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Ladies' Room: Women's Space in Women's Literature

by

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10 May 2019

Submitted for Honors in Women's, Gender, and Sexualities Studies

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## Introduction

“We three ladies whom you see here, moved by pity, have come to you to announce a particular edifice built like a city wall, strongly constructed and well founded, which has been predestined and established by our aid and counsel for you to build, where no one will reside except all ladies of fame and women worthy of praise.”

Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*

For centuries, “women’s space” in Western culture signified the kitchens, parlors, bedrooms, nunneries, and other feminized spaces where women were expected to work and live. As long ago as 350 B.C., Aristotle described women as particularly suited to the private, domestic realm (Horowitz 1976, 207), and the nineteenth-century doctrine of “separate spheres” codified this gendered division where men occupied the public and women the private sphere. Yet this patriarchally imagined spatial separation failed to wholly enforce gendered spaces, both because many women have had to work outside the strictly domestic sphere to survive and because women have consistently reinterpreted the “private” sphere to reflect its political and structural elements, as in the feminist rallying cry “The personal is political.” The phrase has gained popularity especially over the last fifty years, but the idea it represents is not new: in 1405, Christine de Pizan wrote the first Western text in defense of women, situating her text as a personal response to the dominant scholarly and social culture which held that women were conniving, stupid, and weak. She begins her first-person narrative with her dismay at the “treatises of all philosophers and poets and from all the orators [who] seem to speak from one and the same mouth ... that the behavior of women is

inclined to and full of every vice” (4). Christine actively dissents from this anti-woman culture in a revolutionary early ethnography centralizing aristocratic women like herself as well as women from all classes to corroborate her analysis of women’s worthiness. Through these conversations with many other women and the guidance of three heavenly Ladies, Reason, Rectitude, and Justice, who divinely appear to Christine in her despair, Christine concludes that “all who subscribe to [these attacks on women] have failed totally and will continue to fail” (18) and that “a woman is a mind is fit for all tasks” (32). Even though Christine had no words for ideas like feminism or patriarchy, her remarks about men’s criticism of women and the injustice of women’s subjugation reveal her as a proto-feminist, a woman writer writing in defense of women through a spatial politics of an all-women space.

Crucially, Christine structured her book around a symbolic place: the City of Ladies, a city completely reserved for women, which Christine herself metaphorically constructed through the process of writing and reading. Lady Reason tells Christine that she has been chosen to build the City, which “will never be destroyed, nor will it ever fall” (de Pizan 10-11). The City’s strategic reservation for women creates an allegorical space particularly for women’s elevation, which women were denied by the era’s ideological and physical constraints. Christine’s formative text has had a long afterlife not only in its defense of women, but also in its construction and interpretation of an exclusively women’s space, a symbolic foundation for the tradition of space in women’s literature as a mechanism of subversion and resistance to patriarchal paradigms. The spatial metaphor of the city reappropriates the social structures that exclude women to construct a political and social environment reserved for women’s governance and liberation. It enables the radical revision

of space as part of women's projects of navigating the conditions of confining environments: patriarchy, racism, oppression of all kinds.

Christine's City of Ladies began a powerful counter-discourse which positioned women and women's spaces as imperative to women's individual and communal self-determination. However, the term "women's space" remained in use to support essentialist views of women, particularly in the doctrine of "separate spheres," which defined women by their relegation to private, feminized spaces which prevent both personal and public autonomy (Blunt and Rose 1994, 3). Christine's City hinges on the social, political, economic participation of women in a space reserved for their active self-government - a revision of the essentialized "women's space" which evokes Gayatri Spivak's (1987) concept of strategic essentialism. Spivak's modification of reductive essentialism posits that it can be in the interest of people from marginalized groups to *use* imposed essentialist identifications to band together *as* members of particular groups to fight the conditions of their shared oppression "in a scrupulously visible political context" (Spivak 1987, 201). In this sense, women writers have used their existence as women - even in eras when no one would have known the term or concept "gender identity" - to create literary spaces that women occupy on their own terms. Since Christine de Pizan, many women have used space not to essentialize women by locating them in domestic or reproductive contexts, but to reserve a place for women to write, think, and live, in active resistance to the oppressive conditions of women's historic subjugation.

Consider Julian of Norwich's anchorage, Ourika's nunnery, Edna Pontellier's bungalow, Virginia Woolf's room, Alice Walker's gardens - spaces by women, for women, in resistance to dominant paradigms of gender which have imposed physical and ideological

limits on women's mobility and thought. "Women's literature," like "women's space," can therefore be understood as a deployment of strategic essentialism which unites women in literary and physical spaces to work towards their collective liberation. Women writers have written *as* women to implement strategic essentialism against reductive rhetorics, using their experiences as women in the ongoing endeavor to eradicate oppression.

This literary tradition of space in resistance to patriarchy takes various forms. In particular, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, and *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood use space to construct their writers' understandings of space by and for women, producing a spatialized women's consciousness. Brontë, Hurston, and Atwood create and interpret space in their novels to demonstrate the spatial context of women's experiences of subjectification and opposition within patriarchal structures. Each woman wrote in different times - the mid-nineteenth-century; the early twentieth century; the last part of the twentieth century - and in different contexts - nationalist Britain; the American South; post-Cold War Berlin and New England. Yet these novels all employ space as an interpretive tool to situate women's agency, empowerment, and self-realization, at the same time as space can signify constraint, subjugation, and vulnerability. In a sense, the spaces constructed and interpreted in these novels epitomize Christine's imagined City of Ladies: like Christine, Brontë, Hurston, and Atwood not only construct space for women within their novels, they also create spaces for their readers, the discursive next generation of women. These three novels are representative of the tradition of space in women's literature established by Christine de Pizan, which uses space to interpret, navigate, and resist the injustices imposed by dominant power.

Literary criticism of these novels by women has emphasized characterization as a mode of resistance to patriarchal power. Even centuries before the “official” beginnings of feminist literary criticisms in the 1960s, texts by women as well as the critical discourses surrounding them maintained a focus on “pre-Enlightenment female subjectivity” (Plain and Sellers 2007, 6). This focus on subjectivity situates women as individual writers, characters, and people, providing a critical intervention into understandings of writing by women as “women’s writing,” only useful or interesting to other women. Early literary criticism demonstrated the value of an appreciation of women’s subjectivity by analyzing women writers and characters *as* subjects. By the early modern period, some women writers engaged in legibly proto-feminist writing in their engagement with “the dominant debates that circulated around women’s character, her writing, her place in society” (Plain and Sellers 2007, 7). In the following centuries, from the 1700s to the late 1800s, the writing of both women novelists and critics embodied even more recognizably feminist aims, centralizing “the agency and independence of the female subject” (Plain and Sellers 2007, 8). And by the twentieth century, with foundational works like Alice Walker’s *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* (1975), Judith Fetterley’s *The Resisting Reader* (1978), and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), feminist literary criticisms had developed into a sustained discourse around the subjectivities of women, people of color, queer and trans people, and other historically marginalized identities. This tradition of feminist criticism in its many iterations has emphasized these identities to reclaim and empower those historically excluded from cultural spaces of power, including literature itself.

I will turn from this focus on character to centralize the importance of space for women in literature and life. Feminist criticism has sustained its focus on characterization to

enable the subjectivity and humanity of those whose subjectivities have been denied; this previous work has provided a foundation for my analysis of space in literature by women. Texts by women have consistently demonstrated the navigation and negotiation of space in response to structures of power which impose textual and physical violence on women's spaces and lives. Since previous literary critics have established the subjectivity and significance of women writers and characters through their emphasis on characterization, literary criticism can now shift to other, equally important elements of literature by and about women which have not yet received their due. For that purpose, an intersectional approach is particularly apt to draw out the nuances of space in literature by women as intersectionality itself provides a *spatial* perception of power's operation and women's resistance to it in their lives as in their literature. *Jane Eyre*, *Their Eyes*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* have come to represent the tradition of feminist literature in their centralization of women characters and their long-standing appeal to both popular and scholarly audiences as foundational feminist texts. I argue that these novels are also representative of the tradition of space in literature by women, navigating the spaces of the body, the house, and the nation to express women's experiences of their own identities (their "characters") as well as their environments. The sustained engagements with space in literature by women have contributed to another dimension of resistance to patriarchy, white supremacy, and oppression.

