well as the ways that we read history. Instead, despite the intertextuality, the fragmentation and uncertainties in the text, Gauthier sees a linearity and progression to the novel that challenges its postmodern status and its subversive potential: “With its immediate concern for existence in a postmodern age, *Possession* seeks to emphasize the ways in which it is distinctly unpostmodern. Historiographic metafiction should

trouble both our sense of the past *and* the present. Yet in *Possession* it is really *only* the present that is subjected to destabilization” (32). However, Byatt’s privileging of the Victorian does not destabilize the present and the fact that Maud discovers that she is a direct descendant of Ash and LaMotte means that the present also becomes fixed in specific and gendered ways. With the discovery of the affair between Ash and LaMotte, the poets begin to lose their autonomy and the “Ash-LaMotte” correspondence, as it is described by the end of the novel, becomes an entity that does not seem to allow for further exploration of their work on an individual basis: “But these letters have made us all look - in some ways - a little silly, in our summing-up of lives on the evidence we had. None of Ash’s post-1859 poems is uncontaminated by this affair - we shall need to reassess *everything*” (Byatt 485). However, this reassessment suggests that LaMotte will no longer be a feminist poet, no longer an artist in her own right - she will now instead be Ash’s lover, fixed in history as an adulterous woman. Despite the fact that Ash, himself, valued LaMotte as a talented poet, all of her work will now be considered within the context of their affair.

Jackie Buxton says that *Possession* is not a subversive text and that “its ideology is a heterosexual, humanist one” (101). There is certainly a heterosexualizing of the narrative that has been read as problematic by some critics. However, again, I think that Byatt wants her readers to ask these questions and is ultimately suggesting that, in the end, no matter how much scholarship or literary traditions change, there will always be a larger discourse at work - in this instance it is history - that works as a stabilizing and normalizing force in the future. As LaMotte herself says “*All History is hard facts - and something else - passion and colour lent by men*” (Byatt 499). This was written in her final letter to Ash revealing that she had given birth to their daughter some thirty years earlier. Ash never read the letter and his wife, Ellen, buried it with him when he died. These facts are discovered as Maud reads the letter years later. In these few words,

Byatt's message is clear - the facts of LaMotte's life cannot change. These facts, she is aware, can be interpreted, constructed and reimagined - here from a patriarchal perspective - but the events of her life are set. She ends her letter by telling Ash of their grandson and says, with emphasis, that he is a strong boy and he "will live" (499). It is as though she knows what historical fate is waiting for her - that she will now be a female adulterer, an unwed mother, and a spinster aunt - she will no longer have a legacy but her male heir "will live" because he will be allowed to. The fact that Blanche's history and artistic legacy are also absent from the text and in history is revealing in this context and points to the general erasure of women's history.

There are many theories as to why Blanche does not survive history except as a mystery and as a part of LaMotte's life that will never be revealed. Buxton suggests that Byatt believes, in terms of history, that anything is possible and that we can know everything, but that she remains silent about the relationship between Blanche and Christabel (102). Buxton says that Byatt is being coy by omitting these details but I think that it is a conscious move on her part to draw our attention to what is missing. In a novel where scholars will go so far as to desecrate graves to find out the "truth" and to have all of the information, Byatt is careful to draw the readers' attention to what they cannot know and what they may be willing to overlook in order to make sense of the past. For example, Byatt provides the reader with a postscript, a scene where Ash meets his daughter and takes a lock of her hair. This moment is never recorded, the message Ash gives to the girl never delivered: "There are things which happen and leave no discernible trace, are not spoken or written of, though it would be very wrong to say that subsequent events go on indifferently, all the same, as though such things had never been" (Byatt 508). By the same means, the true nature of Blanche's relationship with LaMotte will never be known but the absence of the history of this relationship needs to be addressed in terms of gender and a normalizing heterosexist discourse. It is as if Blanche and her artistic legacy cannot

exist once the affair between Ash and LaMotte is revealed—patriarchy is the public discourse that redefines their stories. In the Victorian story, Blanche commits suicide and partly blames her death on the loss of her relationship with Christabel: *“We believed it was possible to live frugally, charitably, philosophically, artistically, and in harmony with each other and with Nature. Regrettably it was not. Either the world was too fiercely inimical to our experiment (which I believe it was) or we ourselves were insufficiently resourceful and strong-minded (which I believe was also so, in both cases, and from time to time)”* (Byatt 307). While there is no overt description of their relationship as a romantic or lesbian one, Blanche refers to Christabel as her partner and refers to their “experiment” as about women choosing to live independently from men - emotionally, economically and spiritually. Although it is unclear what happens between Blanche and Christabel right before her suicide, Blanche’s note alludes to the fact that she now sees Christabel as belonging to someone else, as becoming part of a heterosexual economy of exchange. She does not want Christabel to bear the expense of her funeral saying, *“I particularly wish that this matter be not put to MISS LAMOTTE’S charge”* (307) and she notes that she and Christabel were property owners in their own right and shared the expense of the house which she leaves to Christabel (308). It is as if she wants to make sure that Christabel remains economically independent despite the fact that she is involved with Ash and she says: *“It is to be hoped that our first heady days of economic independence, and the work we leave behind us, may induce other stronger spirits to take up the task and try the experiment and not fail. Independent women must expect more of themselves, since neither men nor other more conventionally domesticated women will hope for anything, or expect any result other than utter failure”* (307). She fears that Christabel is becoming one of these “conventionally domesticated women” and regardless of her sexuality, will be swept in the heterosexist norms that dictated Victorian society.

Byatt's writing of Blanche may be representative of the ways in which women, especially marginalized women who refuse to conform to societal norms, are erased from history. But Gauthier suggests that the heterosexualizing of LaMotte and Byatt's refusal to address the possibility of a lesbian relationship as an alternative history undermines her "attempt to convey the silent voices of history" (58). Furthermore, according to both Buxton and Campbell, Byatt sees the relationship between Maud and Roland, and specifically the ways in which it becomes a repetition or continuation of Ash and LaMotte, as a "productive, liberating affair" (Buxton 102) that allows the lovers to find a balance and commit to each other without losing their autonomy (Campbell 134). Campbell suggests that Maud and Roland are able to solve the problem of romance that their Victorian predecessors could not and, in the process, create a new kind of heterosexual relationship that "stunningly balances openness and closure in a way that feminist critics argue is representative of successful feminist fiction" (136). Perhaps this is true, that Maud and Roland are able to continue the intellectual, equal and passionate relationship that Ash and LaMotte began but the fact remains, as Buxton point out, that they are scripting themselves into a conventional romance narrative that requires a heterosexual plot. And it is a plot where Blanche becomes expendable. Maud and Roland's love may be freed from the "suspect ideological construct" (267) that Maud believed it to be but due to the connection with Ash and LaMotte and the repetition from the Victorian story, this can only happen at the expense of Blanche.

Gauthier says that absence of detail about the relationship between Blanche and LaMotte, and the fact that Blanche's personal and artistic legacy is meager at best, represents Byatt's intention to create a specific kind of narrative: "Byatt's exclusion highlights the willful construction of a particular kind of narrative that corresponds more closely to her particular version of the past. The intertexts in the novel ultimately confirm a specific reading of the past

constructed by individuals whom Byatt perceives as both enlightened and attuned” (59). However, while I agree that this may be the case in terms of their academic work, I don’t believe that this is true of the personal relationship between Maud and Roland. Through their scholarship, Byatt may be attempting to construct her version of the Victorian era making the connection, as Gauthier does, between Maud and Roland’s relationship and the values of the Victorian. But, this connection and reciprocal relationship with the past also suggests a repetition of acts that took place in the Victorian story. Privileging Victorian values and morals, only serves to heterosexualize the plot and allows for Maud and Roland to rewrite the conventional romance narrative. However, privileging the heterosexual relationships also reveals how LaMotte is ultimately excluded from this narrative, the narrative of normative heterosexuality that also signals domesticity and certain forms of feminine respectability. LaMotte fails in all of these things due to her relationship with Blanche, her adultery with Ash and by bearing a child out of wedlock. Is Maud, as an “enlightened and attuned” Victorian scholar (Gauthier 59) and a direct descendant of LaMotte recreating a liberating version of this affair, a new and balanced heterosexual romantic plot? Or, is she bound by the same narrative as LaMotte, one that will ultimately exclude her from acceptable forms of femininity and domesticity? Of Ash and LaMotte, Campbell says: “Despite his respect for Christabel’s equality and for her need, as an artist and as a woman, to be free, Ash cannot both love her and leave her with her liberty. He is aware during their correspondence that they are contained within a plot that imposes its own convention” (132). Likewise, Maud and Roland are self-conscious critics of their own actions, using theory and logic to understand their feelings and to make sense of their own plot. However, as Campbell also notes, Ash ultimately persuades Christabel that they can carve out a space for themselves, that they can steal away and be free (132). This freedom leaves Christabel as a stereotype - a fallen woman and an unmarried mother (Campbell

132). While critics may believe that the relationship of Maud and Roland revises the relationship of Ash and LaMotte and creates a new and equal romance narrative, the fact that it relies on the insistence of a normative heterosexuality that ultimately excludes Blanche *and* LaMotte undermines the extent of its liberatory potential. As LaMotte says, “*I see no good way out indeed*” (Byatt 184).

Further, LaMotte violates traditional norms when it comes to the spaces associated with acceptable notions of femininity and domesticity. LaMotte and Blanche live together as companions, attempting to build a life independent of men, and they may or may not be lovers. They create a domestic space that mocks Victorian heterosexual marital homes and their relationship can be seen as a violation of this norm. Through her adultery Christabel may be following a heterosexual path but she is also transgressing marriage and domestic space. First, she acts as the adulterous wife by leaving the domestic space she shares with Blanche and by visiting a hotel with Ash. Second, through her role as Ash’s lover, she is violating the domestic space associated with his marriage. Although she does not physically enter Ellen Ash’s home, Christabel’s and Ash’s adultery becomes a violation through its detachment from the home.¹⁷ Their adultery takes place in separate spaces; spaces of adultery that are both public and private. They court through letters, meet in parks, spend much time outside together, and, finally take the train to a hotel in the country. Their adultery is their own private affair but they are often together in places where they could easily be, or are, seen making a further mockery of marital spaces. Finally, both Ash and LaMotte describe their spaces of adultery in their letters and in their poetry. When the correspondence is revealed in the twentieth century and LaMotte becomes reinscribed into a heterosexual plot as Ash’s lover, she is also being reinscribed as a female adulterer who fails in terms of notions of feminine respectability and domesticity and who

¹⁷ Christabel does not enter the Ash house herself but Blanche makes many attempts to confront Ellen Ash with information about the affair in her efforts to make it stop. Blanche’s actions are described by Ellen as a violation and an insult to the sanctity of her marriage. However, she does not see Blanche as the perpetrator, but blames Christabel. In this way, Christabel could be seen as transgressing the boundary of the marital home.

violates the spaces associated with these norms.

Possession's Herstory

Critics have discussed the many ways that Byatt addresses the notion of female creativity in her work. In *Possession*, she is specifically interested in the ways in which women's history gets written and the ways in which literary plots that centre on women get repeated. Campbell suggests that it is Byatt's subversion of the traditional romance plot and use of multiple stories in her text that allows her to transcend patriarchal assumptions and frees her from literary practices that attempt to create "truths" about women and women writers (108). She says that "both Byatt and her characters are engaged with the question of fictive truth as it relates to literature, criticism, biography, history, and moral experience" (109). Byatt's characters are certainly aware of the ways that they construct their own lives, and the women, especially Blanche and Christabel, are able to identify the restrictions and expectations that are imposed upon them by society. Christabel is, of course, a writer and her letters to Ash often explore the writing process and her own role as a writer. Much of *Possession* is written as an epistolary novel and this self-conscious process means that many of the characters are constructing themselves and are aware of the constructions that shape them, including the twentieth century scholars whose work and own writings are based on the writing of the Victorian characters.

Possession is very much a novel about telling stories - whose story gets told, who tells it and what gets left out in the process. Women's stories are at the centre and *Possession* can be seen as a kind of "herstory," exploring narratives that may challenge patriarchal literary and social processes but that ultimately get reinscribed by these discourses. Byatt herself has described her books as somewhat feminist, saying that she addresses the woman artist, her language and the language that has been used to write her (Campbell 1). Campbell discusses that centering of

women's plots in *Possession*:

Byatt uses plot, in both the Victorian and the twentieth century narratives, to question traditional women's plots. She does so in three closely related ways: by showing, in both centuries, the destructive effects of the culture's construction of the female and, at the same time, the richness and variety of women's creative potential; by exploring the possibilities for women of working together in solidarity; and by imagining love relationships between men and women that begin and remain rooted in intellectual sharing, 'passions of the mind.' (112)

While I have already discussed the problems of the heterosexual love plots that ultimately expose the exclusion of both Blanche and LaMotte, Campbell's observations about women's community and women's creative expression need to be explored. Both Christabel and Blanche struggle with their identities as artists in a world that seeks to restrict their social mobility and autonomy.

Campbell notes that many of Christabel's poems discuss the dilemmas facing Victorian women, especially artists and address "both the issues of male construction of femaleness and the question of woman-in-herself" (118). Much of Christabel's poetry reevaluates traditional means of representing women and she produces poems that deal with the female quest or fairy tales, exploring and critiquing the social constructions present in the origins of these works (Campbell 114 - 116). Campbell also points out that many of Christabel's poems confront the complexities of Victorian women's experiences - Christabel uses domestic imagery in some of her work, expressing delight at the domestic but also warning against the oppressive burden that these expectations place on women (116-117). While Christabel's work warns against the confinement that many women faced, she also discusses the fact that sometimes, confinement may provide a freedom that men cannot understand and will not know about (Campbell 118). Campbell makes this connection when Maud is analyzing a poem of Christabel's about a Sibyl.

Maud says that she started to think about the poem when she was writing about “Victorian women’s imagination of space” and that the poem resonated with her in terms of the paradoxical desire for women to escape the confinement of the domestic space while also longing to retreat further inside their impenetrable fortress (Byatt 54). Maud says “The Sybil was safe in her jar, no one could touch her” (54). The notion of being safely enclosed and free from the male gaze in this way is a theme that comes up again, as Campbell points out, when Christabel writes to Ash: “*within its confines we are free in a way you, who have freedom to range the world, do not need to imagine*” (Byatt 137). She is referring to her life with Blanche, a life independent of men where they live as artists and create their own images of themselves free from male constructions and male influence.

While Christabel may warn against the stifling and often oppressive confines of the domestic space for women, she seems to suggest that there is a way to create a safe, nurturing and creative space, but it is a space where women are “confined” by choice and without men at the centre or as the owners of this space. When Christabel begins her relationship with Ash, Blanche describes him as a wolf at the door, a prowler and a peeping tom (Byatt 46- 47). Although she is worried that the presence of Ash will destroy their idyllic relationship, she is also immediately concerned for Christabel as an artist. She says:

This Peeping Tom has put his eye to the nick or cranny in our walls and peers shamelessly in. She laughs and says he means no harm, and is incapable of seeing the essential things we know and keep safe, and so it is, so it must be, so it must always be.... but I fear for her. I asked her how much writing she had lately done, and she laughed, and said she was learning so much, so very much, and when it was all learned she should have new matter to write about and many new things to say. (47)

Blanche alludes to the male gaze, to Ash's male influence peeping in on some essential female artistic process, a process that can only be affected negatively through his influence. She is the only one who worries about Christabel as a writer first and foremost and believes that her relationship with Ash has changed her creative process. However, Christabel believes that Ash is nurturing her writing and much of their relationship is based on their respect and admiration for each other as writers and intellectuals. Ash does, indeed, encourage and support Christabel, gives her feedback on her work and believes her to be a talented and important writer. In a sense, Christabel's literary talents allow her to be freed from societal pressures and expectations; she has the privilege of being allowed into the intellectual world even though she is conflicted about entering a world of male privilege (Campbell 113). But she can only be truly freed by her genius when she enters into the heterosexual economy of exchange with Ash - albeit problematized by the fact that it is adultery - and it is Blanche, attempting to create art outside of the influence of men, who is sacrificed in the process. Campbell says that "The figures and images through which Christabel constructs her personal identity represent the Victorian and modern dilemmas of the woman artist" (120). She compares Christabel to Maud, saying that Maud is also torn between the solitude that she needs to work and her longing for a relationship (127). Christabel does succeed in becoming a well-respected poet, particularly in feminist circles where she is lauded as a lesbian-feminist poet whose independent life with Blanche allowed her to nurture her artistic gift. It is Maud's academic pairing with Roland and their subsequent relationship that leads to the discovery of Christabel's affair with Ash and ultimately causes Christabel to be reevaluated as an artist in her own right.

Byatt has effectively killed her female adulterer, and perhaps this is her point. Franken suggests that LaMotte's "moral decision concerns the question whether she should sleep with Ash; the decision destroys her autonomy" (103). I have argued that it is not only LaMotte's

affair with Ash that ultimately destroys her autonomy, but also Roland and Maud's act of reconstructing the events. This is what Blanche knew all along. Blanche knew that LaMotte could survive the affair with Ash as a woman, but not as a writer. In her diary she suggests that Christabel's association with Ash is most damaging to her career as a writer: "All this adulation is detrimental to her true gifts.... She knows her own worth" (Byatt 46). As Blanche says in her suicide note: "*Nothing endures for certain, but good art endures for all time, and I have wanted to be understood by those not yet born. By whom else, after all?*" (308) LaMotte will now be understood only as the lover of Ash and her poems will always be read in that subordinated context. Over a century later, Maud and Roland prove that Blanche Glover was right.

Through the twentieth century scholarship, we discover that Christabel was a female adulterer and an unmarried mother - the only way for her to regain her autonomy and be a writer in her own right was by giving up her child and living a reclusive, artistic life - a life that was unacceptable for Victorian women and that would have had serious consequences. The revelation of her affair with Ash means that her work and her life will now be forever tied to him. Like Christabel, Maud chooses to leave her own ivory tower and feminist community and to let a man into her life, her work, and her heart. Ironically, it is this act that recasts Christabel in patriarchal terms and seems to exclude her from the scholarly feminist community to which she had once belonged - like a Victorian fallen woman, she is being punished, cast out into exile. Campbell says that Byatt's work offers us a "multiplicity of women's voices and stories" where "processes of construction and reconstruction are fluid and open ended" (25). This may be one reading, but I think that Byatt's text points to the impossibility of escaping these patriarchal literary processes not simply through the stories we tell, but in the ways that scholars construct and analyze them. Like Christabel, Maud leaves the safety of her feminist and women's studies community to experiment with new forms of reading the past. Byatt is somewhat critical of

feminist studies, which she views as one-dimensional, and she wants to move away from feminist scholarship that she sees as being about binaries and absolutes - much like her character of Leonora (Campbell 15-19). Byatt's attempt to challenge rigid scholarship through the character of Maud somewhat undermines the potential for *Possession* to be a feminist and woman-centred novel. Upon partnering with Roland, Maud literally lets her hair down and gradually moves away from the feminist community and scholarship that has been her life's work. At the same time, Christabel is slowly being recast as a woman who has no community. Byatt does not allow for what Campbell describes as fluid and open-ended feminist scholarship because she views feminism as being about binaries. Yet, Christabel is recast in these terms, in terms of a male patriarchal language where she may be a poet, a mother, an artist, a lesbian, a mistress, but she can never be all of these things and the multiplicity of her experience. What Byatt says is important for a feminist analysis, is denied (Campbell 21, 23).

***Possession's* Women: The Artist, The Wife, and the Lover.**

Despite Byatt's undermining of Christabel's artistic and literary autonomy, she does make an attempt to create a female community in *Possession* and there are many suggestions of feminist activity in both the Victorian and the twentieth century stories. As Campbell and others have pointed out, there are many instances of women helping women in *Possession* and of women working together, forming community to further their own independence and intellectual needs. However, one of the reasons that the female adulterer is a complex and paradoxical figure when it comes to feminism is that she is often constructed as working against women. In *Possession*, Christabel's relationship with Ash affects many women in the text in the Victorian story and the twentieth century story directly and indirectly. Blanche is most obviously affected by Christabel's actions and tragically commits suicide; we learn later in the novel that Ellen Ash

has always known about the affair between Christabel and her husband; Christabel's sister raises the child that Christabel bears after the affair; and Maud and Leonora have spent much of their academic careers studying LaMotte only to realize that they will have to reevaluate their own ideas. Campbell says that these women are all connected by the ways that they work together: "Byatt shows the reductive, cramping construction of women in two periods of history, but she also shows women's potential for creative self-assertion and empowerment, available especially when women work together" (128). However, while that may be true, the discovery of the affair and the act of the affair change everything in terms of these relationships and Christabel becomes the site of all the anxiety, guilt, blame and emotions that result. As the female adulterer, she bears the burden of all the other women's failures in terms of domesticity and femininity especially with Blanche and Ellen. Christabel's relationship with Ash is taken as a betrayal by Blanche, a betrayal of their artistic community, a betrayal of their domestic living arrangement, and also of their female companionship and marriage-like relationship. Christabel is the cheating wife and the mistress, leaving her reimagined domestic space for the more traditionally constructed heterosexual spaces of adultery. At the same time, Ellen, Ash's wife, is also represented as constituting a kind of failed domesticity - she is unable to consummate her marriage with Ash but Christabel wants to be intimate with him, acting as his wife. All three women form their own adulterous triangle of sorts, all dealing with their own versions of a failed domesticity. In the twentieth century, once Christabel's own failures are exposed, Maud is destined to face the same failures.

Female Community and the Spectre of Feminism: Christabel and Blanche

Byatt creates a particularly fascinating relationship between Christabel and Blanche that can be read as a commentary on the limits to women's mobility and women's relationship to

domesticity. It is through the character of Blanche that Byatt explores the nature of feminist scholarship itself and the problematics of trying to salvage a feminist reading or be a woman writer/artist in these male-dominated traditions that are overwhelmingly burdened by the history of patriarchy. I do think that Byatt is trying to draw her readers' attention to the ways in which women have been devalued in history and also to the ways in which feminist scholarship has been disregarded, especially in the context of Maud's academic experience. Although Byatt is dismissive of feminism herself, perhaps we can read her recasting of Christabel as being related to the larger issue of feminist scholarship and feminist community and a backlash against these things. Many representations of women, especially female adultery narratives written in the Victorian period, can be seen (paradoxically) to encompass a spectre of feminism - the anxiety of the middle class and the ways in which women participated in middle-class society and intellectual life were represented, suggesting that change was on the horizon. Byatt hints at this through the relationship between Blanche and Christabel and the woman-centred life that they lived before Ash came along. In contemporary fiction, the spectre of feminism has been transformed into more of a haunting - the ghosts of these female characters, still riddled with the anxiety and shifts that Rosner identifies as marking the move from Victorian to modern, are present in the texts, reminding the reader that, as Lamotte says in *Possession*: "I see no good way out indeed" (184). In *Possession*, there is both a spectre of feminism in the Victorian story and a haunting by these feminist characters in the twentieth century when Blanche and Christabel are revived.

The relationship between Blanche and Christabel has been constructed by the twentieth-century scholars as a lesbian relationship based on the fact that they lived together and they created art and poetry that contained many symbols and images that were interpreted as being woman-centred and a celebration of the feminine. Blanche also refers to their relationship as a

partnership and acts like a jealous lover when Ash begins his pursuit of Christabel. As well, Blanche talks of the safety and security she feels with Christabel and that she would be doomed to a life as a governess if it weren't for Christabel's financial contribution to their home. They appear to live a quiet, domestic life and Blanche very much plays the role of the unassuming wife. She talks of "our little house" and the pleasure of shutting the door on the outside world to "be gathered in to the silence of our little parlour" (Byatt 45). Their world is one of domestic comforts and intellectual pleasures - both Blanche and Christabel are clearly educated, intelligent, and creative women and, indeed, Blanche's first acknowledgment of her dislike of Ash is as a criticism of his poetry: "He lacks, in my view, the lyrical flow and intensity of Alfred Tennyson" (44). Blanche clearly admires Christabel's talents and sees their world as perfect - one where they can live as they please and nurture their creative aspirations: "Our days weave together the simple pleasures of daily life, which we should never take for granted, and the higher pleasures of Art and Thought which we may now taste as we please, with none to forbid or criticize" (45). Her message is clear: that without men, they are free to pursue their art and they can also take pleasure in the domestic, something that they could not do if they were wives and mothers or even governesses. Blanche suggests that if they lived with men, they would be expected to make their domestic duties their higher pleasure or be forbidden to think at all.

Interestingly, Blanche's initial jealousy of Ash is because Christabel seems to need his approval of and advice about her work. Blanche insists, and always has, that Christabel's work is important and she enjoys the times that they spend together sharing and discussing their work. Indeed, much of Blanche's art is of, about, or for Christabel - work that later goes missing. With Ash's arrival things change: "All this correspondence is detrimental to her true gifts. She is in no real need of epistolary adulation. She knows her own worth. I only wish I were as sure of mine" (46). Blanche's insecurities begin to show as her domestic life with Christabel is threatened.

Obviously, Blanche is afraid that she will lose the security of their house and the world they have created and she worries that she will have to take a job as a governess and will have to give up her painting. But she also alludes to a more intimate connection: "She came in to me as I knelt there and raised me up, and said we must never quarrel and that she would never, ever, give me cause to doubt her, and I must not suppose that she could. I am sure she meant what she said. She was agitated; there were a few tears. We were quiet together, in our special ways, for a long time" (47). This is one of the last entries in Blanche's diary. The only other remaining document about her life is her suicide note. From other correspondence we can fill in some of the blanks of Blanche's life - Ash talks of Blanche in his letters to Christabel asking about her situation and that he hopes things have calmed down at home. We also know that Blanche went to Ellen Ash with "evidence" of their affair and is described as a "poor mad white-faced woman, in her neat, worn boots, pacing and pacing" (454). Although Blanche appears to be tentative in her relationship with Christabel and acts like the timid and docile wife, she is fiercely protective of her domestic life and fights to keep Christabel as her own: "We were so happy, Mrs Ash, we were all in all to each other, we were innocent" (454). The affair with Ash takes the innocence of all three women and ruins their domestic lives. Blanche, feels helpless and alone - her dream of a life independent from men has been shattered and so has her innocence about Christabel and her own independence. Although she was living in a domestic arrangement where she was dependent on Christabel, she believed that they could survive if they supported each other as women and as artists. As Campbell says: "She and Christabel tried to live an experiment in a harmonious, non-hierarchical partnership where each would pursue her own creative impulse and each would do her share of the household's work" (121). As Blanche becomes more aware of Christabel's developing relationship with Ash, she also notices that Christabel has stopped writing and has also begun to disregard her domestic life. Blanche becomes the jealous wife, suspicious of

Christabel's behaviour, stealing her correspondence, complaining about her disinterest in their life, and desperately confronting Ash's wife.

However, her suicide note signals not only her sadness but also her anger - at Christabel, but also at Ash. For Blanche, Ash represents a threat to everything that she was fighting for - the freedom to live independently and be creative without male influence. Christabel's affair with Ash reveals to Blanche the impossibility of being free from this male influence, to live "fully human lives" without men (307). She acknowledges that the world was resistant to their experiment and that she hopes that other, stronger women will persist in living this way. As an artist, Blanche was always insecure and felt inadequate next to Christabel. However, in her suicide note, this is not the case and she reclaims her worth and says that her work has value. As a sign of her anger and with the knowledge that her story may never be told, she leaves all of her art work to Christabel asking that her paintings stay together and calls upon Christabel's "artistic conscience" (308). In her final act of suicide, she places the blame of her failed domesticity on Christabel. The loss of her female community and her artistic community is the fault of a patriarchal authority that was too hard to escape but she places that burden on Christabel when she cites Mary Wollstonecraft and sews rocks belonging to Christabel into her clothes before she drowns herself. Gauthier says that Blanche represents the "work of women that has been washed away by the tides of history and the oppression of men" (57). In her suicide note, Blanche acknowledges that this will be her fate and although her subtle message to Christabel could be read as a plea for her to continue their artistic legacy, to not let her death be in vain, it also places the burden of the adultery on Christabel as Blanche's death also represents the punishment that would usually befall a female adulterer in Victorian literature.

Blanche Glover, then, is a spectral presence in the text in two ways. Her reference to Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, a famous feminist treatise published

in 1792 that stressed the importance of education and economic independence for women, suggests that Blanche was trying to live by feminist tenets. Blanche and Christabel could be seen to be taking this idea one step further through their economic independence and through making their house a home. In her suicide note, Blanche suggests that society was intolerant of an experiment like this one and that, even without Ash, they already faced difficult odds. She represents the spectre of feminism, a warning of what was to come that was the cause of much anxiety in Victorian society. It was unthinkable that two women could live together, possibly as lovers, and create a "family" and a "home." It mocked the very practice of femininity and the domestic ideology by which the Victorians were supposed to live. The reference to Mary Wollstonecraft, then, also works in two ways - her feminist politics and ideals were ones that Blanche tried to emulate, creating a spectre of feminism that caused anxiety. However, while Wollstonecraft was well known for encouraging women to be educated about economic independence, she ultimately believed that a woman's place was in the home, that domesticity was something that all women desired, and that ideally women would not need to be economically independent. She believed that women should be considered full citizens but within a narrow domestic ideal, focused on the home. Wollstonecraft's belief in domestic ideology reminds us that this dominant ideology is the one that ultimately prevails and Blanche becomes a spectral presence of another kind, a ghost who haunts Christabel and haunts the twentieth century scholars who inadvertently reinscribe Christabel into this same dominant discourse.