### **Spatial Understandings: Critical Frameworks**

*Jane Eyre*, *Their Eyes*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* each engage with the fraught public-versus-private divide, an ideology emerging in the nineteenth-century which codified gender difference through the construction of oppositional space. In this spatial social order, men inhabited the "public" space of the political and economic realms and women were

made to inhabit the “private” space of the home. The definition of space contributed to the codification of gender itself, as the public and private division *defined* gender roles as much as it reinforced them through its coding of gender as organized around space. Allison Blunt and Gillian Rose describe this spatial dichotomy as multiple reinscriptions of power cemented in the spatial constitution of gender difference: “The social construction of gender difference establishes some spaces as women’s and some as men’s; those meanings then serve to reconstitute the power relations of gendered identity” (1994, 3). Yet these meanings are always open to “contestation and renegotiation,” creating a new relationality of power created by *women’s* interpretation of spaces. Brontë, Hurston, and Atwood use this interpretive tradition of space to augment women’s understanding of themselves, as well as a means of resistance to oppressive structures. In this spirit, Blunt and Rose insist that “gendered spaces should be understood less as a geography imposed by patriarchal structures, and more as a social process of symbolic encoding and decoding” (1994, 3). This rejection of essentialization marks women’s writing as a particular location of resistance, where women reinterpret their spaces for their own purposes, including the contested space of women’s bodies themselves. Jane Eyre actively engages with her environment to create a spatial representation of the imagined British nation; Janie of *Their Eyes* operationalizes both internal and external space to construct her self-determined identity in Jim Crow’s America; in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Offred evokes space to interpret and appropriate her own body from the patriarchal regime which attempts to strip her of bodily autonomy. Each of these novels invokes space to describe women’s navigation of conditions of marginalization, their interpretive processes to endow space with their own power.

Although “space” and “place” are commonly considered as different, even opposing aspects of geography, I will treat them as mutually constitutive and interdependent. A “space” exists within or connected to a “place,” the spatially/geographically located area that the space occupies or is constrained by. For example, while “place” can mean the men-only porches in Eatonville, the porch is a framing mechanism for the “space” that Janie can’t enter in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the physical area which nevertheless frames the metaphysical sphere of masculine engagement within a public community. I take space and place as representative and part of each other, sometimes as extensions of each other and sometimes in a hierarchized structure, when locality dictates the nature of the space inside it. For example, sometimes location prescribes the nature of space, as when the legal locality of the courtroom scene in *Their Eyes* defines the simultaneously institutionalized and anomalous nature of the space within it as Janie testifies in her own defense. However, in *Jane Eyre* the third floor’s geographic location matters less than the space it contains: while accessible to the rest of the house, Bertha Rochester is confined on the third floor to constrain her mobility and conceal her existence in the colonial logics of the nation which prescribe the nature of the space she occupies. When considering locality, spatialization, and the attendant roles, rules, and expectations that form and are formed by them, space and place function interdependently, collectively, at the same time.

The spatial configuration of the public/private divide enables powerful readings of women’s experiences; however, that ideology of women’s domesticity has historically been reserved for middle- to upper-class, mostly white women. The intersectional lens of this literary analysis emphasizes the particular conjunctions of power and privilege, especially with regard to women of color. Intersectionality is a particularly apt methodological

approach in that it is itself spatial: as Sharlene Mollett describes, intersectionality as a theory embodies the spatial formation of interlocking systems of power and oppression, which we imagine as a grid creating particular *spaces* where people occupy the intersections of these connected power dynamics. The spatial nature of intersectionality works through power's operation in space: "Power is spatially contingent" (Mollett 2018, 566). Particular spaces such as the prison or the house prescribe different forms of oppression, wherein the power "matrix" (Hill Collins 1990, 223) interlocks in particular ways. Power exerted both by women and on women structures their lived experience through its operation in their *spaces*. Therefore, spatial intersectionality informs this analysis of women's interpretations of space where they can experience both constraint and liberation in the context of the power matrix.

Space, then, is not only imposed by oppressive systems but constantly renegotiated, reinterpreted, and reconfigured in the context of these systems; intersectionality, itself a spatially contingent analytic method, provides crucial insights to women's literary and lived experiences of space. Spatiality and intersectionality ground this argument in an attempt to illuminate some of these reinterpretations and reconfigurations in three foundational feminist texts. An analysis of the spatial coding in *Jane Eyre*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* reveals the continued tradition of space in women's literature as constantly subject to women's interpretive, imaginative power.

## Chapter One

### Hardly Separated From Me: Proximity and the Object in *Jane Eyre*

Almost five centuries after Christine de Pizan, cultural discourse in Britain solidified women's space in the institutionalization of the public versus private spheres. This was far from the goal of the City of Ladies; the codification of gender difference through the division of gendered space relegated women to the domestic sphere, where they were meant to cook, clean, keep house, and raise children (Poovey 1986, 145). The dichotomy of public and private has contributed to critical understandings of *Jane Eyre* as a novel of dichotomies: Jane and Bertha, Jane and Rochester, England and Jamaica, then a British colony. In all of this dichotomization, Bertha Rochester has been described as a representation of the subversion of Jane Eyre's darker emotions - rage, pain, and violence (Gilbert and Gubar 1979). Yet the readings of Bertha as a subversion of Jane's own feelings, her "evil twin," have failed to account for the fact that Bertha is the primary driver of *Jane Eyre*'s marriage plot and that Bertha and Jane exist in close proximity throughout Jane's time at Thornfield, a proximity which demonstrates how Jane and Bertha *constitute* each other through their mutual dependence to make sense of each other's spatialized subjectivities.

Therefore, the readings of *Jane Eyre* as dependent on dichotomies ignore the novel's continuous use of space to define both Jane and Bertha. Charlotte Brontë positioned her novel as the autobiography of an English governess, Jane Eyre, born poor and raised with unloving relations at Gateshead. After her education and training as a governess at Lowood School, Jane travels to Thornfield to teach a young French girl, where she meets Edward Rochester. As Jane and Rochester fall in love, Jane describes the closeness of an

unidentifiable presence at Thornfield, who is later discovered to be Rochester's living wife, Bertha Rochester. Rochester had married Bertha in Jamaica, brought her to England, and confined her in Thornfield's third floor to conceal her "insanity" and her identity as a Jamaican woman. When Rochester reveals Bertha to Jane on the day of his attempted wedding to Jane, Jane flees, but eventually returns to marry Rochester after Bertha's death and destruction of Thornfield. Bertha appears throughout the novel not only as the primary catalyst of its plot, but as one of the central participants in its sustained engagement with space as a method of constraint as well as constitution of the subject.

Then why are we tempted to read Bertha as an annex to the novel? Much of *Jane Eyre's* literary criticism has read Bertha as an extension of Jane, "her own secret self" (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 347), a weaker, less important version of Jane. Bertha's existence preconditions and enables *Jane Eyre's* narrative; though the novel makes her voiceless, she is its central subject. Bertha's existence inhibits Rochester from declaring his love for Jane and prevents their marriage; her suicide and destruction of Thornfield ultimately enable their coupling and the re-making of the English family. Without Bertha, Mr. Rochester would not have tried to escape her in traveling to the Continent, where he met a French lover and was given the charge of her daughter, Adèle; without Adèle, he would have had no need of a governess, and Jane would never have come to Thornfield. The social divide between Jane and Rochester does not preclude their marriage (as in *Pride and Prejudice*, for example) because neither of them have any family around to complain; rather, the primary obstacle to the successful completion of the marriage plot is Bertha, Rochester's living wife. She enables not only the plot of the novel but its heroine: through Bertha, Jane Eyre comes into being. As the nineteenth-century discourse about the colonial subject created the British subject

through defining it against what it was *not* (the colonized, racialized subject), the novel's discourse about Bertha creates Jane.

### **Proximity**

No complete reading of Jane and *Jane Eyre* excludes Bertha: she is not marginal but central to the novel's ideology. The exclusion of the Othered subject to constitute the central subject becomes clear through *Jane Eyre*'s specific use of space, making Jane and Bertha's close proximity very clear. Bertha lives in the specific room directly above Jane's bedroom; Jane specifically visits the third floor, where Bertha lives, to indulge her fantasies of mobility. Even the syntax often insists on their clearly defined closeness. Lying in bed, Jane hears a "vague murmur, peculiar and lugubrious, which sounded, I thought, just above me" (Brontë 150). The sound *might* have come from anywhere; Brontë might have chosen to locate Bertha's room away from Jane's, rather than directly above hers, but instead continuously reinforces their physical proximity. The murmur wakes Jane because it is so close to her; then she hears a "demoniac laugh ... at the very key-hole of my chamber door", which Jane initially believes "at my bedside - or rather, crouched by my pillow" (Brontë 150). In this instant Jane believes herself closer to Bertha even than she is - even though she cannot identify the source of the sounds as Bertha. The nearness of the sounds enables her to save Rochester from the fire Bertha has started in his bed. Their physical proximity enables the narrative's impetus, since if the sounds had not been so physically close Jane might not have heard them, woken, and taken action.

Later in the narrative, when Jane wakes to the sound of a terrible cry, she hears a "deadly struggle" in "the room just above my chamber-ceiling", then Bertha's brother Mason's calls for help "through plank and plaster" (Brontë 209). Again, the near proximity

between Jane and Bertha facilitates the narrative, since the sounds and call “had probably been heard only by me; for they had proceeded from the room above mine” (Brontë 210). Because of this nearness allowing Jane to hear into Bertha’s room above hers, Rochester asks Jane to keep watch over the injured Mason; while he seeks a doctor, Jane fears “a murderess hardly separated from me by a single door” (Brontë 211). This nearness produces Bertha and Jane as inextricable subjects, connected not only through their association in the plot structure but also their construction through and against each other. Bertha is never far away from Jane, never wholly excised from her; in the symbolic dialectic produced by their proximity, Jane represents white womanhood in the British nation defined against Bertha’s Othered, racialized womanhood as a subject of the Jamaican colony.

Through this nearness Bertha becomes *Jane Eyre*’s central problem, the primary obstacle, as well as the source of its narrative impetus. Despite Bertha’s voicelessness and representation through others, she is the novel’s pivotal figure. Literary critics have written, “the specter of Bertha is still another - indeed the most threatening - avatar of Jane. ... Bertha, in other words, is Jane’s truest and darkest double ... the ferocious secret self” (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 359-60). Adrienne Rich (1973) has described Bertha as “a madwoman in the house who exists as [Jane’s] opposite, her image horribly distorted in a warped mirror, a threat to her happiness” (99). However, Bertha is neither an avatar of Jane nor her opposite: to conceptualize her this way is to erase the specific subjectivity of the colonized subject, to ignore the fundamental ways in which Jane and Bertha exist not as separable opposites on a spectrum of womanhood but as parts of each other, co-constitutive despite their imagined dichotomization. Jane and Bertha are not foils for each other so much as counterpoints: although the novel and much of its criticism ask us to think of them as

opposites or parallels, they are much too *close* to ever be oppositional or parallel. They are both Mrs. Rochester. They are both without family or social status in England. However, their connection is more complex than one of duality or resemblance: Bertha and Jane construct each other. Through their pairing, they become legible.

### **Co-Constitution Through Proximal Space: The Abject**

Mary Ann Davis has written that *Jane Eyre* produces “an *interdependent* relationship between erotic power dynamics, female agency, and xenophobic and colonial rhetorics” (2016, 121). Bertha, born in the British colony of Jamaica to a Creole mother, embodies the novel’s logics of colonialism which exploit colonized subjects to support national strength, as Rochester used Bertha’s wealth to maintain the Thornfield estate. Davis argues that the relationship between erotics, power, agency, xenophobia, and colonialism enables the novel’s resolution of its own “erotic ideology” whereby “the empowering forms of erotic power dynamics are marked as decidedly English,” evacuating Orientalist influences from English erotics to reinscribe English imperialism (143). However, Davis does not mention Bertha at all, except in this disingenuous footnote: “Bertha Mason Rochester is, of course, the dominant figure of English colonialism and slavery, and feminist orientalism, in the novel. The novel’s treatment of her character shores up the social forms of Jane Eyre’s erotic power” (2016, footnote to page 136). In an essay on power in which Bertha is explicitly situated as the source and sustenance of Jane’s own erotic power, Bertha’s relegation to a footnote is downright bizarre. Jane and Bertha are part of the same discourse about nation, power, and space that produces Jane as white British womanhood and Bertha as racialized Creole deviance. This nationalist discourse became central to Britain’s understanding of itself in the nineteenth century, consolidating a white British identity through its rejection of

racialized, colonized subjectivities. Without Jane and Bertha as counterpoints for each other, there would be no distinction between nation and colony.

As Toni Morrison has written about the presence of Africanism as a constitutive element of American literature, the analysis of this process of co-constitution is to study not only “racialism in terms of its consequences on the victim” but also “the impact of racism on those who perpetuate it” (1992, 11). Not only as Bertha illuminates Jane, but as Jane illuminates Bertha, *Jane Eyre* can show “the impact of racial hierarchy, racial exclusion, and racial vulnerability and availability on nonblacks who held, resisted, explored, or altered those notions” (Morrison 1992, 11). Racial ideology does not flow one way: the impacts of race and racism are legible in Jane, too, through the ways her whiteness is articulated in opposition and contrast to Bertha’s nonwhiteness. Rochester recalls Bertha and Jane in an explicitly racialized dichotomy, describing Bertha as “the thing . . . hanging its black and scarlet visage over the nest of my dove” (Brontë 315). Rochester’s perception of Bertha as a threat to Jane enables this dichotomization whereby Bertha’s very threateningness contributes to Jane’s vulnerability. Without Bertha, Jane would not be legible as a “dove,” a white British woman; without Jane, Bertha would not be perceived as a racial threat. Racialized language sets up a dichotomy wherein neither “opposite,” neither Jane nor Bertha, can exist without the other. The threat of Bertha constructs Jane’s whiteness just as Jane allows Bertha’s visibility in Britain’s racialized social dynamics.

We can understand Jane and Bertha’s constitution of each other through Julia Kristeva’s post-structural theories which hold that processes of Othering create the imagined center; the process of marginalization creates the un-marginalized, the “center,” of social power (Kristeva 1982). If Jane is the “center” of *Jane Eyre*, signified by everything from the

novel's title to its first-person narration, then Bertha is the margin, and in producing Bertha as the margin (the colonized subject) Jane is produced as the center (the British subject). Bertha, in the margin - neither inside nor outside - occupies a space of what Kristeva terms abjection, wherein she is neither subject nor object, neither agent nor victim. On the third floor, Bertha is both confined and not confined, escaping her constraints to roam the house at night, setting fire to Rochester's bed, and destroying Jane's wedding veil; but Rochester also pays Grace Poole to keep Bertha locked away, subjected to extended colonial and patriarchal power. Bertha's ambiguous spatial location demonstrates the ambivalence and disruption that situate her in the space of the abject. Jane, unlike Bertha, is vocal, literate; she, the narrator, is "the speaking being, always already haunted by the Other" (Kristeva 1982, 12). Jane *is* haunted by Bertha as she would be haunted by a ghost; Bertha inhabits Thornfield secretly, largely invisible in her third-floor room except for her presence, which predicates the Thornfield mystery, Jane's employment there, and the legal impossibility of Jane's marriage to Thornfield's owner and Bertha's husband, Edward Rochester.