Byatt also suggests a kind of feminism in the way that Blanche chooses to commit suicide. Her note says that she is copying Wollstonecraft, but Wollstonecraft died after giving birth, and Blanche's suicide actually resembles that of Virginia Woolf. Although Blanche's suicide predates Woolf, it is hard to ignore this parallel. Woolf, of course, famously stated that in order for women to be creative, to be able to write, they must have money and a room of their

own (*Room*, 4). Woolf is also very critical of the absence of a female canon, the legacy of a literary history for women. In "Women and Fiction" she states that in order to understand women as writers "it is necessary to leave oneself room to deal with other things besides their work, so much has that work been influenced by conditions that have nothing whatever to do with art" (141). Woolf, however, also warned against women using their art to criticize their situations: "And those nineteenth-century novels, remarkable as they were, were profoundly influenced by the fact that the women who wrote them were excluded by their sex from certain experiences" (142). She actually suggests that when women wrote novels that expressed resentment at their treatment and talked of oppression and women's rights, it showed a weakness in their writing and left them open to ridicule and censure (143).¹⁸ While Woolf acknowledges the patriarchal literary history that shaped the work of women writers, she also suggests that women writers in the nineteenth century focused too much on their anger and resentment: "Moreover, insincerity leaks in almost unconsciously. They adopt a view in deference to authority. The vision becomes too masculine or it becomes too feminine; it loses its perfect integrity and, with that, its most essential quality as a work of art" (145). The fact that Blanche's suicide resembles the suicide of Virginia Woolf allows us to make the connection between Woolf's politics when it came to women and creativity and the way that Blanche tried to live her life.¹⁹ It could be argued that Blanche represents the kind of art that Woolf warns against, one that is entirely focused on the feminine and on women's position. As many critics point out, Christabel and Ash develop a relationship that is first and foremost based on mutual respect for each other's work and the craft of writing poetry. The allusion to Woolf in Blanche's suicide raises questions about what constitutes women's art and women's writing and if there is value to be had in studying this perspective. Blanche's suicide suggests that there is no room for

¹⁸ Woolf uses the examples of *Middlemarch* by George Eliot and *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brönte.

¹⁹ In 1941 Virginia Woolf committed suicide by filling her pockets with stones and drowning herself in the River Ouse.

an independent feminist voice, especially if she identifies male authority as a social problem. Christabel's relationship with Ash, the subsequent relationship between Roland and Maud that is described as a new, egalitarian construction of heterosexuality, the reevaluation of Christabel's work outside of feminist theory, and the absence of Blanche's legacy beyond a journal and a suicide note, all point to the notion that patriarchal male authority remains too pervasive. As Woolf says, a woman must have "the courage to surmount opposition and the determination to be true to herself" ("Women and Fiction," 145) in order to be true to her creative gifts. However, history proves that this is still not possible and Blanche's suicide symbolizes the paradox that Woolf outlines: Blanche's feminist ideals ultimately prevented her from becoming a great woman artist but her feminist ideals form the heart and passion of her art. As Blanche says when Ash arrives on the scene, his presence in Christabel's life will be "detrimental to her true gifts" (Byatt 46).

Failed Domesticity and Female Adultery: Christabel and Ellen

The fact that Blanche's suicide and Christabel's identity as a female adulterer exclude them from social domestic norms and point to a failed domesticity suggests that there is a successful version of domesticity. The obvious construction would be one that fulfills the social heteronormative codes in terms of family, marriage and property. In adultery narratives, it is the female adulterer who is demonized because she violates these codes, but is also a site of anxiety because she exposes the contradictions, flaws, and unrealistic expectations that these social constructions bring. In *Possession*, Ellen and Randolph Ash are seemingly the perfect bourgeois Victorian couple, but Ash's adultery exposes the realities of their relationship and reveals a failed domesticity for Ellen Ash.

As with Blanche, we know of Ellen's life through her journals and through the letters that

she and Ash exchanged. The second section of the book that is entitled Ellen Ash's Journal is one of the most intertextual parts of the book and is actually a combination of letters, diary entries, sections of a biography of Ash, and a third-person narrative framing it all that is told from Ellen's perspective. It is one of the few places in the novel where we see the perspective of a Victorian character outside of the other epistolary constructions and it is interesting that Byatt chooses to give Ellen this agency, allowing the reader her version of who Ellen may have been. Ellen's writing reveals that silence was at the heart of her marriage which was, at times, a marriage of love and companionship and also a marriage of silent acceptance and pain - it was also a marriage that was never consummated. Ellen knew about Randolph's affair with Christabel. Blanche is aware of Ellen's knowledge but Christabel remains ignorant. Blanche and Ellen are similar in the sense that they both have knowledge about their relationships, secrets, betrayals and violations of trust. However, while they both write about these things in their personal diaries, Ellen remains quiet about what she knows while Blanche is vocal about her feelings. Ultimately, Ellen survives them all and it is her actions that reveal the final truth about Maia, the daughter born to Christabel and Ash. She has control of the letter that Christabel wrote to Ash telling him about their daughter, a letter that Ash never received. Campbell says that Ellen's act of keeping Christabel's letter and burying it with him gives her a unique kind of agency in the text: "...by ensuring the survival of Christabel's letter about Maia's birth and adoption, she gives Maud her heritage. She thus achieves both authority in her own story and authorship in the stories of others" (125). Byatt does give her authority in her own story, but the act of giving Maud her heritage again draws the story back to Christabel and takes authority away from Ellen.

Christabel writes her final letter to Ash when she learns that he is dying. In order for him to receive it, she must beg Ellen to pass it along to him. She writes to Ellen, pleading with her, saying "I am in your hands" (450). Ellen carries the letter around with her during the last two

months of Ash's life but does not give it to him. Byatt develops an interesting scene here, one where Ellen has an inner dialogue with Christabel, planning a letter to her that she will never write. She fluctuates between feeling guilty for keeping the letter, being angry at Christabel for writing, and feeling a kind of kinship with Christabel about their situations, "One old woman to another" (451). In one of her imagined letters to Christabel she says: "You must understand that my husband told me, long ago, freely and truthfully, of his feeling for you, and that the matter, having been understood between us, was set aside as something past and understood" (451). She fears that there is "too much repetition of understood" (451) suggesting that it is something she accepted but did not really understand. But, it is more than that. It also implies that she is revealing her own failures, as a wife, to Christabel and that it is Christabel who will understand the truth in what she writes. Further, Ellen reworks the letter, now angry at Christabel: "How can you ask this of me, how can you break up this short time I have with him, the life *we* have, of small kindnesses and unspoken ties, how can you menace my last days, for they are mine too, *he is my happiness*, which I am about to lose forever, can you not understand that, I cannot give him your letter" (452). Here, Ellen emphasizes Christabel's exclusion from Ash's life as a domestic partner. She talks of "we" and "unspoken ties" suggesting the comfort of the domestic relationship that Christabel was denied. However, while Ellen refers to Ash as her happiness, she does not mention love or passion. When she imagines writing to Christabel earlier, she acknowledges that Ash and Christabel loved each other, that there were feelings involved in that relationship. But her own relationship with Ash does not speak of love, it speaks of loneliness and grief and of a woman who is desperately trying to protect herself one last time. She does not write to Christabel, sees no point because "it would not convey the truth of the way that it had been, of the silence in the telling, the silences that extended before and after it, always the silence" (453). However, she does not pass along the letter meant for Ash, either. By denying Christabel

this wish and by framing it as a protection of her dying husband and of their relationship, she is reclaiming her domesticity in the only way that she can. Indeed, when she decides to bury that letter from Christabel with Ash, she leaves everything to fate hoping that the “ghouls” will dig them up, “[t]hen justice will perhaps be done to *her* when I am not here to see it” (462). It is unclear here who she is talking about and what she means by justice - she could be referring to any number of *Possession*'s women. Is she talking about Maia, imagining that she will find out her true parentage? Is she talking about Christabel and, if so, what does justice refer to? Does she want Christabel to be punished or redeemed by this act? Ellen could also be referring to Blanche, the other betrayed party, with Ellen a witness to the emotional destruction that Christabel caused in Blanche. Of course, the one person that it does relate to, although Ellen could never have known this, is Maud. Maud learns her true heritage and, subsequently, Christabel loses her identity as a poet and becomes a female adulterer above all else.

There are moments where Ellen shows compassion for Christabel - realizing that she has sacrificed a lot in order to keep herself, Ellen and Ash from scandal. Ellen even burns an unsent letter in which Ash, having learned of Christabel's pregnancy, suggests that Christabel did not carry the pregnancy to term. Ellen decides that this should not be seen by anyone - for Ash's sake and for Christabel's. However, while she may show compassion and be the picture of loyalty and devotion, her journals do not display any passion at all. She barely gets angry at Ash and Christabel and simply remains silent. Her journals are very restrained. When she is faced with all of the papers and letters at the end of Ash's life, she ponders what she should do with her journals: “She put more coal and more pieces of wood on the fire, and made a brave little blaze, by the side of which she sat down to manufacture the carefully edited, the carefully *strained* (the metaphor was one of jelly-making) truth of her journal. She would decide later what to do with that. It was both a defence against, and a bait for, the gathering of ghouls and

vultures” (462). She has tried to live up to the pressure of being a perfect wife even though she and Ash do not have sex and she is aware of his affair. When Ash admits his affair to Ellen, not realizing that she already knows, she begs him to stop talking about it saying, “it is not *between us*” (455). She decides that it is not her business, that it must be unrelated to her marriage. On the one hand, this give a peculiar kind of agency to Christabel as the other woman but Ellen’s later reclaiming of her role and exclusion of Christabel from the last months of Ash’s life, of *her* marriage, point to the silent resignation and a failed domesticity that, instead, aligns her with Christabel. She maintains her role at all costs: “Had she done well, or ill? She had done what was in her nature, which was profoundly implicated in not knowing, in silence, in avoidance, she said to herself in harsher moments” (455). Through her carefully constructed journals, Ellen leads us to believe that she is simply fulfilling her natural role as a wife and that with this comes a certain sacrifice. This, of course, implies that Christabel will never have the same virtue. Ellen chooses to be the perfect wife, “making his a thousand small comforts, cakes and tidbits. She became his slave. Quivering at every word. *He had accepted her love*” (459).

Despite Ellen’s attempts to convince herself that this is a woman’s natural role, something else about her character is evident in her journals. As Campbell says, Byatt also shows Ellen to be a perceptive literary critic and intellectual and that she had a desire to be a poet herself (Campbell 124-5). Ellen talks of her early love of poetry and her desire to be both a poem and a poet:

It may be that this is the desire of all reading women, as opposed to reading men, who wish to be poets and heroes, but might see the inditing of poetry in our peaceful age, as a sufficiently heroic act.... But I now think - it might have been better, might it not, to have held on to the desire to be a Poet? I could *never* write as well as Randolph, but then no one can or could, and so it was perhaps not

worth considering as an objection to doing something. (122)

Campbell says her desire to be both a poet and a poem points to her wanting to take on the conventional male and female roles but that ultimately she becomes an object in Ash's prose rather than the muse that Christabel embodies (124-125). Ellen herself says "I wanted to be a Poet and a Poem, and now I am neither, but the mistress of a very small household, consisting of an elderly poet..." (122). Campbell suggests that Ellen's desire is indicative of a "sense of self-division" felt by women in both centuries, especially in terms of wanting to be her husband's muse and a good wife but also to have the freedom that he is allowed, especially intellectually (125). There is certainly a sense that Ellen has had to choose between her poetic aspirations and her desire to be a good wife. There does not seem to be any room for both - at least not in her understanding of her domestic role. Thus, her journals are edited, restrained and, we can imagine, removed from any creative aspirations that she may still have. Ellen's aborted poetic inclinations in favour of the domestic ideology that she has silently and painfully undertaken and accepted, however, only serve to emphasize her domestic failure even further. This is evident in two ways. First, ironically her desire to be a poet aligns her, once again, with Christabel. Christabel has the freedom to be a poet and have a relationship with Ash. But this can only be done in terms of an adulterous relationship and she can only retain her success and poetic drive when she gives up her child and isolates herself from the world. The only way Christabel came close to a successful relationship that also allowed her to write was in her arrangement with Blanche. However, as previously discussed, this relationship violated social norms of heterosexual domesticity and femininity and failed for these reasons. Christabel is only able to be a poet and a muse when she is violating social codes. Ellen, already knows this to be true and instead of nurturing her artistic side, she resigns herself to a life of domesticity and constructs this as her true nature and her true gifts - thereby emphasizing Christabel's transgressions, but at the same time exposing her own

failures through her acknowledgment that both women had to make a choice.

Ellen also draws attention to her own failed domesticity through the naturalizing of her domestic role and the lack of passion that it seems to require. She edits her life and her journals to be the picture of restraint - she refuses to use poetic language because it is a language of passion and intimacy - things that she does not have in her life and things that do not fit with her picture of a loyal wife. Ellen and Ash have never consummated their marriage and Ellen is terrified of sexual intimacy, even with the man that she loves. She describes their early attempts at lovemaking in terms of fear and pain, she is a trembling animal, he is feral and overwhelming (459). Ironically, this description is beautiful and poetic, full of passion and the truth of her feelings. It is an emotional and poignant testament to her suffering. In this way, Byatt gives Ellen back some of her agency as a poet because this description is not narrated by Ellen and is something that is imagined by Byatt. Her inability to have sexual intercourse with her husband is made worse by the knowledge that he has been intimate with Christabel and that she has been pregnant. She calls Christabel his "true wife. Mother, at least briefly, to his child it seemed" (460). Her decision to bury the final letter from Christabel rather than destroy it, means that she is perhaps aware that if the secret is revealed, her final domestic failure will also be exposed. Maia represents her husband's adultery and her failed domesticity through her very existence. What is perhaps more shocking is that Ellen seems to have been aware of these issues and perhaps she does not bury the letter as a final act of revenge against Christabel, but as a challenge to the patriarchal history that deemed her, as Beatrice Nest puts it, "a nice dull woman," a "helpmeet" (220). It is in this way that I think Byatt gives Ellen authority in her own story. Giving Maud her heritage may give Ellen authorship in the story, as Campbell puts it, and gives Maud a certain sense of agency, but it also reveals Ellen's domestic failures. However, this act also seals Christabel's fate as an irredeemable female adulterer and, through Maud, guarantees her

historical survival in ways that deny Ellen and Blanche. But, this survival also means that she is pulled back to the centre to bear this burden for all three women.

The Promise of History: *Possession's* Legacy

Byatt, then, has created an intricate novel that in many ways is woman-centred and explores the means by which women have been ignored, erased, revived, and rewritten by history. She is critical of patriarchal practices, especially in the artistic and intellectual communities, that seek to define women according to unrealistic expectations and traditional gender roles. Her focus on the nineteenth century exposes anxieties around women's independence from men and we see from the twentieth century revival of this narrative that many of these anxieties are the same today. Byatt is critical of the ways in which the history of women gets written and of scholarship that is too one-dimensional or claims to know the truth about the past. We cannot know everything, Byatt warns us, and what we think we know can change in an instant.

If *Possession* can be read as a woman-centred novel concerned with the history of women, is it a feminist novel, especially considering that Byatt tries to resist these categories that are a "turning inwards" (Gauthier 32) and may limit our reading of the multiplicity of women's lives (Campbell 25)? Byatt is somewhat dismissive of feminism in her novel and although she could be pointing to a backlash against feminism that sees it as no longer useful or necessary, she could also be suggesting that it *is* no longer useful. However, I think that to assume these readings misses the point of feminist analysis and, in fact, contributes to a backlash against feminism. I believe that Byatt is aware of this. Feminism, by nature, is interdisciplinary and the intertextuality of *Possession* leaves room for a feminist reading. The women in the text are all connected, mostly through Christabel, but they are also connected through their feminist

potential. Blanche is the most obvious feminist character - and the most obvious victim of a backlash. However, all of the women, in some way, negotiate the spaces of their daily lives, their lived experiences in small feminist ways. Their voices may have been erased from history but, as we see from the construction of *Possession*, these voices were rediscovered and make a difference to the multiplicity of lives in the novel.

But as I have argued, the act of rediscovering these voices is also the act that reinscribes Christabel into her literary fate, and thus she is no longer considered a feminist figure by the twentieth-century scholars. I have also argued that while she may be connected to the other women in the novel, she ultimately bears the burden of all of their failures, including the ones that are yet to come from Maud if we assume that she is doomed to repeat these. So, how to solve the problem of Christabel? What to do with the female adulterer? It seems impossible that there is any way out for Christabel. The "truth" about her affair with Ash ultimately seals her fate and places her in the context of heteronormative domestic ideology and the practice of femininity in which she is doomed to fail. Her failure becomes the marker for the failures of Blanche Glover and Ellen Ash. Ironically, this failure is conceived as a victory for the twentieth century scholars, especially for Maud who learns her true heritage. But this victory only serves to undermine feminist scholarship and unconsciously contributes to patriarchal discourse, binding Maud to the same fate and causing Victorian ideology to linger in terms of its anxiety rather than its values and passion. Christabel, then, bears the burden of these failures.

However, there is another way to read Christabel. She becomes a marker for the impossibility of reading the women in the text outside of patriarchal discourse and perhaps this is where we can read her as feminist. She is a site of anxiety and therefore becomes a martyr of sorts, showing us how we are implicated in these historical processes. For obvious reasons, Ellen and Blanche were products and victims of patriarchal culture and with the writing of history their

voices remained unheard. But Christabel survived. And she survived in spite of patriarchy and because of feminism. She may be reinscribed into patriarchal discourses in the twentieth century, but perhaps there is hope that she may keep on surviving - a testament to the strength and endurance of women's literary history. Campbell and others suggest that there is hope in *Possession* in the way that Maud and Roland construct their own relationship, that they are able to free themselves from these normalizing discourses and create a new kind of relationship and, with it, a new kind of scholarship that is reciprocal and egalitarian. I like to think that there is hope, not in the privileged heterosexual relationship between Maud and Roland, but in the relationship between Maud and Christabel. Maud and Christabel are connected through history, through literature, and by blood. Christabel survives in Maud and perhaps, in this way, shares some of her burden and through the likelihood of repetition, moves one step closer to freedom.

III

ADULTERY AND FAILED DOMESTICITY: EVELYN LAU'S *OTHER WOMEN*²⁰

In this chapter, I explore Evelyn Lau's novel, *Other Women*. Using Foucault's theories of heterotopic space and Elizabeth Grosz's feminist analysis of spatiality and identity, I will explore how adulterous desire is conceived spatially and how adulterous and domestic spaces construct particular kinds of identity. Lau's novel initially creates a binary between the spaces of adultery and the domestic spaces associated with marriage, yet this binary is troubled by Fiona's complex desires when it comes to marriage and domesticity and the presence of domestic symbols within the spaces of adultery. They all point to a kind of failed domesticity that haunts the spaces within the text. Lau further shifts the binary between marital spaces and the spaces of adultery by creating spaces that are in between and can be read through Foucault as heterotopic spaces. Here, both the marital and adulterous spaces are contested, allowing for the other woman to reconstitute her identity and negotiate *all* spaces in the text. In this way, in these spaces, Fiona can be read as a feminist character who is not haunted by the literary ghosts of adultery narratives and is not defined—or confined—by narratives of normative heterosexuality, domesticity, or femininity. She becomes a figure who decentres the spaces of both marriage and adultery and exposes them as socially constructed, unreal spaces.

Existing research on representations of women and adultery has tended to focus on female (wifely) adultery. Barbara Leckie's analysis of nineteenth-century literary productions explores the construction of adultery as a question of epistemology rather than desire or passion (14). She argues that representations of adultery engage "aesthetic questions" about adultery, particularly

²⁰ This chapter is a reworking and continuation of work that began with my MA thesis entitled *Deconstructing the Other Woman: Evelyn Lau and the Feminist Adulterer* in which I explored the representation of the mistress in three texts with a focus on Lau's *Other Women*. This thesis explored Lau's novel (and others) and the notion of the mistress as a feminist figure who subverts traditional representations of the "other woman". I explored the differences between the spaces of adultery, the marital spaces, and the spaces in between in terms of the identity of the other woman. This chapter takes up those ideas and reworks them within the theoretical framework of Grosz and Foucault and further develops the theme of domesticity and spatiality.

from a moral standpoint, and encompass multiple cultural discourses about adultery - resulting in a kind of “epistemology of adultery” (35). An “epistemology of adultery” is an exploration that encompasses cultural and social discourses of adultery that are outside of literary traditions, but inextricably linked to them. Leckie’s analysis of adultery allows for other representations of female sexual transgression in relation to marriage and heterosexuality such as same-sex adultery, fallen women, prostitutes, and mistresses. My reading of Lau’s novel, then, allows for a reading of Fiona, the protagonist and female lover, to be considered as part of a literary tradition of representations of adultery that tends to privilege analyses of wifely adultery because of their association with marriage - the trope that is usually central to adultery narratives. However, as Victoria Griffin points out in her book *The Mistress: Myths, Histories and Interpretations of the ‘Other Woman,’* the other woman is a paradox: “On the one hand the mistress seeks to live outside of and undermine the institution of marriage; on the other, she is as subject to the institution as the wife, being defined by it” (19). Therefore, I conceive of the mistress or other woman as a crucial part of the history of women and adultery narratives because, as Lau’s novel proves, she is a provocative means of addressing cultural and social discourses of marriage, heterosexual fidelity, and domesticity.

In *Architecture from the Outside*, Elizabeth Grosz seeks to move beyond standard assumptions about space and the places that we occupy, positing ways that we can “move beyond the pervasive assumptions that subjectivity and dwelling exist in a relation of complementarity, either a relation of containment (space or dwelling contains or houses subjects) or a relation of expression (space or dwelling as the aesthetic or pragmatic expression of subjectivity)” (58). Grosz attempts to think about architecture “beyond complementarity and binarization, beyond subjectivity and subjectification” (58). While Grosz’s questions are part of a larger essay about using philosophy as a means of rethinking architecture, her analysis of the

binary between dwelling and subject is interesting to consider in terms of adultery narratives. The notion of the spaces of adultery relies on this binary, positing spaces where adultery takes place against spaces that are connected to marriage. While the adulterous body may transgress the (moral and physical) boundary of marriage, the spaces themselves remain separate and complete. As Grosz points out, space is not necessarily defined and understood by the subjects within it and identity can be defined by the surrounding space. In *Other Women*, the latter is true. Fiona is always the other woman within the walls of the spaces of adultery, despite the fact that these spaces are troubled by domestic symbols, but her identity is constructed differently when she is in other spaces.

Bill Overton and other literary critics tracing the history of adultery narratives have identified the novel of adultery, specifically female adultery, as being connected to the notion of women as the inhabitants of the domestic space with marriage as the central trope and metanarrative. The other woman occupies the spaces of adultery outside the home - restaurants, hotels, and hotel bedrooms. The spaces of adultery in the adultery plot are important because they identify the spaces that are outside the institution of marriage but inextricably linked to them. Evelyn Lau creates an interesting map of spaces in her novel *Other Women* and offers a type of spatial grid that works in contrast to the notion of domestic space and the home. Lau creates alternate, subversive spaces for the other woman to inhabit. Her approach to the spaces of adultery illustrates what Sharon Marcus calls the topography of the text, the “ways in which narration itself ... inscribes spatial relations” (Marcus 10). Lau uses the spaces of adultery and the transitional spaces in between to create a topographical text.

The Spaces of Adultery

In *Other Women*, Lau writes about Fiona, a young woman who pursues a relationship

with Raymond, an older, married man. Although marriage itself is central to adultery narratives, Lau moves her narrative outside the traditional domestic spaces that are most generally associated with marriage and family. Her narrative takes place among the spaces of adultery - the hotel lobbies and bedrooms, restaurants, and bars. I identify these spaces as the spaces of adultery because they work in direct contrast to the “marital” home in the text and are the actual spaces within which the act of adultery takes place. These spaces are important because they remove adultery from the territory of marriage and act as hybrid spaces, partly domestic but without the familial associations. These spaces also blur the boundary of public and private. The hotel bedroom, for example, is a private room within a public building. The other woman can transgress these spatial boundaries, gaining a power that she cannot hold within the marital home. The spaces of adultery that occur in Lau’s novel are important because they shift the focus from domestic space in an attempt to undermine that space. Without the physical space of the family home in the text, the actual family is further removed from the narrative and the other woman therefore poses a threat to the notion of the home as she cannot be controlled.

Lau sets up the dichotomy between marital spaces and the spaces of adultery right away. Her novel opens with Fiona meeting Raymond, her married lover, in a hotel room. She waits in the hallway while he talks to his wife on the phone, the “cool white wood” (2) of the door between them, separating wife from lover. The triangular relationship is also clear right from the start of the narrative as Fiona walks toward the hotel room, watching herself emerge in the mirror at the end of the hall becoming the other woman with every step (1). Lau writes Raymond and Fiona’s characters as clichéd lovers, Raymond “wearing the face of the man she loves” and Fiona, wearing the face of “someone in pain...distorted as if in grief,” knocking on Raymond’s door “stealthily, like a lover” (1-2). The description of these lovers suggests that they are playing roles, that their identities in the adulterous space of this hotel room are temporary, created and

invented because of where they are rather than who they are. In Grosz's terms, the spaces of adultery in Lau's text are "the aesthetic or pragmatic expression of subjectivity" (58).

Once inside the hotel room, Raymond immediately launches into a dialogue about his wife, the third part of the triangle. However, in this room, Fiona will not let Helen in. As Raymond talks, Fiona's mind wanders to intimacies between them, both real and imagined and while Raymond tells her that he loves his wife, Fiona thinks about "His warm scrotum when he guides her hand between his legs and says, hoarsely, Hold me there" (3). When a phonecall from Helen interrupts Raymond's attempt to leave Fiona, she watches him pace beside the freshly-made bed and imagines their love-making from the night before "the cream-coloured sheets around their bodies" (4) in the bed that is now "smooth as the layer of icing on a fresh cake" (6). Lau combines many images in this scene - the organized crispness of the hotel room, the bed which simultaneously represents the affair between Fiona and Raymond and also the marital relationship on the other end of the phone, and Raymond, furtively turning away from Fiona to talk to Helen, jumping up when the phone rings "as quickly as an animal leaping from an open cage" and pacing back and forth "his body turning away from her" (6-7). This scene is very provocative because it reads as if the other woman has called her lover at home and Raymond is trying to prevent his wife from overhearing the call. Fiona imagines the hotel room space as belonging to herself and Raymond and Helen's phonecall as an unwelcome interruption into her mock domestic scene. As Fiona watches Raymond on the phone she wills him to turn to her: "Please, she thinks, please, just turn around and look at me.... let me know that I am a part of what is happening here" (6). Raymond tries to deny her as part of the adultery triangle at this moment but Fiona still maintains control of the scene, of the space, knowing that at any moment she could break her silence and use her voice, knowing that it is she who "could make a sound, who could scream his name, his wife's name, who could scream past his protective body and

across the distances, her own name. Fiona!" (7). Fiona remains quiet and Helen remains on the outside of the space.

Within the spaces of adultery, Fiona is always completely the other woman. Fiona remains separate from Helen with no access to her space. Lau creates many more spaces of adultery in her novel, many of them containing mirrors and glass, places where Fiona's identity can be reflected back, distorted, or shattered. In another hotel room with Raymond, the lovers look at themselves together in the bedroom mirrors and Fiona asks herself: "Were we viable?" (18) As they are leaving the room together, Fiona sees their reflection in the mirrors of the lobby and is briefly shocked that she sees no trace of their recent lovemaking, that they could be any other couple: "Later that day I saw what we looked like when we walked back through the lobby, past glass cases thick with fur coats studded with jewelry. There were mirrors so polished they glowed green around the edges, and I glanced in one as we approached" (18). This image is very provocative because Lau is deliberately playing with the clichés surrounding adulterous lovers and other women. Raymond and Fiona had moved from the hotel room with its "full-length mirror" (18) that allows them to see themselves completely, and Fiona's reflection shows the other woman. And, in the hallway, they are reflected in mirrors and in glass cabinets that house luxurious items that a rich man may buy his mistress in a clichéd film or novel but that are encased here, closed off from the world, a threat that is controlled partly because it is visible.

As they move through the lobby and away from the adulterous space of the hotel room, Fiona is shocked to see that their reflection does not seem to represent them as lovers, that they could pass as "only another couple in that hotel of conventions and assignations" (18). Fiona's assignation is that of the other woman, it is an identity that she constructs and wears before she enters the hotel space. As with the opening scene, her approach to the hotel room, which is a space of adultery because it is where the actual act takes place, reveals her identity as the other

woman in the hallway mirror. She emerges into her identity as she gets closer to the door and when she enters the space, she becomes fully defined. Lau's detailed descriptions of the hotel rooms suggest that it is not simply the hotel space itself that contains the subject (the other woman) but that the room itself represents what Grosz calls the "the relation of expression," (59) the room is a space of adultery. However, as she moves away from that space, her identity begins to shift.

In the hallway mirror Fiona embodies the image of the other woman, in the bedroom mirror she and Raymond embody the image of lovers in bed, in the lobby mirror they reflect the image of acquaintances walking through a hotel. The green glow that appears to be at the edge of the mirrors as Fiona watches her reflection is another cliché alluded to by Lau. As the lovers move closer to the edges of the hotel, preparing to cross through the boundary between the spaces of adultery and the spaces associated with marriage, Fiona sees green, the colour of envy and a trait perhaps associated with the jealous mistress as much as the jealous wife. The mirrors enable Lau to manipulate the perception of Raymond and Fiona and to illustrate the transitory nature of the spaces they occupy that allow them to move in and out of their identities. The hotel is a space where everyone is "other" in some way and Fiona can choose to embrace her otherness or deny it. Lau has created a space that does not dislocate itself from the physicality of the affair but allows for movement and redefinition within it.

The hotel becomes a space of adultery which is both public and private where the other woman can claim her identity within its walls, but can also move freely from lobby, to hallway, to bedroom, and can move through the boundaries of the hotel through the revolving glass doors into the city (13). Lau is suggesting that the hotel could be seen as a space that contains the other woman, or, as Grosz puts it, that subjectivity and dwelling exist in a "relation of containment" (59). However, although Fiona is kept away from the sanctity of the marital home, the hotel

actually undermines the notion of home by mimicking its safety. The other woman can move freely within the hotel and also transgress its boundaries. The hotel is also not a static space in the sense that there are hotels in every city and Lau moves Fiona and Raymond from one hotel to another and the cities are never named - they are every city. The spaces of adultery are everywhere and therefore the other woman is everywhere.