In Kristeva's work on the abject, she problematizes the "ambiguous opposition I/Other, Inside/Outside" (1982, 7), echoing the ostensible logics of *Jane Eyre* where Jane is I, inside society, and Bertha is Other, outside society, outside the family, outside her own mind. If I correlates with Inside and Other with Outside, the opposition of I/Other is misleading for *Jane Eyre's* spatialized logics since both Jane and Bertha exist literally and symbolically *inside* the domestic and patrimonial space of Thornfield. The pretended dichotomy between them is inconsistent with their literal proximity in the novel, established through their physically near quarters and repeated closeness on and off the third floor. Bertha crouches outside Jane's keyhole, slips into her room, and rambles Thornfield at night, increasing the

sense of Jane and Bertha as physically close to each other. This proximity operates not to draw attention to the disparities between Jane and Bertha but to demonstrate them as similar, co-dependent subjects. Bertha's status as "outsider" predicates Jane's status as "insider," giving Jane and readers a defined opposite for Jane to fear and reject, as Bertha's imagined position "outside" the house and the nation constructs the "inside," the idealized estate and empire which depend on rejecting colonized subjectivity to rationalize continued imperial control.

Kristeva has further theorized that the abject "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 1982, 4). In its inability to fit into an identity or subscribe to an established system, the abject transcends or surpasses the categorical boundaries that constitute the social order, necessitating its status as "in-between" categories of identity, like British or Jamaican. Bertha disturbs British systems in her very existence, her refusal to politely die and make way for Rochester's re-marriage; furthermore, she occupies a particular space between "woman" and "thing," variously described as a "tiger," a "monstress," a "clothed hyena," identified with the object pronoun "it" and continuously voiceless. As Carol Atherton has described, these epithets contribute to the dehumanizing violence enacted on Bertha by Rochester himself, which contributes to her loss of self in insanity (2014). When the abject disrupts the social order through its rejection by and of language, the abject occupies a place between subject and object. Bertha is neither subject nor object in *Jane Eyre*; she is "out of her mind," existing as a body without a self, occupying a space of abjection both in the third floor and in her subjectivity as a colonized woman illegible *as* a woman. Her disruptions to woman's

prescribed social role - wife, mother - render her transgressions so unfeminine as to be outside womanhood, truly “monstrous.”

Furthermore, Bertha has no language; she never utters a single word, and she is utterly excluded from language and the symbolic order that structures society, reflecting Kristeva’s theory that lexical rejection and loss of the mother figure signify the first experience of abjection. Bertha’s position in the space of abjection, begun by the loss of her own mother (who is “mad, and shut up in an asylum” Brontë 310), intensifies through the ambiguity in her occupation of the subject/object dichotomy: British subject by virtue of her marriage, denied subjectivity through her madness, Bertha is more than an “object” as she is still Rochester’s legal wife, but less than a “subject,” as she exercises no rights to her body or her mind and she is objectified and Othered through her Creole status in England. Occupying the space of the abject, Bertha is constantly rejected by the symbolic order and those who uphold it - most importantly, Jane and Rochester. Jane must consistently reject Bertha to constitute herself; Bertha is not only Jane’s “secret self” but a part of herself, as Jane represents what Bertha *is not*. The abject is “something rejected from which one does not part” (Kristeva 1982, 4); although Jane rejects Bertha, she cannot part from her. The space between Jane and Bertha signifies the specific space of the differentiated self and the other, where Jane is represented as self and Bertha as Other; their physical proximity symbolizes the loss of that distinction.

### **National Space and the Abject**

Jane and Bertha occupy the contested spaces of the manor house and the landed estate, the bedroom and the “attic,” and the nation and the colony. The space of the nation, its annexed colonies, and the representative microcosms of the nation reflect their perceived

dichotomy and actual affinity. Nineteenth-century Britain was a powerful and growing global empire with something of a monopoly on national space. Throughout the century, British colonizers cemented their wealth and social power both through extracting rents from farmers who lived and worked on their estates and through selling “commodities produced by indentured and enslaved laborers” (Rugemer 2018, 49) at home and abroad. Often, these commodities included the enslaved workers themselves. Colonization and imperial annexation formed a vital part of English nationalism: “imperialism, understood as England’s social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English” (Spivak 1985, 243). In its attempts to spread empire to “uncivilized” parts of the world through colonization, England constructed a national identity based in imperialist logics that represented both England and English citizens as socially and culturally superior to other/Other peoples, which justified their colonization. The discourse of imperialism and the social hierarchies it maintained developed out of nationalist discourses and produced nineteenth-century ideas of the national family, forming part of the “putative organic unity of interests” (McClintock 1993, 63), like England’s imagined social mission and self-representation. These ostensible interests create the national “family,” or “symbolic performance of invented community” (McClintock 1993, 71), that construct a cohesively imagined nation.

The family metaphor which structures the ideology of nation also contributes to the gendering of nationhood and participation in the national body. McClintock centralizes this gendered nature of the nation by demonstrating that nationalist rhetoric contributing to the imagined nation has traditionally positioned women as its symbolic and literal reproducers, tied to their gendered reproductive roles: in the nation, “women are subsumed symbolically

into the national body politic as its boundary and metaphoric limit ... construed as the symbolic bearers of the nation” through physical and cultural reproduction, yet relegated to the private sphere without “any direct relation to national agency” (1993, 62). British citizens in the 1840s considered women’s involvement in the polity suspect at best, and women had little mobility and few opportunities for independence outside of marriage and childbearing. Part of Bertha’s transgression consists of her failure to assimilate naturally into British culture from Jamaica, as well as her more literal failure to reproduce British children; forbidden from the public sphere, a failure in the private one, Bertha has *no* national agency. Her relation to Britain as the wife of a citizen does not protect or empower her, but rather mandates her enclosure in the third floor, her concealment from society. Jane, whose narrative leads to the fulfillment of her reproductive potential and thus reproduction of the nation, likewise exerts no real agency in the political body except for her literacy, her address to the reader, her hermeneutic offspring, which mimics her symbolic “bearing” of nation through motherhood.

The imperially idealized Britain of colonial wealth and power is metonymized through the spaces of the English estate (the Rochester lands) and the house (Thornfield), as well as the literal space between Jane’s bedroom and the third floor, the specific, proximal space between white, British womanhood and other, colonized womanhood. In her boredom at Thornfield, Jane’s “sole relief was to walk along the corridor of the third story, backwards and forwards, safe in the silence and solitude of the spot” (Brontë 111), except that Bertha lives immediately next to where Jane is walking. Brontë makes a point of this *third-floor* pacing; the other spaces Jane tried for relief (the grounds, the gates, the roof) enhance her restlessness; only the third floor will do. Jane’s longing for “incident, life, fire, feeling”

(Brontë 110), her frustrated pacing, and her concentration on the third floor illustrate her search for liberty outside her own mind; the spatial logic of Jane's attraction to the third floor and Bertha's confinement there literalize Jane's "problems ... which find symbolic expression in her experiences on the third floor" (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 349). Because Bertha is physically confined in the third floor and Jane retreats to the third floor to reflect on her own social confinement, the third floor becomes the space of both physical and mental restraint. Their dual confinements, embodied in the shared space of the third floor, remind us that both Jane and Bertha are *inside*, that the inside/outside dichotomy breaks down faced with their physical proximity, that both I and Other are necessary to oppose each other for the I/Other paradigm to work, and therefore that I and Other are dependent on each other to exist. The breakdown of the spatial dichotomy of the abject draws attention to the false opposition wherein Jane is imagined as "I," the first-person narrator and the center of the novel, and Bertha as "Other," the "other wife" on the imagined margin of the plot and the nation.

Thus Jane and Bertha inhabit and interpret the spaces which constitute or disrupt the ideology of nation, most particularly in the space of the third floor, which takes on a specific meaning as the site of colonial memory. The old-fashioned furniture and "air of antiquity" link the "carvings of palm branches and cherubs' heads ... effigies of strange flowers, and and stranger birds, and strangest human beings," and Jane identifies the third floor of Thornfield Hall as the "shrine of memory" (Brontë 107), syntactically displacing the exotics of palm trees, unfamiliar flowers and birds, and "strangest" humans into the past. Jane's representation of the third floor as the past and somehow *passed*, "a hundred years old," "wrought by fingers that for two generations had been coffin-dust," increases the novel's sense of Bertha as a ghost, like the rest of the third floor, analogically linking Bertha with the

space of the past. Space inside the house is constitutive not only of Bertha, but Jane as well: when she meets Mr. Rochester for the first time outside Thornfield, Jane remembers “the new face ... like a picture introduced to the gallery of memory” (Brontë 118), evoking the gallery as a metaphor for Jane’s internal mind.