Lau also uses glass within the spaces of adultery and there are sheets of glass in many of the places that Fiona goes. Glass is an unstable border in the spaces of adultery. Glass also suggests a certain danger and Fiona describes the restaurant where she first had a drink with Raymond as being full of glass and mirrors and as “a vast expanse of sharp angles” (143). She is unable to return there after their relationship is over without imagining his reflection or catching a glimpse of him in the fractured light. The restaurant is called Prism, which suggests both the geometry of the adultery triangle and the transparency of a prismatic form that deflects and reflects light, perhaps making it harder to see clearly. When Fiona leaves Prism she finds herself standing in front of a storefront window display as she once did with Raymond. The window now holds a display of wedding dresses carefully protected behind glass: “They were floor-length, threaded with shining sequins, and the skirts were made of layers of lace and tulle. The three white dresses hung stiffly in their glass room, away from the windstorm” (145). This time it is the quintessential symbol of marriage that is locked away behind glass much like the furs and jewelry in the hotel. Fiona, the other woman, is being kept away from the marital space that these dresses represent and the “room” that Lau suggests they occupy. The dresses represent marriage as the role that Fiona cannot access; even though Lau is not conclusive about Fiona’s desire for this role, they act as a reminder that marriage is still a fundamental part of the adultery narrative and that when Fiona takes on the role of the other woman, she is still tied to marriage and defined by it. However, the fact that Lau describes the dresses as being protected from the

windstorm suggests that her adultery narrative is playing with these spaces - the dresses are behind glass but Fiona, the other woman and windstorm, has the ability to break it down.

While the image of glass adds an interesting dimension to the aspect of understanding both sides of a boundary, it is also a deceptive border. It is deceptive because of its illusory transparency that might allow Fiona to be up against its barrier before she realizes it is there. As a metaphor for the dangers of adultery, glass works very well. It is also effective because Fiona may spend many moments behind a glass door watching Raymond drive back to his wife, but she can also see her own reflection, the reflection of the other woman. Glass can also be broken and perhaps this is Lau's point, that it is not only marriage that is a fragile monument easily chipped and occasionally smashed, but that the spaces that both Helen and Fiona occupy can also be deconstructed. Elizabeth Grosz wants to "infect architecture with its outside" and to "force an encounter, to effect a transformation or becoming" (64). If, as I have suggested earlier, marriage and its association with property are usually the central tropes in adultery narratives, then how does Lau's novel challenge this notion? Lau privileges the spaces of adultery over the marital spaces in *Other Women*, making the usual outside spaces of adultery take centre stage in her narrative. Marriage becomes infected with its outside and, in the process, the spaces of adultery and the other woman can move from the margins into the centre of the narrative. However, Lau still works within Grosz's notion of a system of binaries, positing these spaces against one another. I think that there is further subversive potential in Lau's narrative that can be found in the spaces that cannot be defined simply in terms of marriage or adultery and the blurring of boundaries between the two. The hotel and other spaces of adultery undermine the home, and the privileging of adulterous space over marital ones infects marriage with "its outside." However, Lau's binary is not a clear one and she troubles her own narrative with the presence of domestic and marital symbols. They suggest that the notion of marriage also

undermines and infects the hotel and spaces of adultery in complex ways.

Failed Domesticity

I suggested earlier that Fiona acts as if she is the wife and that Helen is the other woman. Sneja Gunew suggests that Lau's construction of the narrative entirely from Fiona's point-of-view indicates Fiona's desire to be Helen and her identification with herself as occupying the status of a wife in the relationship - one reading of this could be that the mistress is reclaiming her identity and that by making her the central character and narrator of the story, Lau is subverting the traditional adultery plot where the mistress is punished and shamed in some way. However, as Gunew says: "... the text is narrated from the point of view of the traditional 'mistress' so that the other woman is actually the 'wife.' Thus the whole text, and much of Lau's prose work, can be interpreted as celebrating a nostalgia for the 'normal' via the concept of symbolic identification" (85). Gunew uses Zizek to discuss the notion of identification and compares imaginary identification, where we identify with our ideal selves, to symbolic identification: "identification with the very place from where we are being observed, from where we look at ourselves so that we appear to ourselves likable, worthy of love" (Zizek qtd in Gunew 86). For Fiona, symbolic identification is with Helen and a "place from which the 'normality' of these figures might be registered" (Gunew 87). While I disagree that the whole text can be read as celebrating a nostalgia for the 'normal,' I do agree that Fiona's symbolic identification with Helen reinscribes what Gunew calls the "bourgeois heterosexual couple as constitutive norm for social sexual relations" (87). This concept points to an important element in Lau's text that bears the traces of this constitutive norm in literature and especially representations of female adultery. It is through Fiona's symbolic identification with Helen that Lau points to a kind of failed domesticity and connects Fiona to the ghosts of her literary adulterous forbears.

In Sharon Marcus's discussion of failed domesticity she says that the Victorian houses represented are usually rented houses indicating the family's inability and failure to meet the middle-class ideal of owning property (122). It also signals the temporality of the space and the constant flow of people: "Because the house is haunted, its tenants keep fleeing, reducing it to the most transient of lodging houses" (122). Of course, the houses are haunted with all the anxious ghosts of the previous tenants who had also failed at the bourgeois game. In much the same way, the hotel rooms that Fiona and Raymond occupy are transient, haunted by the previous couples and lovers who have been there and the constant flow of strangers who have temporarily occupied the same space, something that Lau makes reference to through the title of her novel, suggesting that Fiona's story is not a new one. This is something that Fiona also stresses through her many reference to other mistresses, affairs gone wrong.

Marcus also talks of the haunted house as a metaphor for the ways in which the middle-class house failed "to secure the qualities advertised in the domestic ideal" (124). The ghosts are there as a reminder of this failure and as a distraction from them, working to "offset the affront to class identity caused by exposing the middle class's failure to live up to its own ideal, as well as its failure to fully differentiate itself from the poor" (126). For Fiona, the hotel space acts as a haunted space that reminds her of her legacy and taunts her with the domestic ideal that she has already failed at due to her status as mistress. She will never be Raymond's wife and the narrative suggests that she will never be anyone's wife - indeed, throughout the history of literature, especially nineteenth-century literature, it is rare to find a mistress who marries her lover or who finds later happiness with another. Fiona even has recurring dreams about what will never happen: "She is running towards him from the other end of the corridor, shouting his name and some words too - it seems he has forgotten to give her something important. Upon hearing her he turns and opens his hands without lifting them up; he raises the palms to show that they

are empty” (69).

The haunted house narratives (and the spaces of adultery) constitute what Marcus calls a “domestic ideology” that paradoxically advocates that the private lives of the middle class be kept hidden while simultaneously putting “private life on display *as private*” (126). The hotel rooms in which Raymond and Fiona meet are private spaces in a larger public space and although it somewhat undermines the private space of the home by mimicking its supposed safety, it also undermines the notion of privacy completely. In one scene, Fiona describes sexual intimacies that take place between herself and Raymond in a hotel room: “The light from the window illuminating your hair and the bottles rattling in the open minibar... you took one nipple then the other in your mouth” (21). This passage signals that the room is a hotel room and that they have come for private discreet sex; however after their intimacy, Fiona says: “You got up then and drew the curtains, although we were on the fifteenth floor” and follows this with a image of herself watching other people’s lives through telescopes in her home town (22). The next morning, Fiona and Raymond leave the “privacy” of their hotel room and are seen together in public, in the elevator clearly leaving a room: “But by day we were ordered people. Look at us in the elevator, descending.... We separated instantly, with frightening ease, when the elevator stopped on the eleventh floor.... The remaining ascent accompanied by these strangers seemed more awkward than usual, as if they were aware by some perceptive feeling that they had interrupted something, committed some kind of trespass” (26). The images in these scenes makes it clear that the public/private binary is easily blurred and questions the notion of private space. The hotel room is a private room in a public space, meant to remind visitors of their bedrooms at home. Unlike home, Raymond leaves the curtains open while he and Fiona are intimate but closes them afterwards as they prepare to spend the night together. He is seemingly unaware that they could easily have already been seen, either in the other public spaces of the

hotel or perhaps from the window of another high-rise. Leaving the curtains open during intimacy symbolizes the possibility and risk of exposure. The gesture of closing the curtains is especially revealing as it shows that Raymond's instinct is towards privacy and concealment, but only after they have been intimate. What these examples suggest is something close to Marcus's paradox when it comes to the middle class domestic ideology in Victorian literature. The home is a symbol of middle-class identity, security and success and the privacy of this space represents this success. Yet, the bourgeois ideal also relies on the public element of private life - a public element that may expose the failures or successes (as with the ghosts in haunted house fiction). To prove that you have an acceptable middle-class private life it must be made public. In this way, it exposes the failures but also exposes the paradox and the unrealistic expectations that constitute this middle-class domestic ideology. In the same way, Fiona and Raymond are keeping their affair private in a public space where they are already coded as lovers - the space mocks the very notion of a secret affair *and* the security of home. On one level, Fiona can be made viable as his lover when they are in the public areas of the hotel but, on another level, it simply draws attention to the fact that she is not his wife, that she has failed in that role and will never attain it: "The vague outlines of your reflection shone in the brass panelling - your dark blue jacket, your white shirt. It was myself I was unable to see reflected in the dark elevator doors" (26). It is when other people step into the elevator and appear to understand them as illicit lovers that Fiona sees herself - the other woman, never the wife, always Raymond's public secret.

If the mock domestic spaces of the hotel and Lau's attempt to privilege the spaces of adultery over the spaces of marriage can be seen as an infection of marriage by adultery, a forced encounter that, in *Other Women*, transforms the mistress and adultery into the central narrative tropes, what happens when we think about marriage infecting adultery? Marriage and

property are usually the central tropes in adultery narrative and Lau's novel subverts this by narrating an adulterous love affair from the perspective of the mistress. However, as Gunew mentions, Fiona has a complex desire for the "constitutive norm" that is heterosexual marriage, represented through her symbolic identification with Helen (Gunew 87). It is also seen through the number of domestic symbols that appear in the spaces of adultery and elsewhere throughout the novel. These domestic symbols force an encounter of another kind and, for Fiona, point once again to her failure to be either a desirable wife or, as a consequence, a good mistress.

For Fiona, her attempts to infect Raymond's marriage with their affair are simple. She thinks about making noise when he is talking to Helen on the telephone, she leaves lipstick on his shirt for Helen to find (27), and she approaches him in public when he is with Helen, daring to touch her face: "Helen pulls away in alarm, stumbling back against her chair as if she has been struck by this stranger whose hand remains suspended in the air. Both women turn towards the man they love, each expecting him to make it right" (80). However, Helen and her association with marriage and the domestic are slowly creeping into Fiona's world and into the spaces of adultery.

Many of the hotel rooms that are shared by Raymond and Fiona contain domestic imagery, with references to beds that are "smooth as the layer of icing on a fresh cake" (6) and warm glow of lights that make the rooms feel like "home." Fiona is constantly referring to Raymond in terms of softness and warmth and the glow of the lights that she relates to her childhood: "The lamplight in the room is the same warm gold as the lamplight in her parents' house, in the impoverished neighbourhood where she grew up. This gives the hotel a feeling of familiarity that she realizes he does not share. After all, his own memories of lamplight would be different" (9). Although Fiona later reveals that her parent's marriage and her childhood had been unhappy, she remembers them with a domestic nostalgia. She also realizes that she has lived, and

is living, a different life to Raymond and with the nostalgia of home comes a nostalgia for the specific domestic life that he shares with his wife, the one with different “memories of lamplight” (9). As Gunew says, Fiona’s symbolic identification is with Helen and the “location of social heteronormativity” (86) and I think that this identification with Helen can also be located in the nostalgia and desire for the domestic. Fiona knows that she will always occupy the spaces of adultery with Raymond and never the domestic space that Helen presides over: “I knew then that I would sit with you in lounges under chandeliers, never by fireplaces or living-room couches” (16). And while, on the one hand, her ability to control her identity in these spaces could be a subversive attempt to give the other woman a voice, Fiona’s nostalgia for the domestic acts, again, as a reminder of her ultimate domestic failure. Gunew says: “There are certain societal standards, designated by invisible or spectral scripts, against which the protagonist transgresses - visibly and stereotypically” (87).

These domestic symbols also point to something else. They are a reminder that Fiona’s behaviour violates acceptable social norms when it comes to femininity, a femininity that is also tied to domesticity and her domestic failure. Like Sharon Marcus, Misao Dean discusses a domestic ideology as one that draws its legitimacy from social systems of power but that is also tied to the ways in which these systems produce and designate certain domestic ideals as feminine (Dean 6). Using the work of Judith Butler to talk about gender performativity and the fact that gender identity is “performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 25), Dean discusses femininity as a practice reinforced by the social production of a “feminine inner self” (Dean 6). Much of the relationship between Fiona and Raymond takes place behind closed doors, something that gives Fiona a sense of comfort and security in the relationship: “We seldom went out which, to my surprise, appealed to me. I did not want to share you with the world” (126). However, this privacy gives way to a

kind of seclusion where Fiona's public persona becomes like a performance. She says: "Increasingly, when you were not there, I found I did not feel entirely alive.... I felt now that I was losing my focus..." (126). Her obsession with Raymond ultimately makes him the centre of her world and she is unsure of herself without him. This leads to many moments where Fiona embarrasses herself in public and although these moments are a sign of Fiona's grief and sadness over her relationship and break-up with Raymond, they also all signal a violation on Fiona's part of acceptable feminine behaviour, especially when it comes to marriage and domesticity ideology. At a dinner party given by a close male friend, Fiona makes fun of the relationship between the host and his new partner, assuming that it is not serious: "'So what's the real story with Jill?' I said now to my friend. 'She doesn't seem like your type. Are you still pining for your lost love?'" (91). Fiona's friend, Martin, loses his patience saying, "'We're planning to get married - so shut up, all right?'" (92). In these moments, Fiona tries to make light of her situation, hoping for a conspiratorial joke with her friend, longing for reassurance that he is not going to follow the boring, traditional path. But it also reminds us that she cannot follow that path - and although she can be the other woman when Raymond is with her, she flounders when she is alone faced with the happiness of others. She is unable to play her role as lover, the woman who pretends that she doesn't need to be married, because it does not make sense without Raymond and is an inappropriate role to play in the larger context of her life. We are reminded that she cannot follow the path to domesticity that Martin is on and that she cannot be the other woman either. This scene of the dinner party at Martin's house is juxtaposed with a memory that Fiona has of sleeping with the father of a high-school friend immediately after his wife has shared her fears about their separation and impending divorce. Fiona delights in the secrecy of it, the knowledge that she was making the wife suffer, and remembers how easy it was to hug this woman the next day (90-91). It is that same thrill that she seeks with Martin, hoping that he will expose some

secret about Jill that will constitute their own, or Jill's own, violation of domestic norms. Fiona's memories, especially ones where she is actively and willingly transgressing social boundaries of marriage and sexuality, seem to haunt her through out the text, and prompt her to act in inappropriate ways. It is as if she is haunting herself, becoming her own spectral presence that, on the one hand tries to undermine the idea of marriage and domesticity by encouraging her to repeat behaviour but, on the other hand, serves to centralize these discourses by reminding Fiona that she is ultimately prevented from accessing them. Dean says that "domestic ideology produces the illusion of an inner self whose essence is gender, and whose behaviour is constantly mobilized to validate the existence of that inner self" (6). Fiona's behaviour simply validates her exclusion from this domestic ideology.

In other scenes in the novel where Fiona is without Raymond, her behaviour becomes an embarrassment to her friends and she constantly violates acceptable notions of femininity. Even she does not recognize herself, especially after she and Raymond break up:

Fiona had heard of women who allowed their lives to be ruined by men. She had prided herself on being too sensible and self-possessed for that, yet in the months following Raymond's departure she came apart as though some stitches in her had been snipped, as though a thread in her personality had been hooked onto his body, so when he left he pulled that thread and she began to unravel. (108)

She starts behaving erratically, flirting with men who look like Raymond, trying to seduce men who are connected to Raymond, drinking too much and talking about Raymond to her friends: "After too many cocktails I would try to tell my friends about you, but I had the impression that they thought there was something wrong with me. Whenever I began to describe my obsession for a man in his forties who was married and lived in another city, they would try to change the subject, or fall into an embarrassed silence and pretend to be absorbed in stirring their drinks"

(141). While Fiona's behaviour and her friend's reactions suggest that Fiona is simply suffering from heartbreak, the frequent moments like these in the novel emphasize Fiona's otherness and her exclusion from social norms. The fact that she is not shy about talking of her affair with Raymond and is almost proud of the fact that she was his mistress only serves to isolate her from her friends and colleagues who find her behaviour intolerable. There is the suggestion that her adultery becomes doubly offensive because it transgresses acceptable norms of femininity, especially in public spaces. The adultery between Raymond and Fiona can be seen in many ways - as a means to destabilize domestic discourses about marriage through the spaces of adultery, as a blurring of the boundary between public and private space - the public privacy of the hotel that mocks the safety of the domestic space, and as a destabilizing of adultery through the presence of domestic symbols within these spaces that, in Grosz's terms constitutes the infection of adultery with its outside. Through all of these readings, Fiona's identity is mediated by the presence of Raymond and, as Gunew suggests, her symbolic identification with Helen, her desire for "social heteronormativity" (86). Her desire to be with Raymond and what he represents - as his wife or his mistress - becomes a factor in the way that she behaves in private and in public. In Butler's terms, she is "compelled to 'cite' the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject" (*Bodies That Matter* 232) when it comes to femininity. The end of Fiona's relationship with Raymond signals the end of a particular citation—that of the mistress. But, as this was already a violation of that norm, her identity remains undefined and her access to social heteronormativity is denied.²¹

Once she and Raymond are no longer together, she becomes this uncontrollable force, violating the rules of social heteronormativity and breaking the codes of secrecy associated with adultery through unacceptable and unfeminine acts. Socially acceptable forms of femininity here

²¹ Another reading of Lau's construction of feminine respectability is in terms of disordered eating. There are scenes in the novel where Fiona is bingeing and purging as a direct result of her emotional turmoil over Raymond. Disordered eating is perhaps another way that women are "compelled to 'cite' the norm" (Butler, *Bodies* 232) of femininity and makes for a compelling argument in terms of viable subjectivity and the body.

are tied to heterosexuality and marriage. When Fiona behaves erratically her friends are shocked on both a personal and a social level. Their anxiety shows that Fiona represents a threat to their own heteronormative desires and their subsequent distance from her serves as a reminder that her status as a female adulterer prevents her from accessing these norms. While Fiona's uncontrollable behaviour could be read as subversive, the other woman is still a threat to marriage and social norms and her presence causes anxiety. Her own anxious ghosts come back to haunt her and ultimately reinforce marriage as the central discourse.

Fiona is at a party and has been flirting with a married man and is considering going home with him simply because he works with Raymond. In the bathroom she meets a woman who seems to be the picture of elegant femininity: "She is in her early thirties, her chin-length blond hair carefully combed and highlighted, wearing a taupe dress with gold buttons down the front and a sleek gold belt. She looks elegant and expensive, and Fiona is surprised when she stumbles in her strappy shoes, then veers away from the row of sinks, neglecting to wash her hands" (176). She resembles Fiona when she drinks too much at parties and talks to her "in the compulsive manner intoxicated people have of fixating on an idea and assuming it is as interesting to others as it is to them" (178). Fiona learns that this woman is the wife of an important business man, but she emphasizes that she is his second wife and fears that everyone is talking about her, that she stole him away from his wife and is not legitimate because she was not his first. Drunk, with smudged make-up, trying desperately to create an image of the perfect wife—the combination of alluring femininity and domestic support—she knows that she will never be accepted and, in that moment, Fiona remembers Raymond and thinks "in her heart she knows it is too late" (179). This scene is important because Fiona watches the other woman in the mirror but does not actually look at herself. It is as if this woman represents a spectre of another kind, a warning to Fiona of what she may become and that she will never have access to marriage

in the same way that Helen does - like her adulterous literary forebears, Fiona is not redeemable.

The fact that Fiona is not redeemable and that her behaviour in both the spaces of adultery and other spaces is a reminder of her failed domesticity is emphasized by the construction of Helen in terms of feminine respectability and domesticity. Laura Kipnis asserts that in the quest for love, we never stop fearing loss:

Anxiety is not just endemic to the enterprise, it's also incurable: however assiduously we devote ourselves to love's pursuit and conquest, the fretful specter of loss permeates the scene. Nevertheless, here we are, chasing tantalizing glimpses of some lost imaginary wholeness in a lover's adoring gaze, or in the "types" that we favor, or in the romantic scenarios we reenact or repeat. There we are, hoping that the flimsy social safety nets we've committed ourselves to—monogamy, domesticity, maturity—resolve our anxieties. (57-8)

Fiona is certainly an example of the tendency to repeat or reenact, and the mock domestic scenes between herself and Raymond in the hotels expose monogamy and domesticity as "flimsy social safety nets." Ironically, through Fiona's repetition of the same behaviours, chasing the same men, going back to Raymond again and again, she does not feel anxiety herself. Instead, she produces anxieties in others at the same time that she is excluded from participating in the feminine social norms that validate those who experience these anxieties. Dean suggests that repetition signals something else in terms of femininity: "femininity is a practice which must be practiced, be repeated over and over again because it can never be done 'right,' can never materialize as a natural attribute of a material body" (7). She goes on to say that femininity, "though it is experienced as a lived ideology, is a fiction" (7). However, what does this mean for Lau's construction of Helen? Helen is described as being naturally feminine and therefore naturally domestic. She is imagined this way by Fiona and described in this light by Raymond.

It is in the relationship between Helen and Fiona that femininity and domesticity truly become challenged and exposed as social constructions. It is also in this relationship that the full extent of Fiona's exclusion from these norms is realized.

Fiona and Helen

Returning to Elizabeth Grosz and her assertion that to "force an encounter, to effect a transformation or becoming" one must "infect architecture with its outside" (64), perhaps the most compelling moment of the outside infecting the inside is when Fiona imagines herself invading Helen's body. Elizabeth Grosz asks some compelling questions about the relationship between inside and outside in terms of architecture that can be applied to Lau's text:

Can the effects of depth, of interiority, of domesticity and privacy be generated by the billowing convolutions and contortions of an outside, a skin? What does the notion of outside, exterior, or surface do that displaces the privilege of interiority, architecturally, philosophically, and subjectively? The boundary between the inside and the outside, just as much as between self and other and subject and object, must not be regarded as a limit to be transgressed, so much as a boundary to be traversed. (65)

Helen is represented in terms of her domestic and feminine attributes, her smart but sensible outfits, her perfect make-up and jewelry, and her poise and grace: her outside. Fiona describes a magazine article where Helen is interviewed for a piece on working women: "She talked about the importance of balancing her home life with her career, and the comfort of having a loving, supportive husband. 'My marriage remains the most important thing in my life,' she was quoted as saying" (Lau 181). Fiona thinks of Helen all the time: she is a constant presence in her relationship with Raymond. Fiona's symbolic identification lies with Helen. It is as if Fiona is

the wife and Helen the lover. Gradually, however, she starts to become obsessed with Helen and imagines Raymond and Helen in bed together: "I imagined the times you took her roughly and how she responded as though you were a stranger she had met once and desired; the times you touched her with respect because she was a woman and your wife" (183). At first, Fiona just wants to watch them together until Raymond becomes displaced and the fantasies are about Helen alone or Helen and Fiona: "I wanted to strip Helen naked, to familiarize myself with her body, her responses; I wanted to put my face against her chest and listen to her heart beat climbing towards orgasm, and then the slowing of her breath and pulse.... I wanted to know Helen's body so well I could climb in and zip up her skin around me" (184). In a particularly violent fantasy, Fiona imagines Helen being raped by a stranger while she watches from afar, searching Helen's face for pain (185-6). Fiona says that she wants to know what it is about Helen that holds Raymond's love (185) and says: "this seemed the closest I could come to you, this seemed the only place I could find where you dwelled" (186). However, while she says that she wants to be close to Raymond by imagining these intimate acts, it is more about a desire for what Helen represents rather than Fiona more obviously wanting to please Raymond sexually or wanting him to desire her as he does Helen.²² Fiona's obsession with Helen, and the image of her climbing inside her skin, indicates what Grosz says is an infection from the outside and a traversing of a boundary. However, the absence of Raymond in these fantasies suggests that this is the only way for Fiona to access heteronormative social constructions of femininity and domesticity. So while Fiona imagining herself inside of Helen may be representative of marriage

²² There is also obviously a homoerotic tone to Fiona's fantasies about Helen as many of them involve sexual intimacies. This reading is subversive because it displaces Raymond - he becomes an expendable part of the adultery triangle and the adultery becomes centred around women. This reading resonates with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) where she discusses literary representations of love triangles between two men and a woman where the narrative is actually about the homoeroticism between men and the woman is not important. However, in Lau's novel I believe that Fiona's fantasies about Helen are much more related to Helen's cultural value as a wife and Fiona's desire for social heteronormativity. These fantasies are not about desiring Helen or Raymond, they are about desiring a social ideal.

being infected with its outside, it also signals Fiona's failure to adequately shift these boundaries because as a female adulterer she is not, in Butler's terms, a viable subject (*Bodies That Matter* 232).

Foucault's Heterotopia

Fiona cannot be a viable subject in terms of femininity and domesticity because her status as a female adulterer violates these norms. As Butler says: "Femininity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment" (*Bodies* 232). The only form of femininity that Fiona can "cite" is that of the female adulterer but Fiona's relationship with Raymond does not last and he remains with his wife. Unlike many traditional narratives, it is Helen who has a "healthy sexual relationship" with her husband while Fiona and Raymond never fully consummate their affair. They have sexual contact and are lovers, but do not actually have intercourse. Wanting to be Helen and imagining herself inside Helen's skin, then, can also be seen as Fiona's way of consummating her relationship with Raymond. Here Fiona really presents a paradox: she is unable to completely perform or "cite" the role of the mistress - she cannot seduce Raymond and expresses her desire through fantasies of Helen. But, although she wants to be Helen, identifies with Helen's position, her irredeemable status as mistress signals a failed domesticity that does not allow her to successfully cite that norm either. What is interesting about this paradox is that Fiona's very existence as a female adulterer *does* undermine marriage—yet, her failure to remain a viable subject as a female adulterer and her violation of feminine respectability also undermine adultery. Adultery decentralizes marriage and marriage undermines adultery—each infects the other with its outside and this cycle keeps repeating. In a sense, the narrative itself becomes the "forcible citation of a norm" (Butler, *Bodies* 232) where

the norms are the clichés of marriage and adultery and, in Grosz's terms, neither is a limit to be transgressed but a boundary to be traversed (65). The binaries may have been shifted, but the identities of both Helen and Fiona remain fixed, citations that they are doomed to repeat again and again.

The spaces of adultery are arguably the only spaces in the novel where Fiona can lay claim to an identity as the other woman despite the domestic symbols that trouble these spaces. However, other spaces in the text have no distinct place: the spaces of the cabs, elevators and other vehicles. The relationship between Raymond and Fiona consists of many moments when they are taking their leave of each other or travelling towards each other, usually in separate cars but often travelling the same road. It is in these transitory spaces that the notion of a viable subject is challenged, partly due to a sense of instability and transition, a sense of the unknown and partly because Helen is not present in these spaces. These spaces are important because they contain an element of uncertainty, like the adulterous relationship.

The symbols of marriage and adultery that appear in these spaces— such as the wedding dresses or the jewels and furs encased behind glass in the hotel—are present but not fully permitted to enter. They are symbols of identification that are not allowed to completely materialize, giving Fiona the ability to reconstitute her identity. It is in these spaces that I think a reading of female adultery using Foucault's heterotopia can take place. Using Foucault's notion of heterotopia, it is possible to break down the binary of domestic/adulterous space and to read Lau's text as a map that creates alternate possibilities of self-identification for the other woman.

Foucault describes heterotopic space as a "simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live" where space takes the form of "relations among sites" (23-24). Heterotopias work in direct contrast to utopias, which represent society in a perfected form and are places that are "fundamentally unreal spaces" (24). Heterotopias act as counter-sites,

“effectively acted upon utopia[s] in which the real sites, all other real sites that can be found within culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted” (24). For Foucault, heterotopias are reflections of reality; it is possible to locate them in reality, but they bear a fundamental difference from the sites that they reflect and remain constitutively contradictory in nature (24).

Foucauldian heterotopic space works very well with issues of adultery because adultery crosses the boundaries of marriage, creates tenuous spaces and thrives on instability. I have found that these transitory spaces in Lau’s novel are perhaps the most subversive because the characters lack solid definitions outside of the spaces of marriage or adultery; everything is in flux and there is the potential for a reconstitution of subjectivity. In Lau’s novel, the spaces that work as heterotopias are often moving, emphasizing the transitory nature of these spaces but also pointing to a kind of collapsing of time and space.

Foucault suggests that the spaces in which we live, where our time erodes, are heterogeneous spaces and that “we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another” (23). Like Grosz’s, Foucault’s construction of the spaces that we occupy during our lifetimes can be seen as static, containments that house subjects. Fiona and Helen, occupy spaces that are related to each other but these physical spaces never overlap: Helen is never in the spaces of adultery and Fiona is never in the domestic space. Their presence in each other’s spaces is symbolic or in Fiona’s fantasies. Raymond visits Fiona’s home but Fiona does not enter Raymond’s home. In fact, the marital home is barely mentioned at all. Foucault’s interest lies in spaces that are in relation to other spaces but “in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate mirror or reflect” (24). These are the spaces that he considers to be heterotopic spaces. In *Other Women*, these spaces can be seen in the hotel lobbies, the

streets, the cabs, the escalators and elevators, the spaces that stand and move between the spaces of adultery and the marital home. Heterotopias act in two ways, then: first as a means of deconstructing the spaces in the text solely associated with marriage or adultery, and second as a means of reconstituting identity within those spaces. If Fiona is denied access to the practice of femininity and domestic ideology through her identity as a female adulterer, and if she also fails in that role, what happens in these heterotopic spaces? If there is no inside or outside to infect, which discourse is privileged?

In one of the many hotels that Raymond and Fiona meet, they travel together in an elevator away from their hotel room towards their other lives. Fiona looks at the outline of Raymond's reflection in the brass of the elevator doors but is unable to see herself (26). As she moves further away from the hotel room, her identity begins to shift and then they take their leave of each other: "Of course it was actually very ordinary - two cars, one of them a taxi-cab, for a brief moment on the same street downtown, leaving a busy hotel. Your car slid into another lane and blinked its tail-light as it slowed to turn the corner. The taxi leapt straight ahead, towards the open bridge" (28). Fiona, is in the taxi, moving towards the open space, to what de Certeau refers to as "another spatiality" that challenges the "clear text of the planned and readable city" (93). The moving, heterotopic space of the taxi allows Fiona to traverse the city freely - to "[e]scape the imaginary totalizations" (de Certeau 93) that define viable subjectivity and exclude her from it.

There are many moments like this in the novel, where Fiona is moving from one space to another or travelling anonymously through cities always in taxis or on buses, impersonal vehicles. In one scene, Fiona is in Raymond's city after they have ended their relationship. As she is travelling to the airport in a taxi, traffic is stopped by a parade and Fiona finds herself in front of Raymond's office building. The parade consists of adults and children, of floats "ambling down

the road like giant cakes, topped by women in aprons” (47). As Fiona watches, the taxi driver points out the name of the parade: “That banner there, ‘In Celebration of the Year of the Family.’ See, I knew it was some government crap” (47). This scene is almost comic - the female adulterer watches a celebration of traditional families while stopped in front of her married lover’s office building. The women in the parade are literally performing respectable femininity and domesticity. However, unlike the other domestic scenes in the novel, this one does not suggest Fiona’s desire for social heteronormativity. Fiona opens the window, “drinking in the noise and the daylight” (47) but she also leans back in her seat and stays in the car. As the parade passes by, the apron-wearing women swing their hips and call out words that Fiona does not understand (47). These symbols are not recognizable to her anymore, no longer desirable:

She closed her eyes and let the discordant sounds flood her senses. For the first time, she felt something - a bright leaking inside her - that might be hope, or at least an indication of something changing ahead. When she looked up at Raymond’s building she thought she saw him standing at one of the windows, lured by the noise in the street below. She wasn’t sure. It could have been anyone, and by then the traffic was moving again. (48)

Here, Fiona seems to be protected by the heterotopic space of the taxi. While the world outside is described by Foucault as “one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites” (23), the taxi can move freely between those sites, carrying different people to different destinations for any number of reasons. In this case, Fiona is going to the airport to fly away from Raymond. As she lets the sounds of the parade wash over her, Fiona feels hope. Perhaps she feels hope that she will have the domestic ideal with Raymond, but the organization of space in this scene suggests otherwise. I think that Fiona feels hope that she will be fine, and in the transitory space of the car she has a mobility that is constrained neither by notions of female

adultery nor by the domestic scene outside. She is able to pass by the family parade, towards whatever is changing ahead. In the same way, she looks up to Raymond's office and is not sure of what she sees - and when the taxi starts moving, she does not stop it. She no longer sees herself as his mistress and she does not feel the security that she once did when he was close by. Raymond represents what de Certeau calls the "totalizing eye," (92) watching the city from above. But, as de Certeau points out, this city is one "whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices" (93). Experience takes place down in the streets, "below the thresholds at which visibility begins" (93). From her transitory position in the taxi cab, Fiona's city becomes readable and visible and, at the same time, her identity shifts.

Heterotopia is also a productive way to read the ways in which both the female adulterer and the domestic ideal are discourses that enable and reinforce each other. Foucault posits heterotopias in contrast to utopias, describing utopias as "sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces" (24). The imagined relationship Fiona could have with Raymond exists almost in a utopic space, one that is directly related to the failure of her parent's marriage and the destructive domestic space of her childhood home. What Fiona wants is "fundamentally unreal," a fact that is made even clearer by her identity as a female adulterer and how that identity shifts in heterotopic spaces. Foucault says that the mirror is a good example of how utopias and heterotopias exist as the mirror is a utopia, "a placeless place" but the reflection in the mirror creates a heterotopic space:

In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself

there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the position of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. (24)

There are many moments where Fiona is looking at her reflection and cannot see herself completely, cannot make out her own image. There are other times when her reflection is seen angled or in jagged glass, distorting her image, or she is looking into a store front window where she can see what is behind the glass but also see herself. These moments reveal the place that she is not, the space she can never occupy. But her inability to clearly see herself in any space also suggests that both the spaces of adultery and marriage are unreal spaces and, as Foucault suggests, enable Fiona to “discover her absence” from both discourses. It is actually in the moving, transitory other heterotopic spaces where Fiona’s identity shifts. In the cab, for example, she does not try and see herself reflected in the domestic parade that passes by, she does not see herself reflected in Raymond’s office—in fact, it is a glass that she can see through, and most importantly, she watches the passing parade with the window rolled down so that her own reflection is not blocking her view. There is no “counteraction on the position” (24) that she occupies and she can move freely, traversing the city with no binaries to cross. It is in these moving heterotopias that Fiona can perhaps create a new identity—one where her own reflection, the image of the female adulterer, does not haunt her and appear in every window. In these transitory moments, Fiona is free to access *all* spaces.

IV

“IT’S THE CLICHÉS THAT CAUSE ALL THE TROUBLE”: ADULTERY AS ABJECTION IN JEANETTE WINTERSON’S WRITTEN ON THE BODY

Jeanette Winterson’s novel, *Written on the Body*, has been read as a novel of love and obsession, a novel of loss and mourning, a novel about the carnal desires of the body, and, most commonly a novel of lesbian desire. Winterson’s novel is unusual in the sense that it has a genderless narrator who embarks on a tumultuous affair with a married woman. The genderless narrator, and Winterson’s own identity as a lesbian, have prompted the novel to be read, most often, as a lesbian novel, with many critics concluding that Winterson provides clues in the text that suggest that the narrator should be read as female and that *Written on the Body* should be read only as a novel about lesbian desire.

However, one of the readings absent in the criticism of *Written on the Body* is that of an adultery narrative and the feminist potential in reading a genderless narrator and the spatial construction of domesticity within the context of the traditional adultery plot.²³ Winterson consciously plays with literary stereotypes in her novel and especially the stereotypes surrounding adultery, domesticity, the married woman and the Lothario lover. Reading *Written on the Body* as an adultery novel with a theme of lesbian desire and same-sex adultery is, indeed, subversive and allows for a queering of the adultery triangle. However, I think that reading the novel as an adultery novel with a genderless narrator from within a feminist framework is even more provocative and allows for a different kind of queering of the adultery text—one that not only subverts the traditional adultery narrative but also maintains an ambiguity and resists being categorized or defined. In this way, *Written on the Body* can be read as a feminist text because it destabilizes normative discourses of marriage and heterosexuality and, like Lau’s novel, also

²³ Many critics, such as Carolyn Allen, do discuss adultery in *Written on the Body* but it is usually in terms of the construction of a lesbian relationship rather than as part of a literary genre of adultery.

exposes the ways in which adultery is bound by these same discourses. Further, constructions of respectable femininity and the spaces of domesticity are troubled by the genderless narrator whose presence in the text both challenges and reinforces traditional means of representing adultery and, in the process, draws readers' attention to the patriarchal processes that continue to shape adultery novels. In a sense, Louise's body becomes space—a textual space—that is subject to idealization, objectification, rewriting, and reshaping. Her body becomes the site on which the normative discourses of marriage, femininity, domesticity are written and, ultimately, challenged.

The readings of *Written on the Body* from literary critics Carolyn Allen and Andrea Harris provide important insights into the ways in which Winterson is consciously playing with notions of identity and sexual politics. Harris's use of Irigaray and her reworking of Irigaray's *Ethics of Sexual Difference* put forward a provocative argument for reading the narrator as female and the novel as lesbian. Similarly, Allen uses psychoanalytic theories of resemblance and recognition to address the construction and representation of lesbian desire in the novel as an "erotics of risk," suggesting that the relationship between the narrator and Louise is not about the boundary between self and other but between self and self-like; the fear of losing the lover becomes a fear of losing the self (76). Both Allen's and Harris's readings rely on the narrator being female, being the same. Allen uses the example of the midsection of *Written on the Body* as a means to explain how Winterson writes about resemblance and also engulfment - the loss of the self to the lover - through the narrator's attempt to read Louise's body as a medical object. Winterson writes pages about Louise's body - a kind of love poem to the body through medical discourse. Allen argues that this section implies a desire for the lovers to know one another inside and out, for the narrator to become a part of Louise and, in the process, recognize "herself." She says that the "language of difference and sameness, incorporation and engulfment, twinning and mirroring

promotes a reading of lesbian affective connection” (76). However, what is missing from this analysis, and other analyses, is the fact that Louise’s body is recalcitrant. She is dying of cancer and her body refuses to comply with medical discourse or to be completely written by the narrator. In this way, the narrator cannot mold Louise’s body into resemblance or recognition because Louise’s physical body refuses sameness - we are left with the abject body, its cancer and its ambiguous borders. While reading *Written on the Body* as a lesbian novel of resemblance and sameness may create a poetics that works with Irigaray, I think that *Written on the Body* also needs to be read using Kristeva’s notion of the abject where the abject body can be read as a counter reading to the same-like analysis. The ambiguity created by reading the novel against Kristeva’s abject provides an alternate “queering” of the adultery narrative, one that does not insist on lesbian desire for its queerness but, rather, opens the novel up to other possible feminist readings that disrupt the traditional adultery plot.

“Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights” (89):

Winterson’s fiction of theory.

Most feminist interpretations of *Written on the Body* rely heavily on theories of recognition, resemblance and likeness. Allen calls *Written on the Body* a “fiction of theory” (46) and suggests that Winterson is consciously creating a novel that can be read as a theory, or hermeneutics, of erotics (48) and can, as such, be used as its own cipher. The clues to understanding Winterson’s meaning can be found in the novel and through a reading of Winterson’s own sexuality which together create a fiction of theory - and a novel of lesbian desire (48). Thus, Allen’s notion of resemblance works in two ways: first, her reading of the narrator as a woman has to do with her theoretical framework and reading of the novel in terms of likeness and recognition. Second, she argues that Winterson herself has theorized her own novel in accord

with this notion. Therefore, the novel becomes the theory and the theory becomes the novel. Allen has effectively tied the novel up in its own theory, allowing for only one reading, that of the narrator as a woman. Difference, in any form, is elided and it is sameness that becomes the cipher for reading women's desire and Allen's hermeneutic of erotics.²⁴ I am not arguing that *Written on the Body* shouldn't be read as a lesbian novel, but rather that I believe that Winterson does not want to limit her work to this reading. Furthermore, to theorize Winterson in terms of a history of lesbian fiction, especially lesbian romantic fiction, where the "personal is political" somewhat undermines the subversive potential in Winterson's novel and simply replaces male patriarchal paradigms with female ones. It also problematically associates lesbian writing with a "type" such as Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body*, a text that may resonate with *Written on the Body* but that is, itself, most often categorized as a somewhat utopian, poetic narrative about women's bodies, women's desire and women's likeness. Wittig's *The Lesbian Body* is the text to which Winterson's *Written on the Body* is most often compared. It is also part of the reason that Winterson's novel is read in terms of it being its own theory. Wittig's text can be read as a hybrid text - part fiction, part autobiography, part poetry and part theory. It is seen as a theoretical text that uses experimental narrative strategies to create a lesbian identity. For Wittig, a lesbian identity is a means to deconstruct the notion of "woman" in language and lesbian identity becomes a utopian means for all women to escape patriarchal control and signification. It is Wittig's conscious reformulation of patriarchal systems of signification that connects her work to a theoretical framework and many critics (Allen, Harris, Duncker for example) read *Written on the Body* as a direct reference to Wittig and read Winterson as having similar theoretical

²⁴ There are many critics who write about Winterson in terms of her own theory. Patricia Duncker discusses *Written on the Body* as a failed revision of Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body* because of Winterson's refusal to sex the narrator and the subsequent inability for her work to be "theorized" as lesbian feminist fiction. Louise Humphries criticizes Duncker's analysis and suggests that Duncker, and others, try to "impose" theory on *Written on the Body*. My intention is not to impose theory on *Written on the Body* but to read it with alternate feminist theory that I believe maintains the ambiguity and refuses the static reading that other theory would impose. In this chapter I am focusing mainly on the criticism of Andrea Harris and Carolyn Allen.

goals. If anything, Winterson is perhaps referencing Wittig in her section on medical discourse and the body, but is far from utopic in her criticism of cultural and social discourses of women's bodies.

Winterson herself talks about resisting labels and does not like her novels to be read according to her identity as an author. She talks about the constant pressure of living in two worlds and having to shift her ideology accordingly: "We learn early how to live in two worlds; our own and that of the dominant model, why not learn how to live in multiple worlds?" (Winterson, *Art Objects* 110). She suggests that those of us living in the "dominant world" should try living in more than one world - that everyone should be forced to face their discomfort (*Art Objects* 110). Having a narrator who remains genderless in *Written on the Body* forces the reader to do just that - resemblance takes place between the narrator and the reader as we are forced to face our own ambiguity, to face our desire for the other, the forbidden and the taboo. As an adultery narrative, the genderless narrator maintains the ambiguity of the adultery triangle but also forces us to face our discomfort with adultery itself. *Written on the Body* is, in many ways, a novel about objectifying women and women's bodies - the ambiguity of the narrator forces the reader to be complicit in this act and to question the ways in which women, and in terms of adultery, lovers, have been objectified in literature and culture. Winterson's literary references allow the novel to be read as an ambiguous text, one that forces us to ask questions within a larger feminist framework rather than restricting the reading to that of a lesbian novel that elides difference, especially amongst women.

Both Allen and Harris suggest that Winterson includes clues and hints in her novel that the narrator should be read as female and Allen calls *Written on the Body* a palimpsest where Winterson consciously plays with a layered narrative, especially around the history of lesbian feminist literature (47). Harris suggests that Winterson's public sexual identity could be seen as

“extratextual reasons for reading the narrator’s gender as female” because “Winterson discusses her lesbianism as well as the autobiographical nature of all her texts... in interviews” (Harris 144). Allen furthers this idea by suggesting that readers depend on an author’s identity to make sense of a text and that “Winterson’s self-identification as a lesbian... drives the decision to imagine “I” as Louise’s woman lover” (48). Winterson, however, is wary of making these connections and believes that a piece of writing should stand on its own and be valued and read as fiction. In *Art Objects* she states:

It seems to me that the intersection between a writer’s life and a writer’s work is irrelevant to the reader. The reader is not being offered a chunk of the writer or a direct insight into the writer’s mind, the reader is being offered a separate reality.... The question put to the writer ‘How much of this is based on your own experience?’ is meaningless. All or nothing may be the answer. The fiction, the poem is not a version of facts, it is an entirely different way of seeing. (27-28)

She also resists the connection of the palimpsest motif to a lesbian literary canon by saying that “I have become aware that the chosen sexual difference of one writer is, in itself, thought sufficient to bind her in her semiotic sisterhood with any other writer, also lesbian, dead or alive” (*Art Objects* 103). Resisting categories is important for Winterson, not simply because she wishes for her private life to be left private, but because she believes that fiction should be read and enjoyed as fiction. It doesn’t mean that fiction can’t be interpreted as expressing meaning but it is not necessarily expressing the author: “Art must resist autobiography if it hopes to cross boundaries of class, culture... and... sexuality” (106). Winterson is also well known for “playing” with her public image and for provoking interviewers with ambiguous and open-ended answers. She has argued that she does not suffer from anxieties of influence or authorship in literature, whether patriarchal literary language or a lesbian feminist literary history (Humphries

15). I would argue that she is perhaps consciously referencing a specific kind of anxiety or literary burden and is not altogether free from it. I like the term that Louise Humphries uses when she describes Winterson as a “brilliant ‘mispriser’; influenced but by no means anxious” (15). Humphries is, of course, referencing Harold Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence* which was also taken up in a feminist context by Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert in *Madwoman in the Attic*. I believe that Winterson herself is making a distinction between considering herself as part of a canon and criticizing the theory that would tie her to one specific “history.”

Winterson does make references to a palimpsest motif in *Written on the Body* but, if anything, they can be read as critical of a direct connection to lesbian writing or even women’s writing. Instead, each layer reveals something new, something different, something to challenge us, and something that keeps questioning. *Written on the Body* resists these static categories and suggests that history is complex and changing. The narrator is constantly making reference to the past, one minute able to change it and another able to destroy it: “I thought how easy it is to destroy the past and how difficult to forget it” (*Written on the Body* 17). And as the palimpsest reveals more layers, there is reference to the “wrong script” (18) being “outside of time” (72) and constant references to being free from the “accumulations of a lifetime” (81). Although the narrator’s “boots are still muddy from the time before” (84) there is a sense of a refusal to become the literary history or histories that are scattered throughout the book, and Winterson keeps her narrative moving and changing, never allowing her narrator to become defined by one moment or tradition. However, while the narrative is constantly changing, Winterson’s novel ends with the assertion that this is where the story actually starts. On the one hand, the ending suggests hope—hope that Louise survived and, with her, a renewed hope that it is possible to rewrite the ending for a female adulterer. But the ending also resembles Byatt’s narrative in many ways as Louise maintains a ghostly presence and her existence in this form—real or

imagined—suggests that the narrator is likely to repeat the same story, that there is no way for Louise to survive.

Allen's reading of the palimpsest motif in Winterson is extended into her reading of the novel as a "hermeneutic erotics" (48). She sees the moving back and forth through recollections, memories and the present as creating a kind of "suspended temporality" that allows for the meditations on love, loss and desire to be at the centre of the narrative and have the plot and characters take a back seat (48). The hermeneutic of erotics comes into play through the further diffusion of the narrator's gender. The desire for the reader to know the narrator, to locate him or herself amongst the affects that the text produces, and to subsequently make sense of the narrative spatially and temporally, is carefully manipulated by Winterson.²⁵ Winterson's novel can then be read as an erotics of risk and is a conscious "theorizing of the risks that charge affective exchanges between women" (46-48). In reference to these motifs, Allen says: "Just as 'I's sex-unspecified body is a palimpsestic recording of the past, so the emotional and sexual codes of various narrative moments are layered in this titular passage which, in the end, becomes emblematic of the erotics of risk and resemblance in the whole novel" (47). It is the theorizing of bodies and of desire into a notion of resemblance that I find problematic. While Allen acknowledges that the genderless narrator acts, in some ways, as a defense against the loss of self in the other, she also suggests that the plot is "underwritten by a dynamics of body likeness" (46). Allen argues that this amounts to a theorizing of boundary loss and that connecting the notion of loss with the recognition of the self in the other creates an emotional risk and an erotics of resemblance that is best explored through desire between women (47).

Harris argues along much the same lines, by suggesting that Winterson provides hints and

²⁵ The idea of readers becoming emotionally and personally connected to a text and its author is taken up by Lynn Pearce in relation to *Written on the Body* in her essay "The Emotional Politics of Reading Winterson." In this essay she performs an autobiographical "rememorying" (30) of the novel in an attempt to understand the emotional processes that form her relationship with the text and, in turn, the author's relationship with the text. This work is further taken up in Pearce's book *Feminism and the Politics of Reading*.

clues throughout her novel that define the narrator as a woman and inextricably link Winterson, herself, with her fictional characters. Like Allen, Harris is drawn to the notion of sameness and resemblance in the narrative as one of Winterson's clues. Even though both critics attest to Winterson's refusal to sex the narrator, both Harris and Allen attempt to read the novel as its own theory, interpreting Winterson's narrative as an autobiographical and theoretical text that "claims universality for a feminine and lesbian subject position" (Harris 130). In the introduction to a collection of essays called "*I'm Telling You Stories*": *Jeanette Winterson and the Politics of Reading*, Helena Grice and Tim Woods suggest that Winterson's fiction is a constant dialogue with theory and that her "fiction is always performing and enacting a theoretical position; whilst theory is always offering a practical position from which to act" (3).²⁶ Theory does, indeed, offer a position from which to "act" when it comes to literature, but the problem with this kind of dialogic interpretation is that the theory tends to close off reading - Winterson's novel lends itself well to feminist theories and I am particularly interested in the ways in which *Written on the Body* performs and enacts multiple theoretical possibilities without ever laying claim to one position. This leaves the novel open to its own multiplicities and successfully destabilizes both marriage and adultery.

"To remember you it's my own body I touch" : (un)mapping the erotics of risk

While Carolyn Allen's analysis of *written on the Body* does allow for some ambiguity in terms of the narrator, her hermeneutic of erotics and her use of psychoanalytic theories of resemblance, recognition and mimesis/mimicry lead her to read the narrator as a woman and the

²⁶ Grice and Woods also acknowledge that there are many ways to read a novel and that Winterson's writing invites multiple interpretations. Their collection is an attempt to elaborate on the many theoretical approaches to Winterson's work and the many different ways to read her novels. However, the notion that Winterson's fiction should be read in dialogue with theory is a common element to most criticism of Winterson's work.

novel as a narrative of “erotics between women” (48-49).²⁷ Allen suggests that the use of an ambiguous narrator “serves in reading an erotics of risk otherwise at work between women” (49) and that the genderless narrator acts as a “defense against the language of incorporation and loss of boundaries that both entices and threatens the two lovers whose bodies are similar” (49). Allen’s analysis is provocative but also problematic on many levels. First, she seems to be suggesting that although the loss of boundaries and the merging of the self with the other can take place in an erotics between women, it is not a violation in the same way if the narrator is genderless. And, as she also suggests that the ambiguity of the narrator creates an erotics of risk that is usually found in an erotics between women, is she not suggesting that this violation of boundaries is different when the bodies are the same, when it is about desire between women? To me, Winterson’s novel explores the possibility of the loss of the self in the other in *any* relationship and the genderless narrator signals the impossibility of being free from the repudiated feminine in discourse and that we are all complicit in this repudiation.²⁸ The ambiguity of the narrator forces readers to face their discomfort with desiring the other and not limiting love and desire to either side of a binary.

The repudiated feminine: *Written on the Body* as a recovery of woman.

One of the most common elements of Winterson criticism is the notion that Winterson is attempting to reclaim and rewrite the feminine. This femininity is very much located in the physical body, and Winterson draws attention to the ways in which women’s bodies are objectified in representation and repudiated by male-centred discourse. Allen and Harris, in

²⁷ Allen does acknowledge the ambiguity here and suggests that Winterson plays with the gender of the narrator, hinting that it is a woman but never determining it. However, ultimately, Allen states that “I, however, read her as a woman” (49).

²⁸ I am not suggesting here that a violation of boundaries or a loss of the self in the other cannot exist in heterosexual relationships and I don’t think that Allen is suggesting this either. I believe that Allen’s use of psychoanalytic frameworks implies that in heterosexual relationships loss already exists; there is a power dynamic in place where women are already constructed as lack.

particular, see *Written on the Body* as a recovery of the feminine by reading the narrator as female. While I agree that Winterson does draw attention to the feminine in discourse, I think that she offers the possibility of a lesbian relationship as a potential recovery of the feminine in language but does not limit her novel to this reading.²⁹ As literary critics dealing primarily with lesbian novelists, both Harris and Allen rely heavily on the theories of Luce Irigaray to explore the feminine and desire between women in representation. Many of Irigaray's ideas do apply to *Written on the Body* but as Elizabeth Grosz points out, many critics often mistakenly limit Irigaray's work to the framework of a lesbian theorist ("The Homo and the Hetero" 335). In fact, one of the appealing aspects to Irigaray's work that, to me, captures the essence of Winterson's novel is the "critical distance she maintains from all existing modes of sexual relations" (Grosz 335). At the core of all of Irigaray's theories is the fact that she believes that *all* sexual practices are inextricably linked to phallogentrism, effectively rendering women as subordinate, both socially and representationally (Grosz 335).

However, many critics read Irigaray as suggesting that female homosexuality can be read as a "radical rupture in heterosexism" (Grosz 335) and in her earlier work, Irigaray does create a concept of femininity and female desire that allows for a representation of women beyond the patriarchal modes that have been made available to them (335). It is not hard to see the appeal of Irigaray to lesbian theorists. As Grosz puts it, Irigaray "implies, at least, the possibility of women loving each other as women, not as male substitutes, heterosexual relations no longer dominated by the phallus and male desire, and relations between beings who recognize and respect the otherness of the other" (339). This could describe *Written on the Body* itself and it is easy to see that there is the potential for a powerful subversive reading if Winterson is read using Irigaray. There are many means to read *Written on the Body* as a lesbian novel using Irigaray, but

²⁹ As *Written on the Body* is also about women's bodies, the feminine tends to get collapsed into the notion of the body which is also problematic.

insistence on claiming *Written on the Body* as a lesbian novel and in claiming Irigaray as a lesbian theorist, misses one of the fundamental aspects of Irigaray's musings on sexual difference.

“Where am I? There is nothing here I recognize(101)”: the ethical ramifications of love.

Harris uses Irigaray in two different ways as a means to approach the feminine in representation. First, she uses Irigaray's mimesis as a way to suggest that representations of women must be successful at unearthing the feminine in literary language without appropriating it or displacing it (Harris 1-2). Harris discusses Irigaray's mimesis as a model of counter-displacement in the search for feminist discourse: “employment of the feminine for feminist ends” (2). Through this process of refocusing “attention on the feminine” there is the potential for subversion as Irigaray believes that the feminine itself possesses textual power (2).³⁰ Harris sees mimesis and Irigaray's feminist philosophy as being about woman as flesh and body that gives (body/home) to all beings in a way that men cannot (21). This philosophy has been criticized by Harris and others as being essentialist and as simply reclaiming misogyny rather than repudiating it (21). Harris argues that Irigaray's insistence that our origins lie in the maternal, female body problematically designates the body as female and elides any connection to intellectual, spiritual and transcendental discourse (21). While reading *Written on the Body* using mimesis is useful in some ways, Harris chooses, instead to move away from this notion that simply rewrites the feminine as a means to create an alternate paradigm. Harris chooses another theory of Irigaray's to unpack *Written on the Body*, one that relies on Irigaray's project of sexual difference but that Harris reworks to insist on a theory of sameness beyond mimesis and a novel of lesbian desire.

³⁰ Irigaray's theory of mimesis asks the question of woman in a different way by “repeating/interpreting the way in which, within discourses the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the subject” (Harris 12). Rather than directly challenging the masculine subject or speaking as the masculine subject, Irigaray suggests that “mimesis involves the deliberate donning of the traditional features of femininity: it is a ‘playful repetition,’ which brings to light the ‘cover up of a possible operation of the feminine in language’” (Harris 12).

Harris uses Irigaray's sensible transcendental and the key concept of the "passion called wonder" to read *Written on the Body* as a novel about lesbian desire, suggesting that the narrator "discovers that 'true love' requires an ethical relationship to the other" rather than the all-consuming crossing of boundaries that happens with the bodies of Louise and the narrator - the blurring of the boundary between self and other (130-131). Irigaray "envisions a restoration of and to the senses - a healing of the breach between the sensible [the immediate and feminine] and the transcendental [masculine] where opposites come in to relation in 'imaginary and symbolic processes'... so that each sex may 'assume its own divisions'" (Harris 131-132). Irigaray suggests that we must reassert the possibility of two positions in any relation rather than two identities (Grosz 344). The sensible transcendental involves, as Grosz explains, "the problem of relations of equivalence, reciprocity, and interaction between two beings (or groups of beings) who recognize the differences between them" (344). Irigaray's sensible transcendental relies on a heterosexual love to heal the breach between masculine and feminine through the "empirical development of sexual difference" (Harris 22). Through the sensible transcendental, Irigaray wants to unearth the repudiated feminine in discourse and transcendental thought. As Grosz explains: "It is her attempt to bring the question of sexual difference and women's autonomy to bear on the question of *whose* perspectives, economies, anthropologies, linguistics, communications, and other forms of knowledge analyzing exchange relations represent. It is her attempt to develop a perspective that speaks woman's point of view as well" (345).

Harris sees Winterson's novel as about a repudiation and recovery of the feminine in language and representation, the coming together of the self and the other, and the ethical ramifications of desiring and loving the other (130). *Written on the Body* represents love in two ways. First, the love between the narrator and Louise is an earthly, fleshy love that is located in the physical body and the lovers' desire to consume each other. Second, Winterson incorporates

an almost spiritual element to the novel, with a love that transcends the mundane and earthly (Harris 130). Harris suggests that this is reflective of Irigaray's concept of the sensible transcendental. However, she believes that as long as Irigaray's theory is grounded in heterosexual love, that it cannot be completely free of patriarchal and symbolic discourse. For a complete recovery of the feminine, Irigaray's theory would have to be developed to allow for true love between women - something that Harris believes Irigaray leaves the possibility for and that is present in *Written on the Body*.

Winterson's Feminist Space

If, as Harris says, Winterson explores the space between masculine and feminine and between self and other, her novel is seemingly perfect for exploring within the context of Irigaray's sensible transcendental (130). Harris sees *Written on the Body* as being about the ethical ramifications of the meeting and crossing of opposed terms, specifically the narrator's initial attempt to consume Louise completely and the evolution of their relationship to one of a "joining" of self and other through an ethical love (130-131). Irigaray's notion of the sensible transcendental includes a "Cartesian concept of wonder, astonishment and admiration" between the sexes (Grosz 347). For Irigaray, when oppositions come into relation with each other "each sex would bear the fruit of this encounter and would be the meeting place of masculine and feminine, or the realization of genuine sexual difference" (Harris 132). As Grosz explains: "Irigaray's texts are thus directed toward establishing a conceptual system in which women as well as men can be represented as distinct, separate different beings. When such beings accept and respect their own and their partner's specific features, their meeting will be marked by this wonder and surprise.... Each is awed by the other's irreducible difference" (347). Irigaray suggests that if wonder takes place, then there can be an intense joining between lovers without

the violation or crossing of boundaries, or the desire for possession and objectification of the other (Harris 132). This wonder is potentially healing for Harris because it takes place at the moment of meeting, the space between the sensible and the transcendental (133).

This is where Irigaray reveals an interesting conception of feminist space - she believes that in order to dismantle Western patriarchal discourses and means of representation, there must be a change in the whole economy of space-time (Irigaray 10-12). Traditionally, woman (as mother) represent a place or space for man, relegating her status to a "thing" and depriving the maternal-feminine its own place (Irigaray 10). Women's relation to spatiality is then constructed according to man's nostalgia and women are exiled from their own "most archaic and constituent site" (11). Irigaray seeks to expose how a maternal and feminine space has been repressed, "leaving women's bodies unrepresented or represented only as a weakness, disability, or lack" (Grosz 346). Irigaray says that women must take up a space of their own, like men have, in order to speak, write, and represent themselves and their desire - only when women have done so can there be "an encounter between, or touching of, the two sexes" (346).