However, Jane’s “gallery of memory” is not dead or past like Bertha’s: Thornfield Hall’s gallery is on the *second* floor, and Jane’s occupation of this gallery indicates her imagined futurity as the bearer of nation through reproduction. Rochester relates having watched Jane walking in the second-floor gallery in “the sweet musings of youth, when its spirit follows on willing wings the flight of Hope, up and on to an ideal Heaven” (Brontë 318). The differences in Jane’s paces - “agitated,” “heaved,” “exultant,” “quickened” on the third floor; femininely “slow,” “gentle,” “soft,” “sweet” on the second - reflect the compartmentalization of the third floor as a distinct, but connected, part of Thornfield where pain, restlessness, ambiguity, and turmoil are symbolically expressed. These spatial metaphors “align the second floor with futurity, while the third floor remains the realm of the past” (Kriesel 106). The language that depicts the third floor as opposed to the second illuminates this disparity: the third floor is the “shrine” of memory; the second floor is its “gallery,” a space for hope and revival. The strange, dusty, “antiquated” and “half-effaced” nature of the third floor’s spatial environment associates Bertha, its inhabitant, with the past, placing her in the past through her occupation of a “past” space, symbolically killing her. The third floor’s spatial nature as “past” echoes the colonial logic of associating colonies and colonized peoples with the past, with destruction and annihilation, with abjection: the imagery of palms, flowers, and people as “primitive” and passed justified European

expansion and colonization, since empire was merely expanding into spaces of the past, with people who were already figured as passed and past.

The dialectic produced by Jane's treatment of the third floor as a particular site of memory, and her probing as to the existence of a Rochester "ghost," situate the third floor as a locus of memory and lost or splintered self: the "ghost" haunting the third floor is Bertha herself, in some sense a ghost of herself, the representation of "voicelessness, forgetting, and loss of self" (Kriesel 110). This loss echoes the loss of self that not only Bertha, but *Jane also* experiences in the third floor through her experience of Bertha. When she meets Bertha at last, when Bertha's brother Mason foils Rochester's attempt to marry Jane by forcing Rochester to display his living wife, afterward Jane appears "just myself, without obvious change ... and yet where was the Jane Eyre of yesterday? - where was her life?" Jane's spatial awareness that enables her internal consciousness has broken down, manifested in the third-person question that marks her estrangement from herself. The interrogative form conveys her sense of disorientation and desperation. Jane is lost to herself because her life, prospects, hopes, and love have all been lost. Her own wishes, "yesterday so blooming and glowing[,] lay stark, chill, livid corpses, that could never revive" (Brontë 300). Jane, too, through the confining space of the third floor, experiences a symbolic death when she and Bertha come into their closest proximity, this explicit encounter: her encounters with Bertha causes the death of her hopes, just as Bertha's connection to Rochester mandates her death to enable Jane's life. Jane is constantly defined *against* Bertha, rejecting Bertha as the abject to shore up her own subjectivity, and when they are closest, Jane can no longer reject her and experiences a symbolic death, like Bertha's loss of self in insanity. These women oppose each other such that they would not be themselves without their opposition: Bertha defines

what British womanhood in the nation does *not* look like, thereby constructing what it *does* look like. The proximity is not just of Jane and Bertha but of colonized and national subjectivity, empire and colony.

Brontë demonstrates the close relationship of colony and nation in Rochester's narration of his marriage to Bertha after she and Jane finally encounter each other. Rochester used Bertha's body through marriage to furnish himself with English social power and to restore the English estate. As the second son of an entailed estate, he would be impoverished if he did not marry well; his need for a fortune to establish his own social power materialized in Jamaica, where Rochester's father and older brother arrange for his marriage to Bertha Mason, "the boast of Spanish Town ... tall, dark, majestic." According to Rochester, the Mason family "wished to secure me because I was of a good race," setting up a distinction between *his* race (white, British) and hers, covertly racialized through the specification "dark." He describes her appeal to him in sexual terms, reflecting the hypersexualization of racialized women: "I was dazzled, stimulated: my senses were excited ... she allured me" (Brontë 310). Rochester represents Bertha as a racialized figure, using the imperialist language of scientific racism to demonize her:

"her nature wholly alien to mine ... her cast of mind common, low, narrow, and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher, expanded to anything larger ... coarse and trite, perverse and imbecile ... violent and unreasonable ... a pigmy intellect ... intemperate and unchaste ... a nature the most gross, impure, depraved" (Brontë 311).

This language relies on nineteenth-century notions of racial difference understood through a hierarchy of intellectual ability: "pigmy" refers to an African people of short stature;

Rochester uses it here to denigrate Bertha's intellect as not only small, but also African. His beliefs reflect the racial discourse of imperialist England, which justified its colonization of other lands through discrediting their native peoples. The discourse of racism in the British empire depended on "the belief that physical appearance was merely an outward mark of an inborn and permanent inferiority for all non-European peoples" (Curtin 1960, 42).

Rochester's description assumes that he and Bertha do not belong to the same race: he describes Bertha's *nature* as deviant, perverse, linked to his perception of her limited intellect, connected to racialized logics of the body. As Bertha's mental state devolves, so does her appearance.

Rochester uses similarly racialized language to displace his own culpability in Bertha's madness. As he sees it, her character "ripened and developed with frightful rapidity; her vices sprang up fast and rank" (Brontë 311). Both "ripened" and "rank" connote fruit and odor, implying the association of Native women, particularly their bodies, with land (a well-documented phenomenon by Andrea Smith 2015 among others). The linkage of body, fruit, and land continue the gendered racial associations that objectify Bertha and displace her from subjectivity, situating her in abjection, neither human nor fully inhuman. Descriptions of Bertha throughout the novel depend on overtly racialized language to depict the space of the colonial abject. Bertha and Jane meet not once, but twice: the first time, Jane wakes to Bertha standing in her bedroom, trying on Jane's wedding veil. Her narration represents Bertha's face as "discoloured ... savage ... blackened ... the lips were swelled and dark: the brow furrowed; the black eyebrows widely raised over the blood-shot eyes" (Brontë 288). The racialized imagery is unmistakable both in the contours of the face and the qualitative word "savage," conveying Jane's evaluative response to Bertha more than Bertha's actual being.

Bertha's depiction in the novel projects British ideology about raced bodies, and Jane and Rochester read her through the lens of imperial racism. This racialization exists in contrast to Jane's whiteness: Rochester imagines Bertha as blackness explicitly opposed to whiteness, as in his description of Bertha as a "black and scarlet" "thing" and Jane as his "dove" (Brontë 315). Jane is imagined as white, bird-like, while Bertha is not even human. But then, in this description neither is Jane; their proximity relegates them both to an analogy wherein neither occupies a fully human position. When they are imagined as immediately next to each other, neither one of them exists as the subject; in bringing Bertha's space of abjection so *close* to Jane, Jane, too, becomes subsumed in the space of the abject.

The bodily *differences* between Bertha and Jane call attention to the way in which their existences are enabled only in counterpoint to each other. When Jane meets Bertha, she is dressed in white, her wedding dress; Rochester calls her "fair as a lily" (Brontë 291). This heightens their disparity in bodily appearance. The sight of Bertha reminds both Jane and Rochester of what Jane is *not* as well as what Jane *is*, and Rochester compares their bodies explicitly: "this young girl, who stands so grave and quiet at the mouth of hell, looking collectedly at the gambols of a demon. . . . Compare these clear eyes with the red balls yonder - this face with that mask - this form with that bulk" (Brontë 298-9). The comparison of Jane and Bertha shows us what they both are - and what they are is *not each other*. As they stand in their closest proximity, Jane and Bertha still exist in their *contrast* to each other. We can see Jane clearly only when we can see Bertha; we see Bertha clearly only when we see Jane; this is not because of Jane's monopoly on the novel's narration but because only when the contrast between Jane and Bertha is clearest do Jane and Bertha become visible. The contrast between the women's skin marks them individually even as it

constructs them in pointed relation to each other: “it was skin color that served popular mind as the real touchstone of race difference” (Curtin 1960, 43), contributing to the creation of a racial hierarchy represented through skin color relative to whiteness, where whiteness signified the top of the hierarchy.