The repression of the feminine and feminine space resides in the interval between space and time. Irigaray suggests that in this interval ("the dynamic reserve") there is the possibility for a space-time that can mediate between space and time; it is where women can take up a space of their own, it is where desire and wonder takes place and it is where the "false duality or symmetry of phallic domination - where woman is seen as man's negative double, modeled on an *economy of the same* - can be shattered" (Grosz 347). It is interesting, then, that Harris chooses to take the notion of wonder and difference and remodel it after an economy of the same, one that she believes can be free of phallic domination through a realization of love between women. As Harris puts it:

the encounter between man and woman is a reflection of the encounter between

‘the most material and the most metaphysical,’ that is, the sensible transcendental, which involves ‘a third dimension... Neither the one nor the other. Which is not to say neutral or neuter.’ (82) That is, we must think outside of one of the fundamental binaries - the sex/gender binary. In fact, wonder cannot strictly speaking, be thought within the framework of difference as we know it. For this reason, wonder may come about in the same-sex relationship... as it does... in *Written on the Body*. (22)

For Harris, the meeting of man and woman in the sensible transcendental is fraught with the history and burden of patriarchy and she argues that the same-sex relationship “is less likely to be fraught with such issues because a history of domination between them does not exist, while it certainly does between men and women” (133). She goes on to suggest that Irigaray’s refusal to explore wonder in the same-sex encounter makes her “blind to the difference within women as well as between women (and between men), despite her constant insistence upon recognition of difference” (133-34).³¹

While Harris’s exploration of wonder in the same-sex relationship is suggestive, her application of this idea to *Written on the Body* is problematic. I also find that there are a number of contradictions in her ideas and she does not take up the opportunity that *Ethics* invites with the notion of a space that remains *between* two binaries. First, Harris suggests Winterson leaves the narrator as ungendered but hints that the narrator is female, and that Winterson’s novel can be read as claiming a “universality for a feminine and lesbian subject position” (130). She criticizes Irigaray’s *Ethics* for not being inclusive of lesbian relationships and reworks the theory to allow for this universal lesbian subject. Irigaray does not claim to be universal, nor does she deny that

³¹ As Grosz points out, Irigaray’s omission of gay and lesbian relationships in this construction of wonder and her lack of clarity when it comes to the possibility of this, has caused anxiety amongst many critics (347). Harris is clearly one of those critics as she suggests that wonder is not, and should not be, exclusive to heterosexual relationships (133). She proposes that Irigaray’s *Ethics* and sensible transcendental should be read as part of a dialogue with her earlier work that is much more woman-centred (133).

she is focusing her sensible transcendental on heterosexual relationships. Irigaray's theoretical project in all of her work is the dismantling of Western philosophical and linguistic discourse to allow for a "concept of femininity that is capable of representing women in more adequate terms than has been made possible within patriarchy" (Grosz 338). She believes that all sexual practices are "effects of an underlying phallogentrism" (338) and *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* is her attempt to recover the repudiated feminine through an exploration of heterosexual love and desire. This resonates with Spivak's notion of a strategic essentialism, where essentialism and essentialist categories should be criticized but, at times, such categories can be used to make sense of our social, cultural and political world (Morton 75). Spivak suggests that strategic essentialism is context-specific and "cannot provide a long-term political solution to end oppression and exploitation" (Morton 75). Despite the fact that Irigaray is making transcendental claims in *Ethics*, her ideas, especially when taken in dialogue with her other work as Harris suggests, are context-specific. She is assuming a position, one that Harris wants to make universal. Second, Harris suggests that Irigaray's concept of wonder through the meeting of the self and the other would not be burdened with the history of patriarchy in a same-sex relationship as the "history of domination between them does not exist" as it does in heterosexual relationships. To assume that only men can oppress women is highly problematic and seems to completely miss the point of why Winterson chooses to have her narrator remain genderless. *Written on the Body* is a novel that can be read according to Irigaray's "concept of femininity that is capable of representing women in more adequate terms than has been made possible within patriarchy" (Grosz 338). However, it also draws our attention to the ways in which patriarchy has constructed femininity and the ways in which its terms remain pervasive.

However, Winterson's genderless narrator also points to another subversive possibility in the text related to Irigaray's concept of a space that mediates between two binaries. The narrator

often occupies this inbetween space as a character who cannot be defined according to traditional sex roles and gendered social codes. The narrator has had affairs with both men and women, performs traditional male and female roles in the novel, and does not fit nicely into any stereotypical category of masculinity or femininity. As well, the narrator is linked to many different literary histories, as characters and as a reader. In this way, the narrator becomes unreadable and exists within this space-time that is able to mediate between space and time creating ambiguity and destabilizing normative discourses—both social and literary—that seek definition.

“Such innocent triangles holding hidden strength” (131) : the romance of adultery

While Winterson may resist the notion that the novel as palimpsest reveals its “true” literary roots, she does include many literary references that can be read as a critique of the ways in which women have been represented in literature. The objectification of Louise’s body in *Written on the Body* has been theorized as being about the self and the other and the issue of love and obsession. As I shall explore further, *Written on the Body*, and the section on medical discourse in particular, is considered to be Winterson’s way of exploring the potential violation of the boundary between self and other but this violation is ultimately prevented by a theorizing of the bodies in terms of resemblance; if the bodies are the same (female) then violation and objectification can’t take place and the novel can comfortably be considered a lesbian love story or romance. This reading, of course, elides issues such as domestic violence in lesbian violence or women’s ability to oppress or objectify other women—issues that have long been marginalized in feminism as well. However, without gendering the narrator, and considering the taboo of adultery that is central to the narrator’s relationship, the love story is troubled and the palimpsest instead reveals a deeper criticism of the stereotypical gendered dynamics that are the central means of

understanding and representing love in literature.

In an essay about the discomfort many reviewers have expressed with the genderless narrator, Gregory Rubinson discusses his belief that, at its core, *Written on the Body* is a love story - albeit, one that is both troubled and made stronger by Winterson's refusal to sex the narrator. Rubinson says that: "by using a narrator of unspecified gender, however, Winterson clearly departs from the conventions of most love stories which delineate clear sexual roles" (128). He goes on to examine the confusion and discomfort that many reviewers have in reading Winterson's novel and their desire to give the narrator a sexed and gendered identity, and suggests that to define the narrator would "reinforce false gender stereotypes rooted in male-authored scientific "knowledge" about sexed bodies" (130). This is especially true of love stories or stories of romantic love where the pull towards heterosexist norms is even stronger. Rubinson says that Winterson's refusal to comply with these norms and expectations is a conscious decision on her part to criticize our need to apply gender stereotypes to characters and our need to use sex and gender as a means of interpreting a text (130). I would also argue that Winterson forces us to face our discomfort with desiring what is forbidden—in this case, the possibility that by identifying with the narrator the reader may be complicit in the taboo of adultery, in desiring the other or the "same."

The genderless narrator is not the only way that Winterson troubles the love story - adultery also troubles the love story and is, in turn, complicated by the genderless narrator. Carolyn Allen discusses the use of (lesbian) romance in the novel and how adultery plays a role:

the power dynamics between a married woman and her unmarried lover continue to determine the erotics. The novel turns upon plot in which the passion of brief affairs first leads to the comfort of a lesbian 'marriage' and is displaced by True Love with a married woman, a relation in which both passion and comfort seem

possible. As a consequence of the lovers' different marital histories, versions of emotional risk remain a crucial component of the erotics between the narrator and Louise. ... *Written on the Body* [takes] the risk of commitment and intimacy in the face of potential loss...*Written on the Body* takes also what might be called the risk of genre, so that it undercuts the conventions of its romance plot by foregrounding its own use of romantic clichés.... As a revisionist romance, *Written on the Body* deconstructs its own clichés and generic conventions at the same time that its narrative writes an erotics once more grounded in the threat of losing a lover. 63

Of interest to me is exactly how Winterson does undercut her own romance plot but also how she foregrounds clichés that can be specifically associated with marriage and adultery. Allen suggests that the relationship between the narrator and Louise is an adulterous one because it heightens the chance of loss and emphasizes the risk of choosing passion over comfort (63). However, I would argue further that Winterson is deconstructing the notion of marriage and commitment in representation, unpacking the romantic clichés in textual and literary contexts. Winterson's depiction of adultery is also not a picture of passion. *Written on the Body* is full of literary references that point to the loneliness, destruction and ordinariness of both marriage and adultery. It is as much about how marriage undermines adultery as it is about the ways in which adultery undermines and destroys marriage, but without privileging one over the other and calling the notion of domesticity into question.

In terms of a lesbian literary canon, Patricia Duncker believes that *Written on the Body* fails—not only as a lesbian love story but also in terms of its place in the history of lesbian literature. Like many critics, Duncker claims that Winterson's novel is reminiscent of Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body* and is referencing a specific radical lesbian feminist literary tradition

where sex and passion between women cannot occupy the same trajectory as heterosexual love (84). Duncker says that Winterson's insistence on ambiguity when it comes to the narrator confines Louise to the status of an object to be won, restricts Winterson herself to heterosexual clichés, focuses the relationship dynamics on the adulterous triangle rather than the love between Louise and the narrator, and, finally, allows for the male reader to identify with the narrator, therefore keeping marriage and adultery in a heterosexual framework unchallenged by an affair between women (82-85). Further, she claims that Louise's cancer "raise[s] ordinary household and garden adultery to the level of Wagnerian tragedy" especially as it is a rare cancer that is not described in the abject terms that Duncker associates with a wasting body (85). All of these issues take away from the potential for Winterson to reclaim Wittig's ideas and to claim, with conviction, that her novel is a lesbian one.³²

However, what Duncker and others see as a failure on Winterson's part I see as an ingenious way for Winterson to answer back to the critics who insist that she has an obligation to be a part of some "semiotic sisterhood" and write lesbian novels (*Art Objects* 103). I also think that what Duncker sees as problematic in Winterson's text is what makes it an interesting and subversive exploration of love, obsession, marriage, fidelity, and domesticity. Cath Stowers points out that many critics think that Winterson fails to "escape the dynamics of possession and conquest, presenting little more than a tale of unpleasant obsession and exploration of the other, inextricably implicated in the discourse of both colonialism and heterosexuality" (90). I think this is precisely Winterson's point - that it is impossible to write out of these traditions

³² Duncker's essay appears in "*I'm Telling You Stories*": *Jeanette Winterson and the Politics of Reading* edited by Helena Grice and Tim Woods (Rodopi, 1998). An essay by Grice & Woods in this collection does address the issue of likeness and sexual sameness in the adultery triangle. Discussing Winterson's later novel, *GUT Symmetries* (1997), Grice and Woods suggest that although critiquing patriarchal gender structures is an important underlying element to all of Winterson's work, *GUT Symmetries* does something that *Written on the Body* does not - it focuses on a triangular love relationship between two women and a man where "woman-to-woman identification" develops and replaces the male/female relationship that dominates the first half of the text (122). It is in *this* novel, rather than *Written on the Body*, that Grice and Woods identify as the work where Winterson takes up the notion of using a lesbian relationship as an alternative to heterosexist, patriarchal and western binarist thinking (122).

and that this history, these ghosts, are marked on our bodies. Stowers agrees that Winterson is not simply unconsciously falling into the patriarchal and heterosexist conventions of romance and that she is trying to do something far more political. For Stowers, this comes in the form of a deconstruction of paradigms of gender, othering, and conquest through Winterson's rejection of male paradigms in favour of a (lesbian) reclaiming of female paradigms in the tradition of *The Lesbian Body* (90). Stowers says that:

Winterson makes her narrator negate the traditional roles of women as passive object of exploration and quest by having him/her follow masculine paradigms, but also, in ultimately rejecting such models, she posits her narrator as an almost perfect illustration of Wittig's claim that lesbianism is far more than 'a refusal of the role "woman"'; it is also 'the refusal of the economic, ideological, and political power of man'. (91)

However, where Stowers sees the lesbian reading of *Written on the Body* as Winterson's way out of male literary paradigms, I think that Winterson's ambiguous narrator also warns us about creating female paradigms to take their place. If anything, Winterson may be recalling Wittig's novel in her section on medical discourse, but instead of creating an homage to lesbian experimental fiction that exists outside of a heterosexist and patriarchal trajectory, she is saying that these trajectories are possible to subvert but impossible to ignore - they are written on the body - the body of literature, the body of the text and the bodies in the text. They are written on the body of the female adulterer.

“I am the archeologist of tombs” : Mapping nostalgia and the abject body

If, as I believe, Winterson's text is a commentary on “the dynamics of possession and conquest... implicated in the discourse of both colonialism and heterosexuality” (Stowers 90),

reading *Written on the Body* as an adulterous love story provides an even more revealing criticism of gendered literary paradigms. The various romantic relationships in the novel, including the marriages and affairs, all point to literature's obsession with women and domesticity. The way that domesticity plays out in *Written on the Body* relates to the way that Winterson constructs the text spatially and the way that the body itself bears the burden of mapping these spaces. It is here, on Louise's body, that the narrator tries to rewrite the adultery narrative as a way to confine Louise to her role as an objectified romantic object.

Many of Winterson's novels deal with the issue of space and time. She is fascinated with history and preoccupied with the space-time continuum, writing non-linear stories that move back and forth through time, transplanting historical figures into the present and mapping cities that change and move according to the characters who move within them.³³ As Lyn Pykett says: "The problems of mapping and measuring space and time are of course particular instances of the postmodern problematization of knowledge and representation. How we know the present, how we know the past, and how we represent both or either are questions which are repeatedly raised in and by Winterson's novels" (55). However, while Winterson demonstrates a "distrust of the possibility of mapping and measuring space and time" (Pykett 55) in many of her novels through a kind of time travel and shifting of linear time, in *Written on the Body* she is drawing attention to the "problematization of knowledge and representation" through a linear mapping of the body through writing. *Written on the Body* does not shift history in the way that Winterson's other novels do. Instead, she makes reference to the way that literary history shapes writing by comparing the relationships taking place in the present to relationships of the past - the narrator's past, an historical past, and a literary past.

One of the ways in which Winterson makes reference to the literary traditions of adultery

³³ For example, *Art & Lies* (1994), *The Passion* (1987), *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), and her most recent novel, *Lighthousekeeping* (2004).

is through a recollection of past literary genres, especially those of Victorian literature, and through a seeming nostalgia for romantic narratives. *Written on the Body* has been considered as a romance narrative because of the ways in which the lovers seek a unity, a wholeness through their physical and emotional relationship. However, as Barbara Creed points out, narratives that appear to be about romantic love can be deceiving because “love does not necessarily assume a normal face nor follow a socially acceptable trajectory. Tales of love and desire also embrace the darker side of human nature...” (Creed 174). Creed explores Gothic narratives of romantic love in film and suggests that these tales do not allow for unity and wholeness for lovers and instead point to the impossibility of this union where romantic love is exposed as a myth that is simply hiding the true nature of desire (174). The narrator constantly references history, particularly the Victorian, when it comes to courting Louise and the narrator pushes to create a romantic wholeness with Louise through an expression of desire. However, this desire is complicated by “seeking pleasure in perversity,” which Creed suggests is common for romance narratives and is most often represented through a desire to cross boundaries, to lose oneself in the other (176). This is true of Winterson’s characters whose idyllic getaways and times together are shadowed by the ultimate loss of each other and the destruction that their love will bring:

We lay in our bed in the rented room and I fed you plums the colour of bruises. Nature is fecund but fickle. One year she leaves you to starve, the next year she kills you with love. That year the branches were torn beneath the weight, this year they would sing in the wind. There are no ripe plums in August. Have I got it wrong, this hesitant chronology? Perhaps I should call it Emma Bovary’s eyes or Jane Eyre’s dress. I don’t know. I’m in another rented room now trying to find the place to go back to where things went wrong. Where I went wrong. You were driving but I was lost in my own navigation. (Winterson 17)

This is one of many places where Winterson compares the relationship of Louise and the narrator to fated romances that incorporate love triangles (*Madame Bovary*, *Jane Eyre*) and, at the same time, implies that Louise is another literary female adulterer in a long “chronology.” The reference to rented rooms also reminds us that they are in the spaces of adultery, temporary spaces that have contained many lovers in the past and will do so in the future. Although the narrator wants to rewrite their story and change the ending, the inclusion of images that are delicate and tenuous undermines this possibility. For example, Winterson includes many images of food in her novel and while food is associated with desire and the erotic, it is also compared to the fragility of the body and its appeal is complicated by the reminder that it can decay, rot, and suffer damage. In this passage there are plums that look like bruises, plums that the narrator later breaks over Louise (18).

The references to food also suggests the desire for the lovers to consume each other. Using the work of Georges Bataille, Creed also points out that in romantic narratives there is often a conflicting desire for the lovers to lose themselves in each other and also to find themselves in each other, to become a unit (176). For both Creed and Bataille, the attempt to erase the boundaries that keep lovers from consuming and becoming each other manifests itself “through violent, perverse excess and debauched behaviour - anything that challenges normality” (Creed 176). While Creed sees this to be a central theme in Gothic tales and horror films, especially ones that maintain the idea of romance at their centre such as vampire films, these notions of conflicting desire and perverse excess are present in *Written on the Body* through the way that the narrator constructs Louise and their relationship and also through the presence of a nostalgia for past literatures and the Victorian; a nostalgia that is also associated with fragile images or characters that are prone to decay and destruction.

The narrator constantly talks of learning from Louise, that Louise is teaching the narrator

about love and desire and that it is a language that the narrator almost violently consumes. While the narrator is also set up as having a colourful romantic history with both male and female lovers, much of this history is connected to literary characters whose experiences can be interpreted as romantic and passionate yet border on the perverse excess discussed by Creed. Many of these literary references, the characters that haunt this palimpsestic text, also relate to Louise and even these boundaries become blurred. For example, the narrator is immediately compared to Caliban - the Shakespearean slave who is described as a monstrous savage who must be tamed. The narrator quotes Caliban as saying "You taught me language and my profit on't is/ I know how to curse. The red plague rid you/ For learning me your language" (Winterson 9). Caliban must reluctantly learn to be "civilized" whereas the narrator must learn to let go of the past and love and trust Louise. However, Caliban is also associated with attempted rape and his name resembles the word cannibal. Winterson sets up the narrator as both the reluctant student, learning about love, wanting the romantic union with Louise but also as the rapist/cannibal whose desire is complicated by a need to completely consume her. It is the narrator who controls their relationship, through a complex blurring of boundaries that ultimately abjects Louise all together: "Louise, in this single bed, between these garish sheets, I will find a map as likely as any treasure hunt. I will explore you and mine you and you will redraw me according to your will. We shall cross one another's boundaries and make ourselves one nation. Scoop me in your hands for I am good soil. Eat of me and let me be sweet" (Winterson 20). Later, when Louise's cancer takes over her body, her body will become abject and reject the narrator altogether.

The narrator's construction of Louise in terms of the Victorian is both metaphorical and literal: "She was more of a Victorian heroine than a modern woman. A heroine from a Gothic novel, mistress of her house, yet capable of setting fire to it and fleeing in the night with one bag. I always expected her to wear her keys at her waist" (49). Louise holds a contradictory place in

the novel as a heroine and as a female adulterer and the narrator attempts to make Louise transcend this literary history by making adultery timeless and without significance. There are many moments where the narrator attempts to challenge the ways in which adultery and marriage are socially viewed and constructed: “Adultery is very common. It has no rarity value” (39). Most often, the narrator unpacks adultery in relation to marriage where neither is morally better than the other, but adultery is often more appealing:

I used to think of marriage as a plate-glass window just begging for a brick. The self-exhibition, the self-satisfaction, smarminess, tightness, tight-arsedness. The way married couples go out in fours like a pantomime horse.... It doesn't have to be like that but mostly it is. I've been through a lot of marriages. Not down the aisle but always up the stairs. I began to realize I was hearing the same story every time. (13)

Both marriage and adultery are described as predictable performances. On the one hand, this destabilizing of marriage can be seen to be subversive and it is certainly all the more effective to include adultery as something that is both the act that transgresses and destabilizes marriage but, through its boring predictability, also destabilizes itself. As the narrator says, “I'd always been fond of Vronsky but I don't believe in living out literature” (75) acknowledging the literary traditions of romance and adultery but suggesting that there is a way to free themselves from the same fate, that there is a way for the narrator and Louise to rescue each other from history.

However, the association with past literary traditions, particularly from the nineteenth century, undermines the timelessness of the affair and restricts Louise's agency as a heroine. She is completely constructed by the narrator: as a swarm of Red Admiral butterflies (29), as a Pre-Raphaelite heroine, connected with Emma Bovary (17) and Anna Karenina (75). Yet, at the same time, the narrator wants Louise to strip away this history, to make them timeless: “I could have

held her for a thousand years until the skeleton itself rubbed away to dust. What are you that makes me feel thus? Who are you for whom time has no meaning” (51). In these moments, Louise is often associated with essentialist images of nature: “There are plenty of legends about women turning into trees but are there any about trees turning into women? Is it odd to say that your lover reminds you of a tree? Well, she does, it’s the way her hair fills with wind and sweeps around her head. Very often I expect her to rustle” (29). Louise is described as the ocean, as trees, as the moon, as the earth. It’s a nostalgia that Rita Felski suggests was common in the late nineteenth century in representations of women that simultaneously put forth images of rationality and progress and a yearning for the past, for what was lost in the process (146). Often, this nostalgia would manifest itself in the form of images of women who were constructed as redemptive due to their closeness to nature (146). This essentializing of women and nature can be seen here through the narrator’s construction of Louise, but it is also more complex than that. There is a sense of the narrator’s urgency in making the love affair with Louise real, to prove its authenticity. Jennifer Green-Lewis says that “[d]esire for authenticity may be understood in part as a desire for that which we have first altered and then fetishized, a desire, perhaps, for a past in which we will find ourselves” (43). The narrator attempts to create their love as something that carries the “authenticity” of true, historical or literary love, but that is also something new: “The maze. Find your own way through and you shall win our heart’s desire. Fail and you will wander for ever in these unforgiving walls. Is that the test? I told you that Louise had more than a notion of the Gothic about her. She seemed determined that I should win her from the tangle of my own past” (54). The constant images of Louise as nature represent a nostalgia but also a sense of the purity, freshness, and innocence that the narrator tries to will onto Louise - the renewal of nature has the potential to free them from the past. However, Louise bears the burden of being represented as an “authentic” literary heroine and a romantic

object of love at the same time as she is being pressed to rewrite their romance, to rescue the narrator: "Louise, I would gladly fire the past for you, go and not look back.... I know what it will mean to redeem myself from the accumulations of a lifetime. I know and I don't care. You set before me a space uncluttered by association. It might be a void or it might be a release. Certainly I want to take the risk. I want to take the risk because the life I have stored up is going mouldy" (81). While Louise also says that she wants the narrator to be free of personal history, "I want you to come to me without a past" (54), the actual process of becoming new, being free from history, becomes displaced onto Louise and onto Louise's body. This passage is very telling because it shows that Winterson is questioning the value of traditions and history, things that linger in the text and make it "mouldy." But she is also drawing our attention to the fact that this mouldiness, this lingering decay of past lives, past loves, and past literary traditions, is something that is not easy to escape. Even though the narrator describes Louise as having "reading hands" and says "She has translated me into her own book" (89), it is a book that will always be "mouldy" because of the burdens of the past that are displaced onto Louise.

Despite these attempts to control Louise, to burden her with writing new history, the narrator starts to create her as abject, ironically foreshadowing her later cancer. Louise often becomes an abject figure in the narrator's descriptions - rotting, exploding, temperamental, uncontrollable. She may be associated with the renewal of nature but she also represents its volatility, a volatility that is especially present during the moments of intimate connection and desire where the boundaries between the lovers blur. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva says that when suffering is present in a narrative, the boundary between subject and object becomes blurred and the narrative itself is challenged (141). Kristeva describes a "suffering-horror" where a narrative seems "controlled by the necessity of going through abjection" (140-141):

If it continues nevertheless, its makeup changes; its linearity is shattered, it

proceeds by flashes, enigmas, short cuts, incompleteness, tangles, cuts. At a later stage, the unbearable identity of the narrator and of the surroundings that are supposed to sustain him can no longer be *narrated* but *cries out* or is *decried* with maximal stylistic intensity (language of violence, of obscenity, or of a rhetoric that relates text to poetry). The narrative yields to a *crying-out theme* that, when it tends to coincide with the incandescent states of boundary-subjectivity that I have called abjection, is the crying-out theme of suffering-horror. In other words, the theme of suffering-horror is the ultimate evidence of such states of abjection within a narrative representation. If one wished to proceed farther still along the approaches to abjection, one would find neither narrative nor theme but a recasting of syntax and vocabulary—the violence of poetry, and silence. (141)

The narrator does seem to suffer from loving Louise and much of this suffering is not from losing her but from intimate and sexual contact. The narrator's ultimate desire is to consume Louise, to get lost in her body, and to lose a sense of self. However, there is also a fear in relinquishing control - a perverse fear that is at once appealing and terrifying: "You want love to be like this every day don't you? 92 degrees even in the shade. This intensity, this heat, sun like a disc-saw through your body" (12). Gradually, this suffering gets displaced onto Louise, where she becomes both the threat and the threatened: "There was a dangerous electrical quality about Louise. I worried that the steady flame she offered might be fed by a current far more volatile. Superficially she seemed serene, but beneath her control was a crackling power of the kind that makes me nervous when I pass pylons" (49). The narrator wants to rewrite their story, their histories through the body, but the impulse to place this burden of agency on to Louise at the same time as she is objectified by the narrator, results in the narrative being, as Kristeva says, "controlled by the necessity of going through abjection" (140). What the narrator and Louise

ultimately write on each other's bodies is abjection and the story follows Kristeva's notion above where the narrative shifts and Louise's cancerous body becomes abject.

"The body is making way for worms" (119): writing the abject body.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva describes processes of abjection: "There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated" (1). Much of *Written on the Body* is about the narrator's attempt to "write" Louise and to "rewrite" her through a medical love poem as a means to keep her alive - to assimilate Louise into an objectified subject in order to "save" her and to be saved. The narrator's pushing of the boundary between self and other in this section, especially references to getting inside Louise, under her skin and becoming a part of her, have been theorized in terms of a loss of self and a violation of boundaries that is ultimately prevented through a reading of the lovers as alike. However, as Louise Humphries points out, this reading ultimately denies the "textual play fundamental to the novel at all levels - the play with sexual identity, with romantic discourse, and literary conventions - the result being a clearly unintended stabilization of the text" (12). Reading *Written on the Body* through the abject, however, does keep the text at play and destabilizes the fixed theory of resemblance.

Humphries believes that Winterson is successful at having her lovers transcend the dichotomy between the subject and object of desire without them compromising their uniqueness as individuals (14). I would argue that Louise maintains her uniqueness throughout but that the narrator does attempt to rewrite Louise, to deconstruct her and reconstruct her. While I disagree that the narrator tries to reconstruct Louise in terms of likeness, I do think that Allen, Harris and

other critics are right in their observations of Winterson's complex explorations of boundaries and the violation of the other. The narrator constantly tries to keep Louise as the object of love and desire, one that borders on obsession, but Louise consistently refuses to be objectified.

Humphries says that both Louise and the narrator are "described as map-makers or inscribers of desire as well as map-readers or translators of desire" (14). The metaphors of map-making and translation are present throughout *Written on the Body* and mostly relate to the actual bodies of Louise and the narrator. However, Louise's map is not so easily read. The theories of likeness and resemblance are connected by the fact that the narrator ultimately learns to respect the self through a recognition of the self in the other. Humphries points out that *Written on the Body* is often theorized as dealing with "the problem in lesbian relationships of retaining some kind of otherness between two like lovers: in what way is the other other?" (14). The risk of loss introduces the element of otherness which "functions as a defense against mere self-projection" (Humphries 14). Harris's use of Irigaray argues much the same thing - that the boundary is less likely to be violated with self and self-like rather than self and other. In this sense, the narrator and Louise recognize themselves in each other and the narrator ultimately learns that to try and reconstruct Louise means reconstructing "herself." But, Louise's body resists this resemblance and, through its cancer, refuses to be read according to anyone else's map. What the narrator learns from Louise is not the same as realizing that they are alike. Likeness is impossible because Louise's body is abject and the issue of her cancer is left unresolved by Winterson. Louise's abject body is the map that leads the narrator to understand about objectification and a violation of boundaries. It is loving the abject body that becomes the ultimate erotics of risk.

Noelle McAfee describes abjection as being about the subject in process (45) - much like the narrator in *Written on the Body* and also like Louise's recalcitrant and unpredictable body. Kristeva's concept of the abject - "the state of abjecting or rejecting what is other to oneself" -

constructs the “I” as existing within tenuous borders (McAfee 45). In processes of symbolic and linguistic articulation and means of constructing subjectivity, abjection threatens to disrupt the symbolic realm (45). Kristeva explores abjection in *Powers of Horror* where she discusses how subjectivity is constituted and how our borders are formed (45) McAfee says that abjection continuously “haunts subjectivity, threatening to unravel what has been constructed; one’s own sense of self is never settled or unshaken. To keep hold of “oneself,” a subject has to remain vigilant against what may undermine its borders” (45). In *Written on the Body*, Louise’s cancer is the abject that haunts her identity, but the identity that is threatened by her abject body is one that was constructed by the narrator. It is a kind of conscious abjection: “In the secret places of her thymus gland Louise is making too much of herself. Her faithful biology depends on regulation but the white T-cells have turned bandit. They don’t obey the rules. They are swarming into the bloodstream, overturning the quiet order of spleen and intestine” (Winterson 115). This passage could relate to Louise’s possible conscious abjection but also to the notion of remaining vigilant against what may undermine the body’s borders. Here Louise’s body is threatened by cancer, but also threatened by the narrator attempting to reconstruct her and get inside her. Ultimately, Louise has control *because* of her abject body, the very thing that threatens her own identity *and* her life.

Winterson uses a Kristevan language when it comes to Louise’s body, talking about the things that the body expels in graphic terms. Kristeva talks of vomiting and retching, bile and shriveled organs, sweat and tears (Kristeva 2-3) in much the same way that Winterson describes Louise’s cancerous body: “Within the clinical language, through the dispassionate view of the sucking, sweating, greedy, defecating self, I found a love-poem to Louise... I would have her plasma, her spleen, her synovial fluid. I would recognize her even when her body had long since fallen away” (Winterson 111). However, the interesting thing about *Written on the Body* is that it

is the narrator who is describing Louise's body in abject terms while trying to become a part of Louise. The narrator is trying to penetrate Louise's body, to try and make sense of its abject borders and save it. But the very language that the narrator uses makes it clear that Louise's body abjects the narrator and resists trying to be read.