Jane is a white woman, but this is obvious to us *because* she does not mark her own race except implicitly, syntactically, as when Rochester calls her a “dove” or a “lily” or a “lamb - so near a wolf’s den” (Brontë 219). Jane’s ability to make her race invisible operates in part because her whiteness operates in opposition to Bertha’s; in a novel dealing so explicitly with bodily appearance, including Bertha’s and Rochester’s skin, Jane’s own appearance receives comparatively little attention, except that she is consistently described as “plain.” The uneven focus on Bertha’s physical aspects echoes the imperial focus on the racialized female body as hypersexual, perverse, excessive - the same identifiers that Bertha receives in the novel. These sobriquets distance Jane from Bertha, Jane’s body from Bertha’s, to separate white Britain from the racialized, Othered colony to fulfill the rhetoric of nation and enable the microcosm of the nation - the reproducing family - to occur through marriage.

### **Destruction of Space: Resistance to Abjection**

The spatial separation of Jane and Bertha aligns with Kristeva’s theory of abjection, which depends on bodily separation, just as the dialectic of difference between Jane and Bertha depends on their proximity. The encounters between Jane and Bertha, along with Bertha’s final act of killing herself, enact the “immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be” (Kristeva 1982, 10). The separation of Jane’s body from Bertha’s, both syntactically and spatially, enable Jane’s existence, her reproducing body, her participation in the nation. The process of separation is violent, from

the violence of Jane's language in describing Bertha as a "strange wild animal," a "maniac," a "lunatic" (Brontë 298), to the violence of her suicide, when "she lay smashed on the pavement ... dead as the stones on which her brains and blood were scattered" (Brontë 436). Jane leaves Thornfield after the revelation of Bertha's existence; thereafter Bertha does not figure explicitly in the novel until Jane returns to Thornfield. Between her departure and return, Jane finds her family, inherits a fortune, and becomes independent; on her return to Thornfield, now a "blackened ruin," she asks the host of a nearby inn about the house's fate, and this unnamed host narrates Bertha's demise.

As we hear it through the host, Bertha finally succeeds in what she has tried to do more than once - destroy the symbolic space of patriarchy. In attempting to kill Rochester by setting his bed on fire when Jane first came to Thornfield, she attempted to kill the symbol of her oppression, the exploitive British colonizer-cum-husband who removed her from Jamaica and confined her in the third floor, the space of the past. Bertha's burning of Thornfield is a disruption to the spatial logic of the nation. Her destruction of Thornfield, the "gentleman's estate," the modern house that contains both futurity (the second floor) and the past (the third floor), mimics a destruction of the nation, the national space of colonized exploitation that Thornfield both symbolizes and physically embodies. Rochester has used Bertha's dowry - thirty thousand pounds - to ensure Thornfield's "landed wealth"; when Bertha destroys Thornfield, she strikes against Rochester as the symbol and benefiter of the nation.

Her violence is a manifestation of her resistance to the colonial and patriarchal regimes that Rochester operationalized to first subjugate her through marriage, then displace her through her forced removal to England, then confine her to the third floor, the "shrine of memory" and the space of abjection, *within* the house but separate from it. This

compartmentalization reflects imperialist logics whereby British colonies and colonial subjects were considered both “part of” the nation and outside them, worthy of commodification but not citizenship. Bertha’s confinement reinscribes British colonial control *of space*: her imprisonment on the third floor and the use of her fortune to restore the Rochester estate reflect the logics of colonial imperialism which racialized colonized subjects to exclude them from the white-coded “family” of the nation. Bertha’s representation as “mad,” “wolfish,” “lunatic,” “savage,” “demonic,” a “goblin,” originate in the novel’s need to distance her from Jane in order to produce Jane. Jane is not irrational because Bertha’s irrationality, her madness, conditions Jane’s rationality. “Bertha’s characterization by both Rochester and Jane as mentally ill stems from her position as the female colonial Other” (Nygren 2016, 119), especially her position as a person of color living in the nationally imagined space of white imperialist England.

*Jane Eyre* misleads us to believe that Bertha is an annex to the novel, a plot device. However, the proximity between Bertha and Jane demonstrates the larger spatial logics of the British nation, wherein the colony was imagined as a part of the nation but always distinctly inferior to it. Bertha’s occupation of the space of abjection illustrates her centrality not only to the novel’s plot but also to Jane as a character and a symbol, constituting and enabling Jane’s marriage plot and her identity as the “appropriate” reproducer of the nation. Bertha enables Jane’s narrative, but Bertha herself needs no enabling - she operates outside Jane’s narration, though *not* outside the logics of the nation and its colonies. The host relates the end of Bertha’s life in part because Jane’s narrative representations of Bertha cannot accommodate her; Bertha is consistently imagined as the abject, and the processes of rejection ultimately constitute Jane herself. Jane, then, cannot represent Bertha’s destruction

of Thornfield or of herself; her proximity to Bertha is disrupted in their spatial distance from each other at the moment of Bertha's death, so that Bertha is no longer legible to Jane as her "opposite," and an unnamed servant has to narrate her death instead. In her burning of Thornfield, Bertha reappropriates spatial power both through destruction, but she also leaves the space of abjection only in death: "the house is what kills her ... without the sheer height of the mansion" (Kreisel 112), Bertha might not die when she ends her trajectory through space in the Thornfield courtyard. She does not die because of her escape; she dies when Rochester "approach[ed] her" (Brontë 436), tries to draw near to her, and she leaps into space rather than accept his proximity to her. Where Bertha dies rather than accept Rochester's proximity, Jane pursues it. In their proximity to each other, Jane and Bertha exist not only as parallels or opposites but as opposition which creates its constituents: without Bertha, neither Jane nor *Jane Eyre* could exist.

### **Conclusions: Spatial Logics Against Abjection**

Charlotte Brontë, a governess herself, wrote in 1839, "A private governess has no existence, is not considered a living and rational being except as connected to the duties she has to fulfil. ... If she steals a moment to herself she is a nuisance" (Brontë 1839 in Smith 1995, 191); that "I hate and abhor [sic] the thought of governess-ship" (Brontë 1839 in Smith 1995, 206); and, most significantly,

"My place is a favorable one for a governess - what dismays and haunts me sometimes is a conviction that I have no natural knack for my vocation - if teaching only were requisite - it would be smooth and easy - but it is the living in other people's houses - the estrangement from one's real character - the adoption of a cold frigid - apathetic exterior that is painful" (Brontë 1841 in Smith 1995, 266).

Brontë follows her qualification of her good fortune - favorable *for a governess* - with an implicit spatialization of this position. Her worry that she has “no natural knack” for the job does not extend to teaching, the basic responsibility of a governess, which for her is “smooth and easy”: she feels pained by the *spatial* qualities of her reality, the displacement to “other people’s houses” and “estrangement” from herself. Brontë reflects her own discomfort with the physical and internal spaces of her position in *Jane Eyre*, yet - as always - we are asked to sympathize with Jane’s pain while avoiding Bertha’s, to follow Jane’s spatial mobility while ignoring Bertha’s enforced restraint. At the end of the novel, Bertha’s destruction of Thornfield and by extension English patrimonial space does deal a blow to English cultural power, but Bertha’s death also enables the microcosm of the nation, the family, to become whole: Mrs. Rochester’s death enables Rochester to remarry, reunifying the “national family” as an appropriately white, reproducing body, Jane and Rochester.

We need the invention of the other to produce “us.” In distancing ourselves from the abject, which nevertheless haunts us within ourselves, we construct ourselves; in defining what we are *not*, we define what we *are*. Bertha has been interpreted as a minor figure to *Jane Eyre*’s plot, but the processes of excluding her from the nation, the family, and the self make her central to the plot. Her proximity to Jane herself reinforces both the attempt to distance white womanhood from Other womanhood and the impossibility of this attempt: in perpetually trying to distance Jane from Bertha and defining her against the process of that rejection, Jane and Bertha become constitutive of each other, inextricable from each other. Bertha’s adjacence and invisibility to Jane, her felt presence in Thornfield and the narrative, make her the novel’s pivot.

The need to perpetually reject the abject to legibly constitute the self underlines the novel's apparently incongruous final paragraphs. The novel's last chapter deals largely with Jane's secluded married life with Rochester at Ferndean, the annex to the Thornfield estate where Rochester originally feared even to house Bertha but where he apparently feels content to while away the rest of his own life. The house itself is of "considerable antiquity, moderate size, and no architectural pretensions"; furthermore, it is "deep buried in a wood" (Brontë 437), away from the *outside* world. This proximal quality, in which even Jane and Rochester ultimately become "adjacent" to the world, might conceivably displace the microcosm of the nation, the family, into the space of abjection - but the novel's final paragraphs ensure that it does not. St. John Rivers, Jane's discovered cousin and would-be husband (if not for her rejection), has traveled to India to evangelize the natives there, and the novel ends with his holy martyrdom. Jane writes that St. John embodies "the ambition of the high master-spirit, which aims to fill a place in the first rank of those who are redeemed from the earth" (Brontë 460). Since St. John is off evangelizing the natives of India, Jane and Rochester can retreat to Ferndean in peace, confident in the nation's ability to continue rejecting the abject, the space between subject and object, by homogenizing the non-white world into an extension of British imperial space. The subject is always on guard against the return of the abject, since the subject constitutes itself through its distancing from the abject; with St. John performing this distancing and guarding, Jane and Rochester can become a family, a microcosm of nation. This continuation of the project of nationhood enables the success of the family, the reproduction of nation through the imagined national family. The ending of *Jane Eyre* is congruent with its spatial project.

## Chapter Two

### Trial Chair: The Spatialization of Identity in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Nearly a hundred years after *Jane Eyre*, a Black woman writer reappropriated internal space from the space of abjection to produce a specifically situated black woman's consciousness. Yet when Zora Neale Hurston published *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in 1937, the book - her third - garnered mostly criticism from the black male literary establishment. Zora Neale Hurston's restoration as writer, woman, and literary ancestor didn't occur until forty years after the publication of *Their Eyes*, fifteen years after Hurston's death, when in 1975 Alice Walker wrote a rediscovery piece for *Ms.* magazine. In Eatonville, where Hurston lived, Walker centered her search for her literary ancestor on a place: Hurston's grave. "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston" shows how her unmarked burial place symbolizes her invisibility in literature, including her absence in black women's literary tradition. Walker's purchase of a gravestone and her publication of the article reinstated Hurston in women of color's feminist movement, which in the 1970s was gaining increasing purchase and visibility.

In the 75th anniversary edition of *Their Eyes*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes that "black women generated [Hurston's rediscovery] primarily to establish a maternal literary ancestry. . . . Hurston became a metaphor for the black woman writer's search for tradition" (Gates in Hurston 196). In this sense Hurston and her writing inhabit a spatialized tradition of women's community, voice, and expression. Gates centers the purpose of *Their Eyes* as "the project of finding a voice, with language as an instrument of injury and salvation, of selfhood and empowerment" (197). For Gates, language operates in the novel through black

vernacular - a “highly idiomatic black voice” (197) - which centralizes both the protagonist Janie’s experience as a black woman and the public voice and power of people of color. For Gates, the narration of the novel operates in “free indirect discourse,” wherein Janie indirectly narrates the novel through a discursive technique meant to center her own voice. However, Gates’s interpretation depends on the masculinist system of “ancestry,” a generational structure perpetuated through essentialized modes of reproduction, reinforcing traditional male heritage patterns rather than acknowledging Hurston’s particularly feminist innovations and inclusion in a maternalist literary heritage independent of essentialist reproductive tropes. Similarly, his focus on voice and language does not account for the complications of Hurston’s treatment of language and speech. As Mary Helen Washington explains, “Janie is often passive when she should be active, deprived of speech when she should be in command of language, made powerless by her three husbands and by Hurston’s narrative strategies” (1987, 195). In several pivotal moments in the novel, as explained later - Janie’s early relationships with her husbands, Janie’s experience of abuse, Janie’s courtroom testimony for her defensive killing of Tea Cake - Janie is oddly, jarringly silent. Washington points out many instances in which we learn about Janie and her life through the reactions of the men around her, rather than her own; operating as both subject and object, Janie’s identity and voice are often subsumed by men. The disappearance of Janie’s voice demonstrates the inadequacy of Gates’s concept of free indirect discourse to fully epitomize the novel’s revolutionary potential.

Voice then is not the central project of *Their Eyes*. Rather, the novel’s concerns with space - physical, mental, inhibitive, liberatory - mirror Christine de Pisan’s conceptualization of a women’s literary tradition creating literal and metaphorical space for women and their

writing. Thus *Their Eyes Were Watching God* participates in that space, not an essentialized, exclusionary one but an autonomous imagination, a non-restrictive space for the free exercise of self.

### **Intersectionality, Identity, and Spatial Politics**

An intersectional reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* indicates that more matters than simply Janie's "identity" as a woman of color. Doreen Massey in *For Space* warns against an "identity politics which takes those identities [of woman, person of color] as already, and for ever, constituted, and argues for the rights of, or claims to equality for, those already constituted identities," and instead identifies an anti-essentialist politics which "takes the constitution of the identities themselves and the relations through which they are constructed to be one of the central stakes of the political" (Massey 2005, 10). Therefore I will interrogate not only Janie's role as a woman of color but also the constitution of this role, through the spatialization of the categories which constitute her multiple selves. In this politics of space, not only the identity categories but also the construction of these categories become interrogable, understandable through the framework of intersectionality, itself a spatialized interpretive method. This spatial theoretical framework powerfully demonstrates that "domination and oppression displace African American women from particular places while simultaneously naturalizing them in others" (Mollett 2018, 567). In *Their Eyes*, Janie experiences simultaneous displacement and naturalization because of the forms of power that her husbands exert over her - power that they consciously construct in terms of the space in which it can operate.

My reading of the spatialization of Janie's black womanhood attends to the cultural violence, denigration, and marginalization imposed on black women by American slavery,

Jim Crow, and the physiological effects of the “double consciousness” and physical weathering caused by existence in a discriminatory society. Casting the system of slavery as invested in spatial logics such as the auction block, the hiding place, the field, Katherine McKittrick (2006) demonstrates that “objectified black female sexualities represent the logical outcome of a spatial process [slavery] that is bound up in geographic discourses, such as territory, body/land possession, and public property. Geographic conquest and expansion is extended to the reproductive and sexually available body” (McKittrick 2006, 78). As slavery was defined in geographic-spatial terms related to possession or entrapment, enslaved bodies became conflated with the land that had to be “conquered” or stolen from Native American peoples (Smith 2015, 12) in order to maintain the American economic system. Conquest of geographically “available” land became indistinguishable from the sexual conquest of “available,” possessed, bodies. The enslavement of the sexually available (black female) body also distanced black women from participating in the epistemological processes which defined space, geography, and spatial relations: “Black women have an investment in space, and spatial politics, precisely because they have been relegated to the margins of knowledge and have therefore been *imagined* as outside of the production of space” (McKittrick 2006, 87). In *Their Eyes*, Hurston displays this commitment to space through Janie’s spatialized consciousness of herself as a black woman and the ways in which her narration through free indirect discourse describes both her self-conception and her understanding of the world around her in explicitly spatial terms.

Through the framing narrative that contains the central story of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie tells her friend Phoebe Watson why she returned to Eatonville, constructing the text as a direct extension of Janie herself, rather than a remote account given

by a detached omniscient narrator. This framing device fulfills both a cyclical function, with the first and last chapters on Janie's porch enclosing the larger plot, and a localized one, in that while the events of the novel occur all over Florida, Janie tells the story during one evening on her own back porch, as she narrates it to Phoebe. This specific temporal locality increases the novel's spatial organization, establishing the main story in relation to its telling in one place in time, demonstrating potential transcendence of both space and place.