Winterson's novel can be read in three sections that all, in some way, relate to Kristeva's abject. Of interest to me are the last two sections, the medical love-poem to Louise and the resolution that comes from letting go of Louise. The common element to them all is that Louise's body is central to each and the narrator must work through a number of means of constructing subjectivity before the end of the story or before Louise dies - whichever comes first. In fact, the ultimate abjection would be Louise's death - something that Winterson comes close to in the final parts of the novel - but that she ultimately leaves open-ended and ambiguous. The first part of the book could be read as Winterson's attempt to explore the symbolic and semiotic in representation. The refusal to name the narrator as male or female in this section keeps the binary at play and the narrator moves between multiple subjectivities - and moves between what could be considered to be traditional masculine and feminine discourses. By the end of this section, the narrator is fully immersed in the objectification of Louise and is almost trying to assimilate Louise, cannot see her as separate: "When I look in the mirror it's not my own face I see. Your body is twice. Once you and once me. Can I be sure which is which?" (Winterson 99). It is passages like these that understandably lead critics to discuss the lovers in terms of resemblance, but it is important to note that Louise does not reciprocate this kind of obsessive affection. It is at this point that Louise's cancer is revealed and her body begins to abject the narrator, something that the narrator reluctantly acknowledges: "You will break up bone by bone, fracture from who you are, you are drifting away now, the centre cannot hold" (101).

The midsection of the novel is described by the narrator as a "love-poem to Louise"

found through the medical language of anatomy books (111). The narrator has left Louise, against her wishes, believing that sending her back to her husband, Elgin, is the only way to save her. Again, Louise's body is at the mercy of the narrator who seems to know Louise's body inside and out but is oblivious to Louise's own desires. Winterson sets this section up in terms of body parts - cells and tissues, the skeleton, the skin, and the senses combining actual anatomical descriptions with prose about Louise's own body. The abject is always present, however, through the narrator's almost poetic yearning for Louise's body that includes references to her cancer and how her body is dying: "You were milk-white and fresh to drink. Will your skin discolour, its brightness blurring? Will your neck and spleen distend? Will the rigorous contours of your stomach swell under an infertile load?" (125). There are also many references to the narrator attempting to get inside Louise's body, crossing the boundary between self and other and often Winterson constructs this as a kind of challenge to the cancer that the narrator knows Louise more intimately than the disease: "The lining of the mouth I know through tongue and spit. Its ridges, valleys, the corrugated roof the fortress of teeth. The glossy smoothness of the inside of your upper lip is interrupted by a rough swirl where you were hurt once. The tissues of the mouth and anus heal faster than any others but they leave signs for those who care to look. I care to look" (117).

"The worm in the bud" (28): Failed Domesticity and Abject Adultery

Louise is connected to the abject in many ways in the text - as a cancerous and recalcitrant body, as an abject corpse, and as the catalyst for adultery itself becoming abject. Abject adultery is connected to the notion of domesticity and the failed domesticity of the various relationships. Louise, herself, is not held to the same standards of domestic ideals because the narrator has much higher ideals for her to meet which, ultimately, abject her completely. Through

the narrator's construction of Louise, she doesn't really exist in the same way that the other characters do. She doesn't have much of a past, we don't really learn anything about her present life except for her cancer, and it is unclear if she will survive. She is an ethereal presence in the book - an idealized, objectified and, ultimately, abject, body; she is not represented in terms of her domestic role but bears the burden of being the reason behind the failed domesticity of the other characters.

Jacqueline is the narrator's partner. There is no passion between them and the narrator describes Jacqueline as somewhat of a compromise, a safe harbour and chance to settle down, to stop pursuing risky and dangerous partners: "I considered her. I didn't love her and I didn't want to love her. I didn't desire her and I couldn't imagine desiring her.... I was tired of balancing blindfold on a slender beam, one slip into the unplumbed sea. I wanted the clichés, the armchair.... It's called growing up" (26). Compared to Louise who is represented in terms of butterflies, willowy trees, and ethereal beauty, Jacqueline is depicted as plain and boring, an unremarkable woman who works at the Zoo. From the moment that Louise enters their lives, Jacqueline is described by the narrator with an air of disgust: "When Jacqueline came home I kissed her and said 'I wish you didn't smell of the Zoo.' She looked surprised. 'I can't help it. Zoos are smelly places.'" (40). When the narrator admits to having an affair with Louise, Jacqueline's reaction is clumsy and oafish, she drops her food on the floor whereas Louise is described as being elegant with food, sexual and erotic. The narrator's relationship with Jacqueline is associated with the banality of domestic life. They eat plain food, they sleep in "pyjamas side by side" (41) and are "apostle[s] of ordinariness" in their domestic space (27). In comparison, Louise is an exotic presence in her own house, eating breakfast with her hair down "warming her neck and shoulders, falling forward on to the table-cloth in wires of light" (49).

While the narrator is responsible for hurting Jacqueline, Louise becomes the catalyst for

the adultery and the abjection that follows. It is her objectified exoticism that is constructed as luring the narrator away from Jacqueline - seducing the narrator with the promise of something new. While the narrator describes Louise's presence in the domestic space as erotic and alluring, there is the sense that with Louise involved, even the most boring of domestic routines would be exciting: "Yes we are and I do like to pass the day with you in serious and inconsequential chatter. I wouldn't mind washing up beside you, dusting beside you, reading the back half of the paper while you read the front" (38). There is a sense that the lure of the unfamiliar will give way to a desire for the normal, the expected—that Louise's seductive presence will allow them to redefine the domestic space and the predictability that the narrator associates with both marriage and adultery. By making their relationship work, the narrator wants to decentre the norms of both marriage and adultery. However, as previously explored, the narrator's nostalgia for the past undermines Louise's agency and confines her to the role of female adulterer and as such prevents her from being able to participate in any kind of domestic norm.

Adultery becomes abject through Jacqueline's reaction to the affair and the ways in which it exposes the narrator's failed domesticity. When the affair is revealed, Jacqueline locks the narrator out of their apartment. Upon returning the following day, the narrator finds the apartment has been destroyed, an abject space that represents the ruin that adultery has brought: "The room looked like a chicken shed. There were feathers everywhere, The pillows had been ripped, the duvet gutted and emptied. She had torn the drawers from their chests and tipped the contents about like any good burglar" (70). Jacqueline has literally ripped the insides out of their bedroom, out of their respectable domestic space and, in the process, has also surprised the narrator by not being the quiet picture of feminine (and boring) respectability that she seemed: "The worm in the bud. That's right, most buds do have worms but what about the ones that turn? I thought Jacqueline would have crept away as quietly as she had crept in" (71). Instead,

Jacqueline does what is unthinkable and recreates the domestic space as an abject space that “does not respect borders, positions, rules” and that “disturbs identity, system, order” (Kristeva 4).

Jacqueline’s behaviour does not conform to the rules of the proper domestic order that the narrator had hated but had also relied on and she also defies the rules of feminine respectability through her final acts of abjection. When the narrator enters the bathroom, Jacqueline has destroyed it by marking the walls with her own feces and by making it unusable:

The bathroom looked like it had been the target of a depraved and sadistic plumber. The taps were twisted on their sides, there was a monkey wrench skewed under the hot water pipe where someone had done their best to disconnect me. The walls were covered in heavy felt-tip pen. It was Jacqueline’s handwriting. There was a long list of her attributes over the sink. Pasted like an acid-house frieze around the ceiling was Jacqueline’s name over and over again. Jacqueline colliding with Jacqueline.... Staring bleakly at the bathroom door I saw it had SHIT daubed across it. The word and the matter. That explained the smell.

(Winterson 70)

This act of smearing her bodily waste on the walls is not simply an act of bitterness and pain. Jacqueline’s actions point to a reclaiming of her own identity through an abjection of the domestic space - the space that she has nurtured from the beginning of their relationship, cleaning, cooking, making tea, taking the “sensible route” - “not too much passion, not too much sex, plenty of greens and an early night” (71). While the narrator says that this kind of normal, expected domestic scene is a cliché and that “it’s the clichés that cause all the trouble” (71) it is also evident that Winterson is saying that if marriage is a cliché, so is adultery. And, Jacqueline’s abjection of the domestic space simply clears the way for the adultery to take centre stage and,

also, become abject.

According to Kristeva, what enters the body nourishes and what comes out of the body “gives rise to abjection” (108). Fecal matter represents what the body must necessarily reject in the delimitation of the self and in order to be autonomous and “clean and proper” subjects (Kristeva 108). She says that “dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not” and allows the body to extricate itself from that border, through this repetition of waste (3). Such bodily waste, then, is an interesting symbol here because it represents, on the one hand, that which the subject must reject in order to define the self, but in Winterson’s novel it also represents the redefining of the domestic space as unclean, unsafe and something that is threatened by the crossing of borders through adultery. Jacqueline is reclaiming her identity as a clean and proper subject, literally leaving the narrator and Louise to clean up her shit. She has rejected the waste of the relationship and the affair, ultimately undermining both and exposing the contradictions and clichés in traditional notions of feminine respectability and domesticity. But, Winterson’s use of fecal matter here also points to another aspect of abjection - that of the corpse. Jacqueline may be excreting bodily waste but it is not long before the burden of this affair and the objectification of Louise’s body turns to a complete abjection where the narrator conceives of Louise as corpse-like. The corpse, according to Kristeva, “represents fundamental pollution” (109) and is the “utmost of abjection” (4). By passing bodily waste continuously, we are guaranteeing ourselves as subjects, as living beings: “Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit - *cadere*, cadaver” (3). Death is inevitable for everyone, but Jacqueline’s actions remind us that she is a living subject, free from the clichés, the history, and the failed domesticity that she leaves behind. It is Louise’s body that performs the ultimate abjection through its cancer; her body decaying and becoming “a border that has encroached upon everything” (3).

The midsection, the medical love poem to Louise, begins with the narrator mourning the loss of Louise. However, this loss is not described as the end of the relationship but as a bereavement, as if Louise had already died (110). The narrator grieves for Louise and has to construct her as dead, has to construct their relationship as dead, in order to recreate her in these abject terms: "I don't want a model, I want the full-scale original. I don't want to reproduce, I want to make something entirely new" (108). They could not rewrite the script of their romance and relationship, could not avoid the clichés of domesticity, marriage and adultery. And now Louise's body has sealed their fate. The only thing that the narrator can do is to rebuild Louise from the parts of her body that have already been marked by her/him. But, first Louise must be killed to make her new again: "As I embalm you in my memory, the first thing I shall do is to hook out your brain through your accommodating orifices. Now that I have lost you, I can not allow you to develop, you must be a photograph not a poem. You must be rid of life as I am rid of life" (119). The narrator wants to possess Louise, to be inside of her, under her skin but knows that Louise's cancer won't allow this, that her body itself will resist: "Here they come, hurtling through the blood stream trying to pick a fight. There's no-one to fight but you Louise. You're the foreign body now" (116).³⁴ As much as the narrator wants to crawl inside Louise and save her body, fight away the cancer and claim it back, the cancer resists this ownership and objectification. Slowly, the narrator's attempts to possess Louise turn to images of death: "If I come to you with a torch and a notebook, a medical diagram and a cloth to mop up the mess, I'll have you bagged neat and tidy. I'll store you in plastic like chicken livers. Womb, gut, brain, neatly labeled and returned. Is that how to know another human being?" (120). The narrator describes this as a "necrophiliac obsession" calling Louise's body an empty shell (123) and makes references to Bluebeard (130) and Louise as bruised and ruined fruit (124). Kristeva

³⁴ Louise's cancer is often described by the narrator in terms of jealousy and possession, as if Louise is having an affair with cancer and the cancer is her lover; cancer becomes an adulterer.

suggests that the corpse is the ultimate abjection and pollution, but that it also allows the subject in contact with the corpse to face the fragility of our own mortality (3). In this way, the process of “killing” Louise and recreating her could be a way for the narrator to come to terms with the mortality of their relationship and to relinquish Louise as an object. The impossibility of rewriting Louise due to her decaying body finally allows the narrator to let her go.

However, it also seems that the narrator is fighting Louise’s cancer, trying to claim her body by killing her first. It becomes an act of repetition where the narrator wants to start again, wants their relationship to be reborn but as the same, not as something new. The final section of the book sees the narrator trying to live a new life but still obsessed with Louise. Unable to possess her, unable to save her, and unable to rewrite her, the narrator tries to reclaim her and find her, but is unsuccessful. Upon returning to the cottage, the narrator is shocked to find Louise there and alive: “From the kitchen door Louise’s face. Paler, thinner, but her hair still mane-wide and the colour of blood. I put out my hand and felt her fingers, she took my fingers and put them to her mouth. The scar under her lips burned me. Am I stark mad? She’s warm” (190). It is unclear if Louise is real or an hallucination. However, as with her previous appearances in the text, she is seen and constructed through the narrator’s eyes as an ethereal presence, almost untouchable. At this point, the narrator has developed another relationship of sorts with a character called Gail who is reminiscent of Jacqueline, and in a similar domestic space - safe and predictable. Louise’s presence at the end as a kind of ghostly figure and the narrator’s claim that “This is where the story starts” suggests that the story will not be rewritten but will simply be repeated. Winterson leaves the ending ambiguous, allowing for hope that “let loose in open fields” (190) Louise and the narrator will tell a new story, that they can rewrite the clichés. But there is also the suggestion that this is impossible, that we are destined to repeat the same stories over and over and for the female adulterer that story involves objectification, anxiety, and

ultimately, death. She can only be reborn into the same story.

SHAME AND THE POSTCOLONIAL CITY: MONICA ALI'S *BRICK LANE*

In Chapter 3 Elizabeth Grosz's *Architecture from the Outside* provided a theoretical framework for discussing Evelyn Lau's *Other Women* and the dichotomy between domestic and adulterous spaces. Grosz's means of thinking about space in terms of embodiment is a useful means to address the construction of identity in novels of female adultery such as Lau's, particularly the gendered specificity of how bodies live and understand space. Grosz suggests that "conceptions of space and time are necessary coordinates of a reinterrogation of the limits of corporeality" (32). She explores the notion of a "spatiotemporal universe" in which the body is housed and "through which bodies become real, are lived, and have effects" (33). Through this rethinking of bodies in space, she envisions a "double displacement" (31). Although bodies occupy space, they do not need it for identification, definition or understanding, however space relies on bodies to make sense. Space and time can then be understood as "corporeal categories" that "parallel the cultural and historical specificities of bodies" (32). In this chapter, I apply Grosz's analysis to my reading of Monica Ali's novel, *Brick Lane*, to explore how the city space of postcolonial London is represented, and, as in Lau's novel, how the protagonist's agency, mobility, and adultery are delineated by her access to certain spaces. Further, this chapter explores the different and gendered ways that shame and fear are represented and experienced by the characters in the novel, especially in terms of their relationship to public and private space and constructions of domesticity. As Grosz says: "Cities have always represented and projected images and fantasies of bodies, whether individual, collective, or political. In this sense the city can be seen as a (collective) body - prosthesis or boundary that enframes, protects, and houses while at the same time taking its own forms and functions from the (imaginary) bodies it constitutes" (49). In *Brick Lane*, the way that the city produces the individual, collective *and*

political body is important, as well as the ways that these elements are inextricably linked when it comes to class, gender and colonialism in the city of London and the smaller city of Brick Lane.³⁵ In this context, Nazneen's adultery can be conceived of as a shameless and fearless act because it not only challenges the constrained mobility and restrictive notions of respectable femininity that are placed on her by her husband and reinforced by the colonial city of London, but it is also the act that frees Chanu from his complex relationship with the city of London and allows him to break free from the shame that the city imposes on him and from his own failed domesticity.

Grosz says that "cities are loci that produce, regulate, and structure bodies" (49) and, indeed, this is true of the characters in Ali's novel, especially Nazneen, the protagonist who has been transplanted to London from Bangladesh through an arranged marriage. As she adjusts to life in Brick Lane and learns to adapt to British sensibilities, Nazneen becomes defined by Brick Lane - the community and the actual physical space - she is regulated by what this space represents, within itself and within the larger community of London and her body is defined according to the spaces that she occupies. Much of the conflict with space in Ali's novel relates to the gendered and social construction of interior/exterior and public and private space. Nazneen and the other inhabitants of Brick Lane represent a kind of visible invisibility in postcolonial London. The housing estate within the area of Brick Lane itself, acts as a kind of city within a city - its inhabitants are visible to the public but contained within a manageable "space" that give the illusion of being both separate and a part of London. Shame and fear are key here, for

³⁵ The characters in *Brick Lane* live in the East End of London in the borough of Tower Hamlets. Brick Lane is an internationally known street in Tower Hamlets in the heart of the Bangladeshi community. Tower Hamlets and the surrounding areas (including Bethnal Green, Spitalfields, and Stepney) are commonly known as the East End and have a history of poverty and racial violence. However, much of the East End is being redeveloped and part of Tower Hamlets known as Docklands, primarily a warehouse district, is now a sought-after and fashionable area for elite clubs, restaurants, housing and galleries. Likewise, Brick Lane is now a popular tourist destination because of its restaurants and historic Sunday market. Nazneen and Chanu begin their life in Brick Lane in 1985, before it became a popular tourist destination. Ali calls her novel *Brick Lane* as a means to refer to the specific Bangladeshi community in the larger borough of Tower Hamlets. I also understand it as a means to define a specific feeling, atmosphere and type of space - for this reason, I usually refer to the general area of Nazneen's neighbourhood as Brick Lane (as is common in London) rather than Tower Hamlets.

Nazneen's experience and for the way that Ali constructs the immigrant experience in general. Nazneen and her husband Chanu both feel a sense of shame - Nazneen feels ashamed that she cannot be happy in her marriage and domestic life while Chanu feels ashamed that he has failed in his goals and dreams and that England has not provided all that it promised. Shame in *Brick Lane* also constitutes a discourse of exterior/interior that ties into the actual, physical and national spaces within the novel. Jacqueline Rose suggests that unlike guilt, shame "requires an audience" (1). Conceiving shame as a kind of trauma, Rose says that shame is connected to the notion of public exposure and, at the same time, is secret and hidden, "crossing the boundary between our inner and outer worlds" (1-2). In this context, the city of London acts as both the shamer and the public audience that witnesses the shame of Nazneen and Chanu.³⁶

Recolonizing the City

Key to the ways in which shame and the immigrant experience are represented is *Brick Lane's* place in the complex canon of postcolonial literature. London is a city that features prominently in much colonial and postcolonial literature and has a complicated relationship to what John Ball calls the "postcolonial imaginary" (5). He describes London as a signifier around which ideas, images and characters coalesce in postcolonial literature and explains that the history and geography of colonialism are mapped out in specific temporal and spatial ways (4). Following de Certeau, Ball suggests that as "former colonized subjects" walk through the streets of London they reterritorialize the city and, through fictional narratives, the metropolis becomes reinscribed by and against their identities: "The London that once imposed its power and self-construction *on* them can now be reinvented *by* them" (9). Similarly, John McLeod suggests that

³⁶ Another reading of *Brick Lane* would be one that focuses on discourses of religion and race within the area of Brick Lane. Brick Lane is in itself a diasporic community that functions as a part of post-colonial London but is also separate from it. This is another reading of the concept of visible invisibility. Religion plays an important role in the lives of the characters and in the daily interactions of the inhabitants of Brick Lane and the larger city of London. However, I have chosen not to focus on religion in this chapter.

postcolonial London's power lies in the city's architecture and space but that cultural initiatives (such as Brick Lane) open up the city to the possibility of new spaces "while the subaltern contingencies of everyday life contest and dismantle authority" (11). Rather than conceiving of postcolonial literature in terms of rearticulation or resistance, Ball and McLeod suggest that there is a way for these texts to be read as a "transnational models of identity" (Ball 13).

Ball has two approaches for reading London in literature, each of them relevant to *Brick Lane*. First, he suggests that there is a representation of London that is redolent of and with empire and colonial rule where London is represented as an "historically continuous site" (16-17). Second, he believes that there is a London that is represented as being transformed by formerly colonized people who see the city as "geographically or spatially continuous" (17). While Ball posits these two readings as being potentially contradictory, I think that they are both present in *Brick Lane*. Nazneen and Chanu can certainly be seen as somewhat reinscribing and reinventing the city, what Ball calls a "spatio-geographic" perspective that allows for a diasporic reading of the city rather than simply an historical one (17). However, I think that *Brick Lane* is also representative of how colonialism, like the city of London itself, is "historically continuous" and no matter how much Nazneen and Chanu may "appropriate it and reterritorialize it" (Ball 9) the city itself resists being reinscribed and acts as a constant reminder of Nazneen and Chanu's otherness.

The characters in *Brick Lane* do form a community and in some ways this can be read in terms of Ball's reterritorializing of the city and his somewhat problematic ideas about a decolonizing or colonization in reverse. But there is also a sense of non-belonging, even in the Brick Lane community. When Nazneen first arrives in London, she knows only a few English words. She is sheltered by Chanu and discouraged from leaving the apartment or the Tower Hamlets housing estate where she lives. Despite this, Nazneen takes in her surroundings and

tries to feel at “home” but is also well aware that she will never completely be “home.” The first section of the book that describes the dull, grey life in the Brick Lane area opens with Nazneen waving at the tattoo lady- a nameless woman who lives in an apartment across from Nazneen. The tattoo lady acts as a revealing metaphor as we learn about Nazneen’s life in London and the paradox of Ball’s notion of “recolonizing” the city. The tattoo lady embodies privacy and spectacle, otherness and belonging: “Nazneen waved at the tattoo lady. The tattoo lady was always there when Nazneen looked out across the dead grass and broken paving stones to the block opposite. Most of the flats, which enclosed three sides of a square, had net curtains, and the life behind was all shapes and shadows. But the tattoo lady had no curtains at all” (5-6). Nazneen is watching the tattoo lady from her own apartment - both of them shut away by duty, boredom or both. As Nazneen looks out of the window, she sees signs in Bengali, a sari hanging from a window, two men in panjabi pajama (6). In stark contrast is the tattoo lady, implicitly a white woman, who sits in her chair all day, smoking and drinking and highly visible. She is also coded as different, as other:

At least two thirds of the flesh on show was covered in ink. Nazneen had never been close enough (never closer than this, never farther) to decipher the designs. Chanu said that the tattoo lady was Hell’s Angel, which upset Nazneen. She thought the tattoos might be flowers or birds. They were ugly and they made the tattoo lady more ugly than was necessary, but the tattoo lady clearly did not care. Every time Nazneen saw her she wore the same look of boredom and detachment.

(6)

The tattoo lady represents the idea of private life on display—in this community of Brick Lane she is quite literally marked as other. She is a spectacle for Nazneen, invoking a mixture of fear, pity, and wonder—the same feelings that Nazneen provokes in people when she leaves Brick

Lane. When Nazneen imagines walking across the square and visiting the tattoo lady, she thinks that they could sit together in peaceful silence by the window. In reality, she realizes that they would likely have nothing to say to each other. Nazneen assumes that the tattoo lady feels trapped in the same way that she does; she feels drawn by their perceived sameness, but is prevented from making any contact because she knows that deep down they can never be the same. The tattoo lady may be alone but she also has the air of not caring, and the air of someone who has the privilege of belonging - she may be a spectacle for Nazneen but she also belongs in a way that Nazneen cannot and is able to move freely around London should she choose to do so. Like the buildings that they live in, the tattoo lady acts as a kind of silent memorial to the east end of London before Brick Lane became a Bangladeshi community, one of the "diaspora communities" that John McLeod talks about where the "subaltern contingencies of everyday life contest and dismantle authority" (11). Tattoo lady may be nameless and silent but she holds the same colonial power and visibility that the actual space and architecture of London does - the "architecture of power" (McLeod 11).

Lost in the City: Nazneen's Visible Invisibility

Ball's reading of postcolonial London, acknowledges that postcolonial subjects "must negotiate the materially local urban reality in which they live at the same time as they respond to the ways in which metropolitan space and everyday life signify the global histories and geographies that underlie and transcend the local" (18). For characters like Nazneen, national identity is relational as she negotiates the transnational city. Ball asserts that postcolonial narratives of London incorporate these relational constructions of identity and nationalism to imagine an alternative representation of the nation where the complex and confusing negotiations

of space and place and “conditions of multiple national belonging and non-belonging” exist (32).³⁷

This is particularly evident when Nazneen ventures out by herself for the first time. Newly pregnant and still unable to speak much English, Nazneen leaves the safety of the flats and the surrounding area of Brick Lane and loses her way in London. Nazneen quickly realizes the extent of her belonging and non-belonging, where “both/and continually shades into neither/nor” (Ball 32). Ali describes Nazneen’s outing as a kind of escape, a rush towards freedom: “Outside, small patches of mist bearded the lampposts and a gang of pigeons turned weary circles on the grass like prisoners in an exercise yard. A woman hurried past with a small child in her arms. The child screamed and kicked its legs against the kidnapper” (33). She may be leaving the “prison” of her home but it is clear that outside may not hold the promise of freedom either - her agency is complex and limited. When Nazneen makes her way out of the housing estate and onto the main road she doesn’t have a destination in mind but keeps going: “A space opened up before her. God is great, said Nazneen under her breath. She ran” (34). She moves through the streets and when she realizes that she is walking in a pattern, leaving herself a trail, she takes a random road and attempts to get lost. de Certeau would perhaps say of Nazneen that her “story begins on ground level, with footsteps. They are myriad but they do not compose a series” (97). She does not want the city to become legible to her because she does not understand herself within it; she is not legible. As she walks through the city it all feels the same, and is something that she is resisting: “The buildings seemed familiar. She sensed rather than saw, because she had taken care not to notice” (35). Again, Ali allows for Nazneen to have a certain amount of agency - she walks the streets of London without caring where she is going and taking care not to notice her surroundings. It is unclear if she is ignoring her surroundings because she wants to resist this imposing, colonial city or if she feels that she doesn’t have the right to notice,

³⁷ Ball makes a distinction between the terms space and place. Following the work of Mike Crang, Ball suggests that places are sites of experiences and continuity shared by people and community over time. Spaces become places over time as they are imbued with meaning and definition - what Crang calls time-thickened (Ball 32).

to feel that she belongs. These complexities of character are most powerful in the moments when Nazneen feels shame and shamelessness during her affair.

When she finally does stop and take in her surroundings, she becomes aware of her difference - and also her invisibility:

Nazneen, hobbling and halting, began to be aware of herself. Without a coat, without a suit, without a white face, without a destination. A leafshake of fear - or was it excitement? - passed through her legs. But they were not aware of her. In the next instant she knew it. They could not see her any more than she could see God. They knew that she existed (just as she knew that He existed) but unless she did something, waved a gun, halted the traffic, they would not see her. She enjoyed this thought. (35)

She momentarily enjoys her invisibility, feels it as a kind of freedom from the lonely domestic life she must face every day and a border-crossing of sorts from the areas surrounding her home that she usually accesses. However, when that spell is broken and someone sees her, she realizes just how invisible she actually is and everything changes. Suddenly, she is lost in the city, she begins bumping into people, feels disoriented and confused, and abruptly becomes aware of her body. For the first time, she realizes that she needs to use the bathroom, is freezing cold, and has a twisted ankle. She feels the physical pain and reality of her body but also feels the reality of her self as a racialized body. This is made clear when, in her panic and confusion, she is approached by a "brown-faced man" who asks her a question that she cannot understand:

Nazneen recognized Hindi when she heard it, but she did not understand it. He tried again, in Urdu. Nazneen could speak some Urdu, but this man's accent was so strong that she could not understand this either. She shook her head. He spoke in English this time. His eyes looked huge behind their lenses, like they had been

plucked from another, much bigger creature. She shook her head again and said,
“Sorry.” He nodded solemnly and took his leave. (38)

While Nazneen is pleased afterwards that she was able to speak to a stranger using an English word, this passage and scene indicate the visible invisibility that Nazneen must face every day. She is sought out by this man because of her difference and while their lack of a common language is indicative of the city of London as the transnational and diasporic space that Ball delineates, it also suggests that Nazneen and this man are recognizable to each other because of their difference and because the city as an “historically continuous site” only allows for “transnational models of identity” in specific spaces (Ball 17, 13). Outside those spaces, Nazneen and the man that she encounters recognize each other through their sameness - where difference equals sameness. At the point of contact they move to the place where “both/and continually shades into neither/nor” (Ball 32). He turns to her because she is the same in her otherness and because it is not possible for him to approach anyone else.

Gender and Fear: The Cities of Nazneen and Hasina

Lost in the city, Nazneen is, at once, a spectacle - an immigrant non-English speaking woman lost in the city - and an invisible minority - just another immigrant non-English speaking woman lost in a city. In these moments, Nazneen realizes her outsider status just as she is beginning to understand her invisibility and Brick Lane becomes a place that both shields her but also guarantees, by its socio-spatial construction, that she will always feel this way. Further, Nazneen’s life and access to spaces and places are very much gendered, a fact that is emphasized by her correspondence with her sister, Hasina.

At the age of sixteen, Hasina who “would listen to no one” ran away from her childhood village and eloped with her lover (5). Shortly after, Nazneen is told that she will be marrying

Chanu and moving to England with him and her only contact with Hasina is in the form of letters. Nazneen is constantly comparing her situation to Hasina's and although she worries about Hasina, she also romanticizes her situation because Hasina fell in love and ran away to find freedom. Nazneen describes her life and marriage much like being trapped, remembering her life in Bangladesh where she was never alone "Until she married. And came to London to sit day after day in this large box with the furniture to dust, and the muffled sounds of private lives sealed away above, below, and around her" (11). Her flat is described as a box that she can't get out of or as a prison from which she cannot escape, even though they live fairly well. In contrast, Hasina romanticizes her domestic life: "*Our place have two room. No veranda but I go up on roof.... My pot and pan is keep inside the crate. Hardly any cockroach only one maybe two I see time to time. Even we have nothing I happy*" (11). While Nazneen longs for some kind of emotional connection in her life like Hasina, Hasina imagines that Nazneen has the ideal life, imagining her as a privileged princess (12). Their idealization of each other's worlds is especially poignant because their lives are similar in one way - they both live in and as the property of their husbands. While Hasina may have married for love and Chanu is a genuinely kind and well-meaning man, the sisters are tied to their gendered roles partly through their restrictions when it comes to space. They have no spaces of their own. It is this kind of reading that Ball does not take into account with his approach to reading postcolonial London in literature. While he says that postcolonial writers like Ali "imaginatively render transnational Londons" and "constitute a London that is rapidly changing" (19), he does not take into account the ways in which the gendered body changes these representations and the city as much as the racialized body does.

Nazneen and Hasina also both experience restricted mobility based on gender. Sara Ahmed discusses the notion of fear and its relation to shame in terms of mobility and social space, suggesting that vulnerability and fear shape women's bodies and, in turn, affect the way

that those bodies inhabit spaces (70). While Nazneen's act of venturing out beyond Brick Lane and into the city of London encompasses both a sense of fear and fearlessness, her movements are not simply marked by her racialized body but also by her gender. Ahmed says that narratives of respectable femininity encourage women to stay at home by constructing spaces outside the home as threatening (70). Women are supposed to exit the domestic space with caution and are socialized to feel afraid of what lies outside, creating a gendered sense of fear and vulnerability (70). Fear, Ahmed says:

works to align bodily and social space: it works to enable some bodies to inhabit and move in public space through restricting the mobility of other bodies to spaces that are enclosed or contained. Spaces extend the mobility of some bodies; their freedom to move shapes the surface of spaces, whilst spaces surface as spaces through the mobility of such bodies. It is the regulation of bodies in space through the uneven distribution of fear which allow spaces to become territories, claimed as rights by some bodies and not others. We can see this process at work in the heterosexualization of space, as well the racialization of space. (70)

While Nazneen faces restrictions in postcolonial London based on her race and gender, Hasina faces restrictions in Bangladesh based on gender and class. Both of them are restricted in their mobility due to the fear and shame that comes with the proper feminine respectability that is expected of each of them. Ahmed says if women are to have access to feminine respectability, they "must either stay at home (femininity as domestication), or be careful in how they move and appear in public (femininity as a constrained mobility)" (70). While Nazneen and Hasina face both, it is the notion of femininity as domestication that becomes important for the way that Ali constructs the movements and mobility of Nazneen, especially in comparison to Hasina and

her female friends in Brick Lane. For Nazneen, the femininity as domestication that keeps her restricted to Brick Lane is also the very thing that she challenges through her adultery, made all the more shocking because of its direct relation to Chanu's own failed domesticity. It is ultimately this shameless and fearless act that undermines the construction of marriage, the domestic space, and the postcoloniality of the city of London.

Nazneen's mobility is limited partly because of the gendered expectations placed on her by Chanu. As a good, proper wife, she is expected to stay at home and be a caretaker for her husband and, later, her children. Chanu also instills fear in Nazneen about being outside the home, reinforcing femininity as domestication through his construction of home (and in limited terms, Brick Lane) as safe and by reinforcing femininity as constrained mobility by making Nazneen afraid to go out without him. Part of Ali's discourse of femininity as domestication relies on Nazneen's fear of the outside being connected to her fear of shaming her husband, making him look bad: "She did not often go out. 'Why should you go out?' said Chanu. 'If you go out, ten people will say, 'I saw her walking on the street.' And I will look like a fool. Personally, I don't mind if you go out, but these people are so ignorant. What can you do?'" (Ali 27). While Chanu also makes Nazneen generally afraid of going outside because, as a woman, she should fear for her safety, he also reminds her that her actions reflect on him and his moral character depends on her being a good wife and obeying him. By telling her that she is free to go outside if she chooses, he is subtly instilling in her the fear that she will be a public spectacle if she were to leave the house. Chanu reminds Nazneen that the safety of her home is tied to her respectability as a good wife - and good wives stay at home or only venture out with their husbands. This point is emphasized by Nazneen's acknowledgment that Hasina is not safe in Dhaka: "It seemed that she had not the least idea about the danger she was in (and she *was* in danger, a girl, a beautiful young girl, alone in Dhaka)" (Ali 45). Chanu, however, does not have

the same fear for Hasina: “He cannot accept one single thing in his life but this: that my sister should be left to her fate” (45). Whether alone or married, in London or Dhaka, Hasina and Nazneen both face the same thing: restricted mobility and access to certain spaces based on their gender. Nazneen’s mobility is tied up in notions of feminine respectability as a married, immigrant woman whereas Hasina’s mobility is tied up in notions of class and the stigma of being a single woman, having left a husband who beat her. Chanu refuses to help Hasina not because he does not fear for her safety, but because she is not governed by the rules of femininity and domesticity that he understands and maintains by his policing of Nazneen.

Nazneen, on the other hand, understands that Hasina’s mobility is bound by gender and while she may have the perceived luxury of being able to move freely from space to place, she is actually made more vulnerable by this process. As Ahmed says, “[v]ulnerability is not an inherent characteristic of women’s bodies, rather it is an effect that works to secure femininity as a delimitation of movement in public, and over-inhabitation in private” (70). Hasina is not bound by the notion of femininity as domestication but must face the shame of this by her ability to move about in public and the constant threat to her safety that this creates. While Hasina’s life may initially seem romantic to Nazneen, a life of freedom and love, it is clear that they are both bound by the similar patriarchal rules of their societies and are made to feel ashamed and afraid if they do not comply. However, Chanu’s lack of concern for Hasina also suggests that she will survive because at least she knows the rules. She is not displaced like Nazneen and may have to face class and gender discrimination but does not have to face racism in the way that Nazneen might. And, for Nazneen, living in Brick Lane, these things are all inextricably linked and constitute a discourse of fear, and reproduce a discourse of domesticity. As Ahmed says, “the production of the ‘fearsome’ is also bound up with the authorization of legitimate spaces: for example, in the construction of home as safe, ‘appropriate’ forms of femininity become bound up

with the reproduction of domestic space” (70).

It is the reproduction of domestic space, and the fact that Nazneen’s identity and mobility are so tied to it, that makes her adultery so transgressive. Everything about Nazneen's life is bound by Chanu’s sense of what “proper femininity” should be. Although he says that she can come and go as she pleases, he also suggests that it would disappoint him if she were to move outside of the acceptable spaces assigned to her as a Bengali woman in London. This is made even more complicated by the fact that these spaces are not only defined and allotted by Chanu but also by the city of London itself, as was evident when Nazneen got lost in the city. Despite the fact that Nazneen feels angry and trapped by Chanu and her home, she abides by the rules, rules that are reinforced by her friends in Brick Lane. This is especially evident in the way that Nazneen and Chanu approach the idea of Nazneen working or going to college to learn English. Chanu’s determination that Nazneen will not work is connected to his own sense of failed domesticity and his attempt to perform Englishness. However, it is also connected to what Ahmed calls the femininity of domestication and the fact that Chanu believes that the reputation of their family is, in part, determined by Nazneen’s ability to adequately perform femininity in the domestic space, where notions of femininity, motherhood and domesticity are collapsed to mean the same thing.

When Nazneen approaches Chanu about going to college he forbids her:

‘Will it be all right for me to go?’

‘Where?’ He rolled onto his back to look at her. His belly showed.

‘To the college. With Razia.’

‘What for?’

‘For the English lessons.’

‘You’re going to be a mother.’

Nazneen picked up a glass from the windowsill. Yes, she was going to be a mother.

‘Will that not keep you busy enough? And you can’t take a baby to college.

Babies have to be fed; they have to have their bottoms cleaned. It’s not so simple as that. Just to go to college, like that.’ (51).

But, Chanu does not simply say no. Instead, he makes it sound like she is a bad mother for even considering going out to college and learning English. Rather than simply saying, I don’t want you to go, he constructs a discourse that equates being a good mother with staying at home. In her work on fear and shame, Ahmed discusses the embodiment of these emotions and the spatial politics of this embodiment (15). She also makes the important point that fear is usually constructed as having an object but that the object is often absent or “passing by” (64-66). She says that we fear the approaching object, “So the object that we fear is not simply before us, or in front of us, but impresses upon us in the present, as an anticipated pain in the future” (65). The embodiment of fear and the object of fear are important for Chanu and Nazneen because Nazneen’s object of fear is at once an abstract fear that keeps her at home and is imposed on her by Chanu and based on the fact that she is a woman. Ahmed talks about the way that feminists approach the question of fear when it comes to women:

fear is shown to be structural and mediated, rather than an immediate bodily response to an objective danger. Rather than seeing fear simply as an inevitable consequence of women’s vulnerability, feminist critics argue that fear is a response to the *threat* of violence. The threat itself is shaped by the authorization of narratives about what is and is not threatening, and about who are and are not the appropriate ‘objects’ of fear. (69)

In this context, Nazneen responds to a discourse of fear that does not bear a specific object but

is, instead, the threat or idea of violence that is also connected to the threat of being shamed or bringing shame on Chanu through a violation of her domestic role.

Nazneen, however, is also the embodiment of fear in another way - as the maternal body. Chanu's suggestion that it is wrong for a mother to go to college, to be outside of the home, is constructed to make Nazneen fear her own potential failure as a mother. But, it also signals the fact that the maternal body, in public, is an object of fear for others - a fear that is displaced so that the pregnant woman or mother is made to fear being outside herself and also made to feel ashamed that she is alone in public in the first place. For Nazneen, her identity as a mother is tied to the idea that she belongs to Chanu and that she is not an object of fear when she is with him, representing respectable femininity in the context of a respectable family. Ali delineates this ideology well with an image of Nazneen, Chanu and their son on their regular family outing:

It was Sunday morning. They would go out for a walk soon, around Brick Lane, and Chanu would push the pram and she would walk a step behind. When people stopped him in the street to admire Raqib, to give him a kiss or tickle, Chanu would grow a couple of inches.... At the shops, Chanu would buy vegetables. Pumpkin, gourd, spinach, okra, aubergine. Whatever was in season. He would buy spices and rice and lentils and sometimes sweetmeats.... He broke off bits of jelabee and fed them to Raqib, and licked his fingers where the liquid sugar spilled out. (61)

Although they are both parents, Nazneen walks behind Chanu. While she is the mother, the woman who gave birth, Chanu acts as if he is the sole parent, as if he created this child alone, completely displacing the idea of the maternal body but maintaining the image of a respectable family. As well, Chanu does the grocery shopping and feeds Raqib. These actions are things that Chanu performs in public but in the privacy of the domestic space, Nazneen is expected to

prepare and cook the meals and take care of Raqib. Being a wife and mother is important for Chanu's public appearance but Nazneen must not violate the rules of respectable femininity in public. Ironically, it is Chanu who later takes on all of these roles when Raqib is sick and in hospital, taking care of Nazneen, cooking and letting her be herself. It is also the moment when his own failed domesticity is revealed.

The Ghosting of Colonialism: Chanu's Failed Domesticity

In contrast to the way that Nazneen is constructed in terms of domesticity, Chanu represents his own version of a failed domesticity. In Victorian literature, the haunted house is a metaphor for the ways in which the middle-class house failed "to secure the qualities advertized in the domestic ideal" (Marcus 124). Rosner takes up this notion in her work on early twentieth century literature, suggesting that the Victorian lingers in post-Victorian fiction, haunting texts due to the anxieties that emerged with the pressure of changing social, sexual, and cultural values at the turn-of-the-century especially in terms of domesticity (3). I am suggesting, here, that the notion of failed domesticity is especially important in adultery narratives and that this idea "haunts" contemporary adultery narratives, affecting the way that women negotiate public and private space, marriage and property and reproducing an anxiety about women's mobility in relation to space. While the notion of failed domesticity is mostly applied to women in the sense that women often bear the burden of familial and domestic responsibility, Chanu represents a kind of failed domesticity of his own in Brick Lane which can be seen through his "belated Victorianism," his constant striving (and failing) to be the perfect, middle-class English family man.

Chanu's world is full of Victorian ghosts, reminding him of his own failures and the fact that no matter how much he performs Englishness, he will always be outside of the "promised

land.” Chanu represents the search for an Englishness that Simon Gikandi says is defined by “simultaneous acts of inclusion and exclusion” (Gikandi, *Maps* 8). The anxiety around this inclusion and exclusion can be mapped out and is affected by the city spaces where the “dialectic of imperialism is played out” (2). While Ball has a similar notion of belonging and non-belonging that relates to the immigrant in the city in general, Gikandi is concerned with a specific notion of Englishness that can be seen in Ali’s representation of Chanu. Gikandi also takes up the notion of ghosts and haunting in a similar way to Marcus and Rosner but in specific relation to the colonial subject in London. He says that “the great categories that defined the modern age - race and citizenship, civility and authority, for example - were haunted, from the start, by the colonial question” (*Maps* 3). Gikandi’s compelling notion of the “ghosting of colonialism” refers to the “invisible specter” of colonialism that has shaped modernity and narratives of identity (3-4).³⁸

This also relates to Gikandi’s suggestion that colonial subjects are constantly appropriating and reformulating a kind of “belated Victorianism” (“Embarrassment” 159). This can be seen in *Brick Lane* through the character of Chanu whose own version of a failed domesticity is related to his failure to adequately perform Englishness. Gikandi points out that in the nineteenth century, crisis was a central element in the “definition of English identities” but did not consider the inextricable links between this crisis, colonialism and decolonization (*Maps* xii). Chanu represents a colonial subject striving towards Englishness, not realizing that he is doomed to fail because his colonial ghosts, and the colonial ghosts of London, stand in his way. Instead, he performs a belated Victorianism that unconsciously reinscribes a kind of failed domesticity and confines him to a space of belonging and non-belonging and a feeling of shame.

Ali writes the Victorian into Chanu’s world. Many of the key people in Chanu’s life have names that resonate with Victorian literature (or early twentieth-century literature).

³⁸ Previously, I have used the term spectre to refer to a kind of haunting prospect, the threat of something to come, as opposed to ghosts which I have used to refer more to haunting memories or histories. Here, Gikandi seems to be referring to a specter as a haunting presence, not confined to the past, present or future.

His boss is called Mr. Dalloway, his colleague is called Wilkie, he boasts that he is able to quote from Dickens and Hardy (21), freely discusses the Brontes and Thackeray (22), he has a certificate in nineteenth-century economics and a degree in English literature. Throughout the first half of the book, Chanu is constantly striving towards a goal - a middle-class ideal - that is clearly unattainable and made all the more unattainable due to his nostalgia for the Victorian. Ironically, his admiration for the order and structure of Victorian life and style is exactly what ultimately leads to his failure to perform this kind of Englishness and ties him to Gikandi's "belated Victorianism," a performance in itself that is representative of the uneasy relationship between the colonizer and colonized in postcolonial literature where colonized subjects were "using the dominant forms of colonialism to express their own experiences" (Gikandi, "Embarrassment" 159-160).

In Chanu, Ali creates a character whose performance of Englishness can be read as questioning this relationship. Chanu may strive for the English ideal but he also seems to be aware of himself as a colonized subject. However, although he identifies racism as a reason why he may not get promoted at work, or attain his dream job, he still rearticulates himself as a belated Victorian subject - a capable, aspiring family man who sees his desire to be a proper middle-class English man as enough to propel him further in life. Racism in the twenty-first century may be the reason that he will not be promoted but, ironically, Chanu identifies the Victorian age, "a powerful reminder of colonial domination" (Gikandi, "Embarrassment" 160), as a time when his drive, motivation and intellectualism would have earned him the respect that he feels that he deserves. Chanu constantly chatters about his dreams, to Nazneen and especially to Dr. Azad - a man who Chanu wants to impress, needs as an ally, and who also inspires the most shame for Chanu. Dr. Azad has flourished whereas Chanu has not.

When Chanu arrived in England in the early seventies, he had all sorts of dreams:

When I got off the aeroplane, I had my degree certificate in my suitcase and a few pounds in my pocket. I thought there would be a red carpet laid out for me. I was going to join the civil service and become Private Secretary to the Prime Minister.... That was my plan. And then I found things were a bit different. These people here don't know the difference between me, who stepped off an aeroplane with a degree certificate, and the peasants who jumped off the boat possessing only lice on their heads. (Ali 18)

Chanu constantly uses his education as a means to prove his superiority and the differences between himself and uneducated immigrants whom he considers to be of a lower class. Here Chanu can be seen to be performing a belated Victorianism where he is adopting the idiom of Victorianism in terms of class but also in terms of colonialism and the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Gikandi is concerned with the "discursive mechanisms through which some of the central categories of Victorianism - notions of labour, moral character, respectability, and progress - were transformed in the encounter between the colonizer and the colonized to create what has come to be known as postcolonial culture" ("Embarrassment" 160). Chanu performs Englishness as if he were the colonizer, believing himself to have the moral character required to belong and he openly mocks a colleague who tries to win the boss's favour through means other than hard work: "He thinks he will get a promotion because he goes to the *pub* with the boss. He is so stupid he doesn't even realize there is another way of getting promotion" (21). Again, education is the key to Chanu's feeling of superiority and he believes that his education and eagerness to keep being educated will get him his dues: "I don't have anything to fear from Wilkie. I have a degree from Dhaka University in English Literature. Can Wilkie quote from Chaucer or Dickens or Hardy?" (21).

Chanu also makes the distinction that he did not come to England for money but because

he wanted to further his education and, for him, Wilkie at his office with his one or two O Levels is no better than the acquaintances back home who beg him for money:

‘The begging letters still come,’ said Chanu. ‘From old servants, from the children of servants. Even from my own family although they are not in need. All they can think of is money. They think there is gold in the streets here and I am just hoarding it all in my palace. But I did not come here for money. Was I starving in Dhaka? I was not. Do they inquire about my diplomas?’ He gestured at the wall, where various framed certificates were displayed. ‘They do not...’ (19)

Chanu is performing the belated Victorian “notions of labour, moral character, respectability, and progress” (Gikandi, “Embarrassment” 160) where respectability, morals and progress are tied up in a classist notion of education. For Chanu, Wilkie is no better than the uneducated servants in Dhaka and he has absolute belief that his education and desire for knowledge will get him a promotion and all the things for which he strives. Ironically, his education and intellectual aspirations are all rooted in a classic Victorian and colonial education, one that prevents him from belonging and his actions become a “ghosting of colonialism” (Gikandi, “Embarrassment” 3).

Yet, at the same time, Chanu recognizes that as an immigrant he faces racism - real or perceived. Of Wilkie, Chanu says:

it is the white underclass, like Wilkie, who are most afraid of people like me. To him, and people like him, we are the only thing standing in the way of them sliding totally to the bottom of the pile. As long as we are below them, then they are above something. If they see us rise then they are resentful because we have left our proper place. That is why you get the phenomenon of the *National Front*. They can play on those fears to create racial tensions, and give these people a superiority complex. The middle classes are more secure, and therefore more

relaxed. (21)

Chanu's discrimination based on class makes him the perfect Victorian but also represents his belief in the colonial ideal of the "promised land" - of decolonization and a sense of identity free from colonialism.

When Chanu leaves his job due to his frustration that his superiors won't recognize his abilities and potential, his desire for Englishness starts to ebb. He becomes disillusioned. He takes a job as a taxi driver and this moment marks many things. First, it marks the moment where his shame really becomes apparent - all the more so because he becomes a visible yet invisible figure in the city, not walking through like de Certeau but driving. Chanu's move to taxi driver also marks the moment when his belated Victorianism is both recognized and also displaced - he owns a car, albeit a taxi, a symbol of middle-class wealth and also of modernity - a successful move from the Victorian to the modern that also moves him into a lower-class job, one that many of the lower-class immigrants that Chanu had previously looked down on have taken. As Chanu enters the work force as an immigrant taxi driver, his academic aspirations subside. In a sense, as he drives through the city in his private vehicle used to ferry the public around, he marks it with his otherness but, at the same time, reinforces what the city already knows. As "driver one-six-one-nine" Chanu becomes just another immigrant in a working class job, just another number.

Chanu's desire for Englishness subsides after a tragedy in their family, tragedy that is preceded by Chanu's growing shame and desperation over his life and Nazneen's growing awareness that he will never achieve his goals: "No, the degree would never be finished. The promotion would never be won. The job would never be resigned. The furniture would never be restored. The house in Dhaka would never be built. The jute business would never be started. Even the mobile library, the petition which had taken Chanu from door to door, would be

forgotten" (Ali 63). Along with Nazneen's silent acknowledgment of her husband's failure, is Chanu's desperate need for approval from Dr. Azad. Although Chanu complains about Dr. Azad's lack of hospitality and suggests that Dr. Azad should feel lucky to have him as an intellectual equal, there is also the hint of desperation in Chanu's feelings. Dr. Azad does not have the same anxieties about belonging as Chanu and Chanu is clearly envious of what he perceives as his smooth transition into middle-class Englishness. However, rather than allow his wife or his friend to see his shame, Chanu's pride leads him to think that Dr. Azad is an ungrateful snob, much like his construction of the uneducated lower-classes: "He eats my food, he reads my books. God alone knows where else he finds his intellectual stimulation, any companion of the intellect" (60). Chanu believes that his moral character and intellectual drive should be enough for the "right" kind of people to be drawn to him. In reality, Dr. Azad probably sees what Nazneen is beginning to recognize - a colonial subject in an unforgiving colonial city who desperately clings to his naive dreams.

It is Nazneen who also sees the reality of Dr. Azad. When they finally see Dr. Azad's house, Chanu is impressed at its respectability and thinks that, by living in a primarily white suburb of London that Dr. Azad has somehow found the success that Chanu desires (73). However, it is Nazneen who realizes that Dr. Azad and Chanu are both ashamed of their lives. When Chanu and Nazneen show up unexpectedly at Dr. Azad's house, it is clear that the relationship between the two men is a reciprocal one in terms of the shame and insecurity that they both feel:

Gradually, Nazneen became aware that Chanu was staring at something over her shoulder. When she turned her head she saw that Dr. Azad was standing in the doorway. The two men appeared to be frozen. The doctor was as neat as a tailor's dummy. He held his arms smartly to his sides. White cuffs peeped out of

his dark suit. His collar and tie held up his precise chin and his hair was brushed to an ebony sheen. He looked as if he had seen a ghost. Nazneen looked at Chanu. He made a poor ghost, in his broken-down shoes and oversize green anorak. (78)

Dr. Azad may be aware that Chanu is all talk, but he also quietly assumes the role in Chanu's life of listener, supporter, and middle-class success. However, what Chanu does not realize is that Dr. Azad is also living an illusion - on the outside, his appearance may be spotless and his house may seem perfect but on the inside his flaws are evident, his unhappiness clear.

The visit to Dr. Azad's house seems to be a challenge to the masculinity of both men. For Chanu and Dr. Azad, their masculinity is connected to their sense of being successful as English men who also maintain their sense of otherness in terms of their immigrant pride. For Dr. Azad, his embarrassment lies in his wife and daughter, modern women who wear short skirts, drink beer and serve modern food. For Mrs. Azad, progress is defined by her freedom to dress and eat as she pleases and her ability to belong: "Listen, when I'm in Bangladesh I put on a sari and cover my head and all that. But here I go out to work. I work with white girls and I'm just one of them" (78). She believes that belonging is better than non-belonging and criticizes immigrant women who refuse to adapt. Mrs. Azad's understanding of her life and situation in postcolonial London is what Gikandi calls a "colonized consciousness" where it is impossible to acquire a discourse of freedom from colonialism but, as we see with Chanu, also impossible as a colonized subject to try and be both inside and outside colonial discourse, to be a part of creating a progressive "narrative of decolonization" in a city such as London (Gikandi, "Embarrassment" 160). Mrs. Azad recognizes the impossibility of living the way that Chanu does, trying to negotiate the complexities of what Ball calls "multiple national belonging and non-belonging" (32). Chanu believes, like de Certeau, that he can change the city by walking through as long as

he aspires to the ideology of what that city represents. Chanu's dreams require the city of London to be what Ball calls transnational London: "a locus for the construction of emergent sensibilities that are both transnational (in the spatial sense of inhabiting multiple geographic scales) and postcolonial (in the temporal sense of wrestling with the influence imperial history exerts on present-day life)" (32). But Chanu's "ghosting of colonialism" and nostalgia for the Victorian prevents him from taking part in this discourse and is the cause of his anxiety and shame. Chanu says that "To be an immigrant is to live out a tragedy" (Ali 77). Chanu's tragedy is that he struggles with the fact that he does not want to choose between belonging and non-belonging. Referring to Dr. Azad's life and his modern daughter, he says:

'But behind every story of immigrant success there lies a deeper tragedy'.... 'I'm talking about the clash between Western values and our own. I'm talking about the struggle to assimilate and the need to preserve one's own identity and heritage. I'm talking about children who don't know what their identity is. I'm talking about the feelings of alienation engendered by a society where racism is prevalent. I'm talking about the terrific struggle to preserve one's sanity while striving to achieve the best for one's family...' (78)

Chanu's tragedy is that he is trapped by his own ambition and feels let down by the people he respects and by London. Mrs. Azad's tragedy is that she has truly become a Londoner. And, Dr. Azad's tragedy is his own shameful secret, one that Nazneen can recognize because she shares it: unhappiness. While Chanu happily thinks that Dr. Azad enjoys his company as an intellectual, Nazneen knows the truth: "He came as a man of science, to observe a rare specimen: unhappiness greater than his own" (79). Ironically, it is an actual tragedy that changes Chanu and marks the beginning of the end of his aspirations towards Englishness. It also marks the moment when Nazneen stops finding her husband irritating and starts to truly care about him, making her

later adultery all the more shameful.

Nazneen and Chanu's tragedy comes when their first child dies. For Chanu, it is even more tragic because it is his first and only son. When Raqib is in the hospital, Nazneen and Chanu both start to change and for the first time, Chanu appears to be focusing on his immediate situation rather than worrying about his future: "Nazneen smiled at her husband. For now, he was speaking only to her. There was no one over her shoulder. The audience had finally gone home. She put her free hand briefly across his round cheek. To touch like this was permitted here, among these stateless people, where the rules were unknown and in any case suspended" (83). Nazneen had felt for a long time that Chanu was always performing for an unseen audience, giving speeches about literature, economics, and education and quoting from Shakespeare. Although Dr. Azad and Nazneen are often witnesses to Chanu's monologues, they are aware that the performance is not really for them. Nazneen always imagined that Chanu felt more ashamed of his failure because he made his aspirations so public. Ironically, it is when Chanu turns inward, to a private audience that his shame actually becomes more public.

The scenes in the hospital mark many important moments for Nazneen and Chanu and the way that Ali constructs their shame. First, the space of the hospital itself could represent the ideal space that Chanu is striving for - that space between belonging and non-belonging where the outside struggle with multiple national identities doesn't have meaning. The hospital is a place where no-one really belongs and this, and the tragedy of losing their son, becomes the space where Nazneen's and Chanu's identities become closer: "For the first time she began to feel that he was not so different. At his core, he was the same as her" (84). We see, as Nazneen does, that Chanu is lonely, disappointed and insecure. While Nazneen prays and hopes that her feelings of difference and alienation will subside, Chanu clings to his ideals of making his world an ideal place: "He was looking for the same essential thing. But he thought he could grab it from

outside and hold it against his chest like a shield. The degrees, the promotion, the Dhaka house, the library, the chair-restoring business, the import-export plans, the interminable reading. They were his self-fashioned tools. With them he tried to chisel out a special place, where he could have peace of mind” (84). It is the hospital that becomes this special place, where identity and the struggle to belong do not matter and where Chanu stops trying to live in the city that Ball identifies as postcolonial and transnational, a city where Nazneen “wanted to look neither to the past nor to the future” but where Chanu “lived exclusively in both” (Ali 84). The tragedy that befalls them is the “tragedy of our lives” that Chanu says every immigrant faces (Ali 77) because it breaks him and it turns him inward - his pride turns to shame.

During Raqib’s illness and stay in the hospital, Chanu’s change also makes him admit to a kind of failed domesticity that is shadowed by the irony that he is a fabulous cook and provides Nazneen with food and care while she sits by their son’s side. During their stay at the hospital, Nazneen and Chanu have their first and last honest and open conversations. For Nazneen, Chanu’s honesty about his failures marks a turning point in their marriage towards a peaceful resignation - and, indeed, after the death of Raqib, we only see the next thirteen years of Nazneen’s life through the lens of Hasina’s letters, a life that seems relatively peaceful. However, as Nazneen’s embarrassment and pity for her husband subsides, he turns inward and is swallowed by shame.

One of his most painful realizations is that he will not be able to fulfill his dream of building his family a house in his home of Dhaka - his domestic dream. Although Chanu aspires to Englishness, he has also always held fast to the idea that he will eventually return to Dhaka - but not until he has become successful and can retain his sense of Englishness at home. In a sense, he would return to Dhaka in the position of colonizer rather than colonial subject - determined to show his family that he has made it, he is English. His sense of “home” is not a

nostalgic one like Nazneen's. While she dreams of her childhood and longs for the smells and senses of her childhood home, she also realizes that it is now simply a memory, an unattainable ideal: "she knew that where she wanted to go was not a different place but a different time. She was free to wish it but it would never be" (Ali 27). Nazneen realizes that she can't go back because what she wants is now a memory. Chanu, on the other hand, does not want to return to the life that he had, he wants to create a new life that incorporates his Englishness, he wants to prove his success. He even wants to design the house himself: "I've drawn up the plans for the house, did I tell you? Very simple, very classical in design. I intend to be the architect myself" (Ali 76). The hospital is also the only place that Chanu admits his shame, shares it with Nazneen, in that space where nothing seems real. He also, pitifully, admits that he wants to go back to Dhaka because he can be a success there in a way that London will never allow, despite his desire to learn to be English. He realizes that he has been lying to his family and to himself, believing in the promise of England:

'All this time they thought I was rich. Why should I stay in this foreign land, if it did not make me rich? I let them think it. It suited them and it suited me.

Actually, I told them some things that are not true, have never been true. Made myself a big man. Here I am only a small man, but there...' The smile vanished. 'I could be big. Big Man. That's how it happened.' He sighed and placed his hands atop his stomach. 'So when the begging letters come and I blame left and I blame right, what I should be blaming is this, right here.' He put his hands up over his chest, to show how his heart, his pride, had betrayed him. (93)

This passage not only reveals Chanu's acceptance of his failure, but also signals that he probably knew that he would never return to Dhaka. Deep down he knew that he would never fully be able to bridge the gap between belonging and non-belonging, would never bridge the gap between

Brick Lane and Dhaka because London would never allow him to build that bridge. Only his hope kept it alive and he loses that along with his pride, his job and his son.

Chanu's failure can be considered as a kind of failed domesticity because it is important to him to be the caretaker of his family. When Nazneen announces her pregnancy, Chanu says that he will finally demand his promotion: "Give me a proper job, fit for a real man, a father" (Ali 32). Chanu wants to be the perfect husband and father - for him this means traditional domestic roles where Nazneen stays at home and cooks while he goes out into the world and earns their fortune. At the hospital, Chanu takes on the caretaker role and in these moments, Nazneen sees his imperfections: "Nazneen sat and watched her son, and watched her husband rattling around the place: fetching things and returning them, bumping into carts and nurses, questioning the doctors, accosting the cleaners, poring over charts and articles, dragging chairs out of place and back again, going for coffee, going for tea, collecting the undrunk cups and spilling them on the way to the sink" (Ali 84). Nazneen by no means idealized Chanu before, but she accepted him and their roles in the household and was only privately annoyed by his quirks. Now, his imperfections make her realize that they are not that different and she starts to love him for it, perhaps because she thinks that she will not have to be perfect any longer. It is also interesting that Ali creates the hospital scene as being about Chanu's failed domesticity rather than Nazneen's. Chanu has done his best to be a patriarch because that is what he believes that he should be. And, Nazneen has played the role of the perfect, docile, unquestioning wife and mother. The burden of the family, the "idea" of family is often tied up in the concept of motherhood but Ali does not question Nazneen's domestic role or her role as a mother when Raqib falls ill. Instead, Chanu's domesticity is called into question and is the focus. Chanu realizes that he has failed and that action is needed - he must change his life before he loses what he most values.

Chanu forgets his patriarchal role at the hospital, realizes that in that space it is

unimportant and he takes care of Nazneen without question. He prepares food and takes it to Nazneen - food that she describes as delicious: "This rice was superb. Just the rice would be enough for her. But fresh coriander made her swoon for the chicken. The deeply oily aubergine beckoned lasciviously. She wanted to stick her tongue in the velvety dal. Chanu could cook" (89). Nazneen has always cooked their food but also rarely ate it, refusing to eat, to partake in the domestic ritual of eating with her husband. She describes it as self-denial, something that she refuses to give of herself - the only thing that she can control. Instead, she would eat at midnight, stand in the moonlit kitchen and eat directly out of food containers: "It became a habit, then a pleasure, taking solace in these midnight meals" (51). Finally, at the hospital, Nazneen eats and eats Chanu's food, taking much pleasure in it. This is also the only moment in the book where Nazneen shows any desire for Chanu, albeit indirectly. Chanu's failed domesticity is made all the more evident by his inability to provide the physical space of a home for his family, his inability to penetrate the world of middle-class economy and intellect that he identifies as crucial to his masculinity, and the irony that he is the perfect cook, a perfect caretaker. These roles are even more clearly delineated when a female neighbour comes to the door with food: "Nazneen took the containers. 'My husband has been cooking.' 'I know,' said Hanufa. 'But I didn't know what else to bring'" (99).

Chanu's public shame

After Raqib dies, Ali shows us the next thirteen years of Nazneen's and Chanu's lives through the letter of Hasina. From Hasina we learn that Nazneen's marriage has its ups and downs, she and Chanu have two daughters, and that Chanu has taken up bookkeeping as one of many careers, having resigned from his office job during their stay at the hospital. Chanu has now become a staunch authoritarian and disciplinarian of his daughters. Instead of teaching them

Englishness, he is determined that they will not belong. He forbids them to speak English in their flat and he constantly schools them in Bengali history and religion. His new goal is to take his family back to Dhaka and he is now critical of the colonial culture to which he once longed to belong, determined that his daughters will not suffer the same sense of shame that he has: "A loss of pride.... is a terrible thing" (133). However, Nazneen, now much more competent in English and the ways of her husband, is fully aware that it is Chanu's own loss of pride that is his main concern. If his daughters learn to love the idea of Dhaka and embrace this part of their identity, then he will be able to salvage some success and hope that they won't notice his shame. However, through his constant badgering of his daughters, his shame and fear gradually become more visible: "Chanu smoothed Shahana's hair away from her face.... He kissed her cheek and held her hand and Nazneen saw that he was not just baffled but afraid" (145).

During this time, Chanu has bought a computer and works away on it researching all things to do with Dhaka during many periods of unemployment. His shame begins to manifest itself as depression: "There had been a period, weeks or perhaps months but to Nazneen it seemed an infinity, when he had gone to bed and stayed there. He stopped making plans. His plans, to which he gave his all and from which he expected so much had deserted him" (145). His frustration reaches a desperate point and, to make matters worse, he has borrowed money from Mrs. Islam and this debt is catching up with him. Chanu's act of borrowing money from Brick Lane's known usurer makes his shame more public as well as the humiliating experience of only being able to secure jobs that, to him, are associated with lower-class immigrants. He still believes that he is worth more than that: "There was in the world a great shortage of respect and Chanu was among the famished" (146). Chanu is caught in a complex web of shame where he is shamed and the city and promise of London acts as the shamer, constantly reminding him that he is a colonial subject, an immigrant. However, as a means to regain some of his pride - or to avoid

his shame being recognized - he turns his rage and anger towards his daughters and he, in turn, becomes both the shamed and the shamer. In *Blush: Faces of Shame*, Elspeth Probyn says that there is a tentative relationship between the shamer and the shamed:

One could tentatively distinguish between a politics resulting from feeling shame and a politics that actively seeks to cause shame in those seen as their enemy. It's a tricky distinction, because often groups spring up around sites of experienced shame, which then coalesce into fields where those assumptions and rules are used to shame others. In a culture organized around increasingly complex questions of who is hurt and who is to blame and who feels resentment against whom, shame is bound to flourish. (76-77)

Before, when Chanu was performing his belated Victorianism, he needed other immigrants to share in the shame of what he called the tragedy behind every immigrant's story (Ali 77). If they all realized that they are being shamed by the very act of living in a colonial city, then they could "preserve [their] identity and heritage" (Ali 77) while embracing the city itself. For Chanu, creating this balance between belonging and non-belonging - or, rather, refusing to be shamed into non-belonging - he could avoid the "feelings of alienation engendered by a society where racism is prevalent" (77). His naive belief that London really is a transnational and postcolonial city, in Ball's terms, means that he has hope that if all immigrants live like he does, then they can overcome the shame that they are supposed to feel as immigrants. Chanu believed that he could embrace Englishness and reinscribe London in his terms as a liberating space - a naive hope that he had for other immigrants, albeit the educated ones. However, his failure means that, instead, Dhaka becomes the hoped-for city, the only place where he can now find meaning. This move also means that his internalized shame will become the shared shame that Probyn talks of - but not shared by others like him as he still feels superior, but shared by his family where his

experienced shame is used to shame his daughters. As Probyn says, hurt, blame and resentment mean that shame is bound to flourish - and Chanu feels all of those things; London represents all of those things.

Nazneen's Spaces of Adultery

Adultery, then, acts in this larger context as the ultimate transgression associated with public and private space and domesticity. Adultery is a private act that is constructed, in literature, as having public consequences and often women who commit adultery are punished in public on behalf of the community rather than privately. Shame is also key in adultery narratives, as women who are publicly exposed for their adultery are usually shamed in some way - humiliated and made to feel disposable. Adultery becomes an almost "shameless" act on Nazneen's part - her way of reclaiming her own agency and troubling the discourses of domesticity and space within the novel.

What is important about Nazneen's adultery is that it sparks in her the ability to see beyond the rules of respectable femininity that are expected of her but that, in order to do so, she must first embrace this notion of femininity completely. She meets Karim through work - Chanu allows her to work from home, sewing clothes that are delivered by Karim. Ironically, Chanu brings Nazneen's lover into his own home - the space that is supposed to represent safety, the space where proper respectable femininity is a given as far as Chanu is concerned. But it is respectable femininity that Nazneen embraces during her affair. Nazneen likes to take care of Karim, "dance attendance" on him, bring him food and gets pleasure from this even though he has the same demands and expectations as Chanu. However, she acknowledges that this mock domestic life with Karim is a game, something that she does not take seriously: "Nazneen danced attendance. It was a thrill, this playing house. But she was playing, and she sensed that for

Karim it was serious business” (Ali 218).

Nazneen, however, starts to get pleasure from her domestic life while she is having an affair and believes that she is better in her domestic role and actually enjoys it. But, it is as if the game rolls over into her actual life, allowing Nazneen to realize that she can control it. Of her newfound domestic bliss, she says that “It was as if she had been born deficient and only now been gifted the missing sense” (219). While this could refer to the idea that this type of femininity as domestication is something that should be innate in women, it also suggests a realization that she is letting go of the shame and fear associated with that ideology by exposing the facade of her performance.

Nazneen’s adultery is also about a shameless desire. She allows herself to feel desire for a Karim in a way that she has never experienced - a desire that she says makes her feel sick with shame, but that ultimately her desire for pleasure overrides her sense of shame. Partly, this could be attributed to the fact that Nazneen has already reclaimed her domestic role and no longer feels the shame that her domestic relationship with Chanu brings. Karim cannot make her feel the same way because she won’t let him. Karim, too, longs for the perfect wife and the perfect woman and when he suggests that Nazneen is that person, he starts to lose his appeal: “He uttered caresses, whispered promises, moaned and mumbled his love, sweet with the stupidity of youth... She got up and went to wash and rinsed away his words” (Ali 251). Nazneen enjoys her mock domesticity with Karim because she is in control of her own desires for the first time, experiencing a pleasure that she had believed to be impossible and where “she lost one thread of existence and found another” (218). In her heightened state of desire for Karim, she becomes another person, moves outside of herself: “In the bedroom everything changed. Things became more real and they became less real” (218). In acknowledging the contradiction of feeling real and unreal at the same time, Nazneen’s desire becomes completely hers - she feels real within herself

because she is experiencing pleasure in and of itself and it is not connected to the reality of her real life, connected to the male authority that rules her life. In its unreality, sex with Karim becomes about her own pleasure and, in a sense, displaces him. Nazneen completely surrenders to this pleasure, allowing herself freedom from the domestic life that imprisons her and also from the mock domesticity of her affair:

She had submitted to her father and married her husband; she had submitted to her husband. And now she gave herself up to a power greater than these two, and she felt herself helpless before it. When the thought crossed her mind that the power was inside her, that she was the creator, she dismissed it as conceited. How could such a weak woman unleash a force so strong? She gave in to fate and not to herself" (218).

Nazneen's conflict about her own pleasure marks many things. First, she describes herself as "afraid and defiant" during her afternoons with Karim and expresses the anxiety, guilt, and guilty pleasure that is often used to describe the emotions of adultery. However, her guilt seems to come more from the fact that she is capable of such strong desires and she is ashamed of what she sees in herself. Before Karim, she has only ever surrendered herself to prayer and it was through praying that she would lose herself and become herself at the same time. Ali describes Nazneen's pleasure as a kind of religious fervour, calling her a Sufi, a whirling dervish (218). Nazneen feels guilty because she is lying to Chanu, but her guilt is displaced by the fact that she feels like a better wife because of her affair. She also feels guilty that she does not love Karim. Ultimately, her guilt is overshadowed by shame, a shame that has implications for her gendered and national identity in London especially as it relates to her faith.

Nazneen's adultery marks the beginning of her agency in her own terms. She is not rebelling against a violent and impossible husband, she is not having an affair out of boredom, and

she is not in love with Karim. She is expressing her own desires for the first time in her marriage and, in the process, breaking free of the rules of feminine respectability that are imposed upon her by Chanu and Karim and delineated by the spaces that she occupies. During her affair, Nazneen starts to move differently, with confidence, and feels more at ease in the domestic space that before had constrained her like a prison. Karim assumes that they will get married but Nazneen refuses, as the idea of moving from one domestic prison to another terrifies her: "She tightened the muscles of her pelvic floor, afraid all of a sudden that she would wet herself. If she stayed here, then what alternative would she have but to marry Karim? The thought flooded her with so many conflicting emotions..." (300). Nazneen realizes that she does have a choice - the choice to leave her husband and her lover and to raise her daughters alone. By taking something that she needs, that she desires, Nazneen is able to negotiate the spaces of her life in a different way, on her own terms "Why should she wait? She felt as strongly as if someone, standing beside her in the kitchen, had taken a piece of paper, written down the answers, and then set light to the page while she watched.... *I will decide what to do. I will say what happens to me. I will be the one* (300-301).

It also allows her to finally tell Chanu that she is not returning with him to Dhaka. It is unclear if Chanu knows about her affair but there is the suggestion that he does. Regardless, he knows that Nazneen has changed and does not force her to leave: "I can't go with you," she said. 'I can't stay,' said Chanu, and they clung to each other inside a sadness that went beyond words and tears, beyond that place, those causes and consequences, and became a part of their breath, their marrow, to travel with them from now to wherever they went" (Ali 358). Ironically, he returns to Dhaka and Nazneen chooses to stay in London - but it becomes a city that she can now truly reinscribe in the ways that Ball suggests. Chanu, on the other hand, may not openly know about the adultery, but it is the act of adultery on Nazneen's part, her reclaiming of herself

through her affair, that frees Chanu from his colonial ghosts and allows him to leave London. The change in Nazneen forces Chanu to make the one decision that he thought he could never make - to allow Nazneen the choice to decide where she lives, to choose her own space free from the rules of feminine respectability and domestication that had bound them both. In this way, she is a feminist figure. London no longer has the power to shame Chanu and Chanu can no longer shame Nazneen. Adultery becomes the shameless, fearless, and feminist act that frees them both.

VI

FEMALE ADULTERY: THE FEMINIST PARADOX

All four of the novels discussed here in some way contain feminist representations of female adultery. I have explored the ways that acts of adultery in fiction have specific implications for women and their access to feminine respectability and domestic ideology, especially in the construction of public and private space. The female adulterer may not herself be a feminist figure, but she becomes a site for the anxieties about women's participation in social and domestic life. In these texts, her negotiation of space can be seen as feminist and she becomes a marker of the feminist possibilities in representing female adultery and also their limits. As a figure who destabilizes marriage and the spaces associated with marriage, the female adulterer can be read a feminist and subversive figure but she is also a paradox, in that for her to exist, marriage cannot be completely displaced. She is also a paradox in terms of feminism itself because she is often seen as being anti-feminist insofar as her adulterous behaviour often hurts other women. Finally, she exposes the paradox of feminist literary criticism - how can the female adulterer be read as feminist if there is no way to distance her from the patriarchal and heteronormative discourses that created her? What constitutes a feminist adultery narrative - or is this simply a paradox that cannot be solved?

Failed Domesticity and The Female Adulterer

One of the important elements of female adultery narratives is the ways in which domesticity is represented. The female adulterer epitomizes failed domesticity in obvious ways but she also reveals the anxieties around domestic discourses - for what they represent on a personal and a social level and how these two elements cannot be separated. The concept of failed domesticity suggests that there is a successful way to be domestic, to take part in domestic

ideology. However, as these adultery narratives reveal, the relationships in the texts that are supposed to be successful, the marriages that are transgressed and the ideologies that surround them, are just as flawed. In this way, the female adulterer serves to expose the fact that domesticity is an ideological construct. It is an unreachable and unrealistic goal, one which women are constantly being pressured to reach - but the very way that ideology is constructed makes this impossible. In her discussion of the practice of femininity and domesticity in fiction, Misao Dean addresses subjectivity and gender, saying that subjectivity is “envisioned as both an enabling and a limiting process, and one which signals a kind of unavoidable complicity with patriarchy” (8). In order to gain any subjectivity, women must accept the social constructs of gender and “thus become subjected by its norms” (8).

This is particularly true of the female adulterer, herself a paradox in terms of marriage, but it is also true of domestic ideology as we have seen with the figure of Ellen Ash in Byatt’s *Possession*. To a certain extent, Ellen understood that she had to make a choice - she could not become a viable subject in ways that would include her desire to become a poet and to be a wife. She had to make a choice and in that decision, accepted her limited role. However, she is aware that this decision ties her to a discourse that defines her and ultimately confines her to a life of failure. She can never be the perfect wife because she cannot consummate their marriage and cannot give Ash children. When Ash’s affair is revealed, Ellen’s anger and sense of betrayal lies with Christabel and also with Blanche for revealing the affair. She cannot bring herself to be angry with Ash, at least not in that moment, because she feels guilty and implicated in his adultery. Her failed domesticity had driven him to have an affair, to fulfill the needs that she cannot provide. Ellen realizes that she is stuck, trying to live up to an ideal that can never fully be realized and one that does not allow her to pursue her creative drives beyond the role of being an intellectual companion to her husband. She is also aware of her paradox—that she is enabling

her own failure through her attempts to make up for that same failure. Ironically, Ash chooses to have an affair with a fellow poet, seeing in Christabel the artistic potential he will never see in Ellen due to her domestic identity.

However, as already noted, the female adulterer is also denied access to successful domesticity or domestic ideology because of her status. In Christabel's case, she appeals to Ash because he does not see her as being a domestic subject—to him, she is simply a poet. Although she lives in a domestic arrangement with Blanche, Ash—and by implication the larger patriarchal society—does not acknowledge it as real because it, too, violates heteronormative domestic discourses. Therefore, Christabel is not held to the same standards as Ellen because she already violates these norms. While her affair with Ash can be seen as a means of trying to acquire access to domestic ideology because she pursues a heterosexual relationship, acts as his wife, and bears him a child, she also enables her own failure because she does this through an adulterous relationship.

Fiona, in Lau's *Other Women*, can also be seen to be caught up in this paradox. Fiona, unlike the other female adulterers in this study, actually says that she wants to be Raymond's wife. She desperately wants to be a part of the domestic ideology that Helen represents. But, as Sneja Gunew has pointed out, Fiona's symbolic identification with Helen actually signals her desire to be part of social heteronormativity, to access "the hegemonic codes of the social world" (86). It is not her desire for Raymond that drives her, but a desire to be normal, which for Fiona can be found in a heterosexual domestic relationship. That Fiona seeks this normativity through traditional notions of marriage can be related to her own parents' unhappy marriage and, in this sense, her adultery and sexually transgressive behaviour throughout the novel can be seen as a punishment - both of her parents and of herself, for being helpless where their marriage was concerned. But, it can also be read in terms of the way that domestic discourse is constructed,

suggesting to women like Fiona that, through it, they can register as subjects according to social codes and norms. However, as we have seen, this domestic ideal is impossible to attain, especially for the female adulterer. In *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, Žižek discusses adultery:

A passionate extramarital liaison not only does not pose a threat to the conjugal love, it rather functions as a kind of inherent transgression that provides the direct phantasmatic support to the conjugal link and thus participates in what it purports to subvert. It is this very belief that, outside the constraints of marriage, in the adulterous transgression, we can really obtain “that,” the full satisfaction, which is questioned by the hysterical attitude: hysteria involves the apprehension that the “real thing” behind the mask of social etiquette is itself a void, a mirage. (214).

Fiona, then, seeks full satisfaction through her adultery, but also through her identification with Helen - in the process, she does inadvertently reinforce marital discourse but her adultery and insistence on marriage as the norm only seeks to reveal the “mirage” that constitutes this domestic ideology in the first place.

Fiona’s identification with Helen raises an important point about sexual desire in adultery narratives, especially if we read Fiona’s relationship with Raymond as signaling her desire for normative heterosexuality rather than her sexual desire for Raymond himself. Fiona and Raymond do not fully consummate their affair. Raymond allows sexual contact with Fiona but implies that full sexual intercourse equals a complete betrayal of his wife and marriage. The act of sex, then, becomes one of the ways in which Fiona is denied access to normative discourses of domesticity, marriage *and* adultery. But what about the other narratives? As we have seen, in *Possession* the adulterous relationship is consummated, but the marriage between Ellen and Randolph is not, reminding Ellen of her failures. While Ellen’s inability to consummate their

marriage could be read as a challenge to domestic norms—her refusal to have sex with her husband as a subversive means of undermining their domestic arrangement—it is also constructed by Ellen herself as being her own fault, a flaw rather than a choice. Rather than being subversive, the unconsummated marriage is so fraught with Ellen's guilt that it shifts focus back to the adultery and the fact that Ellen feels she is partly to blame. In this way, both women's domestic failures are exposed. And, the adultery is not without its consequences as Christabel becomes pregnant, but is unable to raise her own child. It is the discovery of the affair, its consummation, and the pregnancy that ultimately seal Christabel's fate as an irredeemable female adulterer. *Possession* and *Other Women*, then, can be seen to use sexual intimacy as a way to discuss larger issues of domesticity in both marriage and adultery and point to the unrealistic ideal that traps both faithful wives and female adulterers in an endless reproduction of an unattainable domestic ideology.

Sexual Autonomy and the Female Adulterer

Written on the Body and *Brick Lane* deal with sexual desire in different ways. In these narratives, the female adulterers both face oppressive forms of objectification from their partners. Louise in *Written on the Body* must face sexual objectification from her partner while in *Brick Lane*, Nazneen uses sexual desire as a way to escape the objectification she faces from her domestic life. In traditional adultery narratives, the act of adultery is usually associated with a sexual transgression for which women are held accountable and punished. The sexual act is not only an offense to the social status of marriage but also a violation of feminine respectability. This is something that Winterson makes clear by having the married party in the affair be a woman and the lover remain ungendered. I have argued that female adultery narratives reveal the impossibility of untangling the female adulterer from larger patriarchal discourses that seek to

control and define women's subjectivity. If this is the case, how is it possible for the female adulterer to reclaim her subjectivity through sexual desire?

Nazneen, in *Brick Lane*, is the only female adulterer in these novels who has sexual intercourse with both her husband and her lover. While her sexual relationship with Chanu is not pleasurable and is described as being part of her wifely duty, it is not depicted as being particularly dysfunctional either. As a sexual partner, Nazneen performs the necessary basics with Chanu and gets sexual pleasure from her affair - she is capable of consummating her marriage and deriving pleasure from her affair in ways that the other women in this study cannot. In the other relationships, either the marriages or the affairs betray some kind of sexual dysfunction. Ellen Ash is afraid of sexual intercourse and does not have sex with her husband, Fiona and Raymond are sexually active but do not have intercourse, and Louise and Elgin no longer make love, because Elgin, who has a preference for masochistic sexual practices, sees Louise's body as something that arouses medical interest but sexual disgust. Nazneen, then, is unusual in the sense that her sexual activities are relatively normal and her adultery could be seen in clichéd terms, as she does not get sexual satisfaction from her husband and therefore seeks it elsewhere. But, it is more complicated than that.

Nazneen finds agency in her affair with Karim. Having sex with Karim is a way for Nazneen to learn about her own desire. Although she longs for Karim when they are apart, thinks about his touch and is aroused by the thought of him, in the moments when they are actually together their sexual acts are very much about Nazneen and about her feelings. When she and Karim make love, she becomes removed from everything else in her life, including Karim, and it is as if her sexual awakening has made her realize that her domestic life is simply a role that needs to be performed. She becomes the perfect housewife while she is involved with Karim and lavishes attention on both her affair and her domestic duties, but sees her affair as a game she is

playing. It is as if she regains the autonomy that she lost through her marriage by having sex with another man and, in the process, realizes how much her identity and mobility are defined and controlled by that domestic ideology. What is interesting about Nazneen is that her sexual affair is actually the catalyst for her to take control of that autonomy in the rest of her life. When Chanu returns to Bangladesh, Nazneen remains in London with her children. When Karim talks of marriage and wanting to be with Nazneen, she begins to lose interest in him. She has never had any interest in a future with Karim - not because it would be impossible but because she does not desire it. In fact, at the end of the novel, Nazneen begins her life without men - she and her daughters will be fine and while they have the financial support of Chanu, they also rely on the emotional and community support of Nazneen's female friends. In this sense, *Brick Lane* could be seen as a feminist adultery novel because despite the fact that Nazneen violates social and cultural codes when it comes to marriage, domesticity and femininity, she is still able to survive and resist being written back into these discourses.

Children and Adultery

It is surprising that Nazneen is allowed to reclaim her autonomy because her adultery transgresses domestic ideology in a way that the other female adulterers do not - Nazneen has children. In traditional adultery narratives, pregnancy was often the result of a sexual transgression, an indisputable sign of a woman's fall - and often part of their literary punishment, the scarlet letter from which they cannot escape. In *Possession*, the pregnancy of Ellen Ash's housemaid, Bertha, is dealt with by Ellen trying to send her to a home for unwed mothers to have her child. However, although she is trying to help her, she also knows that sending Bertha away will seal her fate as a fallen woman. Bertha's solution is to disappear, from the text and from history. Christabel LaMotte's pregnancy is also a sign of her transgression and she, too, chooses

to disappear, but has the support of her family. However, she cannot raise the child - her sister adopts Maia and Christabel becomes her aunt. While this act is somewhat freeing for Christabel, allowing her to spend the rest of her days in solitude writing, it also indicates the fact that it would have been unacceptable for her to have kept Maia regardless of how supportive her family may have been. Childless Ellen Ash is the one who controls the secret in the end and her action of burying the evidence with Ash ultimately leads to revelations about Christabel, but also further exposes her own failed domesticity.

In *Other Women*, Raymond and Helen have no children but, instead, have a seemingly perfect marriage. Fiona's desire for normativity does not include children and children are only mentioned in terms of clichéd descriptions of Fiona's friends who pity her. In *Other Women*, children are present in images of middle-class success such as with Fiona's friend Martin - first he finds a partner, then he has the happy marriage, followed by the joys of parenthood and, with it all, the dream house and the new friends who also all have the same lifestyles. When she meets Martin's baby, she has a momentary thought that she wished she could become pregnant with Raymond's baby (Lau 94). But this is not about wanting a child, but about wanting Raymond and what he represents. However, the actual reality of the social heteronormativity that she desires is here, in Martin's living room, with its diaper bags, its middle-class comfort and its early nights. Fiona is disconnected from the actual physicality of domestic life and the reality of what it means and this disconnection symbolizes the fact that, as a female adulterer, she can never have access to that reality.

Nazneen, then, is unusual in the sense that she has an affair but also has a loving and successful relationship with her children and does not lose them when her husband leaves for Bangladesh. Although being a single mother and immigrant woman in London may seem like a version of failed domesticity to some, and Nazneen certainly faces much shame in terms of her

domesticity throughout the novel, she is perhaps the only female adulterer in this study who successfully reclaims her autonomy and is able to escape punishment. However, this is largely because her adultery is not revealed publicly; it remains private and although it is implied that Chanu knows of her affair, his own shame prevents him from admitting this fact and ironically saves Nazneen from the repercussions.

Marriage, Anxiety and the Female Adulterer

If decentring marriage can be considered a feminist negotiation of the adultery narrative, does this mean that adultery is privileged? And, if so, does this not also in some ways privilege the patriarchal discourses that the female adulterer is unable to escape, especially in terms of the anxiety that she represents? I don't think that Ali's novel privileges adultery over marriage. In fact, I think that Nazneen is a good example of a female adulterer who learns to successfully negotiate the expectations placed on her in terms of domesticity and femininity on her own terms and shifts our understanding of marriage *and* adultery. However, it is important to note that, unlike those of many other female adulterers, Nazneen's story of marriage begins with her having no autonomy whatsoever. In the other narratives, the female adulterers have more of a sense of agency in their own lives, agency that is challenged by their adultery. The female adulterer is an interesting figure to examine because she still holds much cultural weight and produces anxiety. She is a somewhat unpredictable force who threatens to destabilize social norms, but she is also needed and used as a means to regulate those same norms. The fact that the female adulterer is everywhere, that she is reproduced again and again in representation, and that her literary forebears haunt her narratives, also means that the anxiety is being reproduced. The actual act of adultery may not be as shocking to us in the twenty-first century as it was in the nineteenth century but marriage has remained a fairly stable social norm. While there are many other social

factors that now commonly threaten the notion of heterosexual marriage, there is something about the female adulterer that gives her longevity.

The current western discourses around gay marriage are interesting to consider here. Gay marriage can be read as a challenge to the patriarchal and heterosexist institution of marriage itself. Same-sex couples seeking a legal union and wanting the same legal and social privileges that heterosexual couples are allowed represents a shift in how marriage itself is viewed, especially in terms of women, domesticity and property. In many traditional adultery narratives, adultery is constructed as a transgression of marriage and as a violation of private property. As we have seen, women's association with the private and domestic sphere was reinforced at social and ideological levels which meant that adultery was conceived as a direct affront to male power and authority. Marriage itself has changed, women are no longer legally considered to be the property of men, and, for the most part, marriage is viewed as an egalitarian arrangement that is a celebration of love between two people. This is the view of marriage to which many same-sex couples want access. However, while same-sex marriage may change the way we think about marriage, it also maintains marriage as a central social discourse. Marriage may be for everyone but it refocuses it as a norm that *should* be for everyone. *Written on the Body* is a good example of how a relationship that challenges us and creates discomfort through its refusal to be defined by social codes of gender and sex may, in fact, be subversive. But it also falls prey to the same larger social discourses of objectification and does so regardless of the narrator's gender. For the female adulterer, though, it *is* about gender, as it seems that social anxieties about any kind of marriage are still displaced onto women.

Throughout this study, then, there have been a number of ways that female adultery is used to trouble discourses of heteronormativity, marriage, domesticity, femininity, and public and private space. But it also seems to be impossible for the female adulterer to completely

subvert these normalizing discourses. The female adulterer may be able to transgress certain binaries but, often, she is ultimately defined by what she is not and her subversive potential is undermined by other social dichotomies. However, perhaps we can return to Elizabeth Grosz here who talks of infecting architecture with its outside - a theory that is useful when applied to discourses and binaries of marriage and adultery as seen with the discussion of Evelyn Lau's *Other Women*. Grosz posits that we should not be thinking about a binary in terms of a limit to be transgressed but as a boundary to be traversed (*Architecture from the Outside* 65). Seeing the female adulterer as a figure who must transgress boundaries suggests a reversal in power and sustains the boundary, including those that regulate marriage. Instead, if we can identify her as traversing boundaries, as having the freedom to negotiate *all* spaces, she is able to keep marriage and adultery constantly at play and, in this way, can keep troubling them both.

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