### **Birthplaces, Marriage: The Roots of Space and Identity in *Their Eyes***

Janie generates one of the novel's central spatial metaphors at the beginning of her narrative: "Mah grandma raised me. Mah grandma and de white folks she worked wid. She had a house out in de back-yard and dat's where Ah wuz born" (Hurston 8). The house where Janie was born is not the central house of the "white folks" who employed her and her grandmother, but a house "out in the backyard," spatially distinct from the white space of power and decentralized within this white space. Janie describes her birthplace in relation to the white folks' house and as inhabiting a particular space, the backyard, marginal in terms of the larger house, through the eyes of the white owners, and possessing a centrality and wholeness of its own, through the eyes of Janie and her grandmother. Like Thornfield's third floor, the backyard represents a double spatiality, a liminality: though attached and peripheral to the white-owned house, the backyard also elides the house itself. Though the word "backyard" implies the existence of a central space with the yard as its extension, Janie leaves that space utterly undescribed, ascribing a wholeness of space to the backyard so that it exists *next to*, but *apart from*, the house. In this way Janie's earliest description of a self-defining space - her birthplace - both centralizes her own space and reinforces the marginality of black women's spaces.

Janie continues to frame her identity in unconventional terms. When she begins her narrative to Phoeby, we learn that “Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone” (Hurston 8). Her conceptualization of her life is both visual, through the tree image, and dimensionally constructed, with “dawn and doom . . . in the branches” (Hurston 8). The metaphor of the pear tree as both regenerative and destructive parallels the spatial liminality that Janie constructed in her centralization of her childhood house. Although the tree also echoes the generational “family tree,” Janie’s use of the “blossoming pear tree in the back-yard” (Hurston 10) to experience a sexual awakening centers the pear tree as a personal, rather than communal, construction. The tree symbolizes Janie’s sexual being: “she saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom . . . So this was marriage!” (Hurston 11) The sexual language introduces Janie’s sexual maturing, which she initially perceives through marriage but embodies in a public kiss with Johnny Taylor, which necessitates Nanny’s intervention into Janie’s burgeoning sexuality. Janie conceptualizes herself *as* the pear tree: “Oh to be a pear tree . . . she had glossy leaves and bursting buds” (Hurston 11). The pear tree as both representative and constitutive of Janie’s identity establishes its metaphoric significance. In the pear tree, Janie creates a new space for herself through her connection to the tree and forms an interrelationality between herself, her life, and the tree that operates outside the constrained indoor spaces she later inhabits.

When Nanny sees Janie’s sexuality in bloom, she tells Janie, “‘Youse got yo’ womanhood on yuh. . . . Ah wants to see you married right away’” (Hurston 12). Nanny regulates Janie’s sexuality through marriage, which institutionalizes sex and procreation, in

an exercise of the “respectability” ethos which arose after the abolition of legal slavery. African American elites saw personal respectability, the public conservation of social hierarchies and etiquettes, as a way to leave behind the debasement caused by slavery, hinging on “a high moral standing and respectable bearing” (Rhodes 203). For women, this meant chastity and reproduction within marriage: “The preservation of black female chastity and purity was of paramount concern among African American elites seeking to escape the trauma and stigma of the sexual exploitation of black women during slavery” (Rhodes 205). Childbearing after the wedding exemplified the respectability politics which relegated sexuality to within marriage. Nanny’s regulation of Janie’s sexuality reflects the era’s need for black women to police their own sexualities or to be policed, subsuming the expansive metaphor of the pear tree into the constraints of Logan Killicks’ house. The policing of Janie’s sexuality has spatial consequences: she moves from outside to inside, from single under the pear tree to married in the kitchen.

Space becomes constitutive of gender when Logan demands of Janie that she help him move a pile of manure in the barn. Janie tells him, ““You don’t need mah help out dere, Logan. Youse in yo’ place and Ah’m in mine” (Hurston 31). Janie’s “place,” the kitchen, is the domestic to Logan’s agricultural; she reinforces the dichotomy of gender roles between house and field, private and public, domicile and polity. For Janie, married to a man she doesn’t care for, her emotional separation from her husband parallels her spatial separation from him: they occupy different spaces in which the other has no business. Logan’s occupation of his “place” - the barn, his sixty acres - precludes Janie’s acceptance into that space, and Janie’s occupation of and labor in the kitchen reinforce the coding of the kitchen as a female, domestic, dependable, and thus invisible space in which women’s labor happens

so normatively that it doesn't appear as labor. The Killicks' racial domestic dichotomy continues the respectability narrative imposed on Janie: When Janie refuses to enter Logan's space, she rejects entrance into the male space of the farm and simultaneously denies Logan entrance into her kitchen space. In conforming to the gendered division of labor which characterized respectability and which most women of color were denied through the economic necessity of working outside the house, Janie shores up her investment in a gendered dichotomy which both constrains her agency and protects her social respectability.

Logan responds to his wife's disobedience by rupturing the spatial role assignment that has defined their relationship, wherein Logan works outside on his sixty acres and Janie remains inside, in the house. However, in Logan's undermining of the *spatial* gender dynamic, he maintains a more insidious form of spatial control: the conflation of space with women themselves. "You ain't got no particular place," he tells her; "it's wherever Ah need yuh" (Hurston 31). In asserting that Janie has no "place" particular to her, that she neither owns nor occupies a space personal to her, Logan subsumes Janie's identity and physical consumption of space into his own needs. His lexical implication correlates with the legal practice of "coverture," whereby women's legal identities became synonymous with their husbands' when they married. Through coverture, women lost all legal rights, including rights to their bodies. American adoption of common law, enshrined in England since the Middle Ages, meant that coverture came to the U.S. legal system, too, although by the late 1800s it began to be eroded by new laws to enhance women's rights to property, especially in widowhood (Zaher 461).

By 1937, when *Their Eyes* was published, coverture was still socially operational. However, in its original purpose, which still informed marriage as a legal and social structure

well into the twentieth century, “her person as well as her personal and real property belonged to her husband” (Zaher 460). In its twentieth-century form, the survival of coverture depended on the new justification of the “separate sphere” doctrine whereby women and men occupied markedly separate spaces and those spaces defined their “spheres” of activity and authority. The creation of these spheres contributed to the perpetuation of coverture as a social practice: “Since [women’s] private sphere was thought to be inferior to the public sphere, they still functioned legally under the cover and protection of their husbands” (Zaher 461). Thus when Logan says that Janie has “no particular place” except where he dictates, he sustains the legal precedent of erasing women’s identities through marriage, echoing Rochester’s legal and physical erasure of Bertha through marriage in *Jane Eyre*. Janie’s adherence to the “separate spheres” increased her respectability; however, Logan’s assumption that Janie herself occupies no “place” and thus can be absorbed into the space that Logan occupies treats Janie as an extension of Logan and thus simply a part of him, the space that he takes up. According to Logan, Janie’s body in terms of labor and her identity in terms of spatial occupation are secondary (in fact, nonexistent or invisible) to his. Janie thus occupies a paradox: she cannot both maintain her social domestic respectability and obey her husband under the law.

### **Interiority, Exteriority: Evolutions in Spatialized Identity**

When Janie leaves Logan, rejecting the social and institutional policing of her sexuality, she does so by leaving the house, the space that contained her. In the same conversation when Logan orders her to help him in the barn, he threatens to come into the kitchen and kill her if she doesn’t obey. She leaves the house and Logan: “Janie hurried out of the front gate and turned south” (Hurstun 32). Her departure *out of* the gate signifies her

departure from Logan and from her marriage; the preposition solidifies the notion of two spaces, her old marriage and her new existence. She goes *out* of the marriage which held the kitchen, enclosure, domestic work inside a house. In becoming exterior to the gate and the house, Janie also leaves the enclosing space of the marriage. Hurston emphasizes the symbolic newness and “space” of Janie’s life in the place of her marriage to recent acquaintance Joe Starks: Green Cove Springs (Hurston 33). The “green” of growing, the association of “spring” with rebirth, and the positive connotation of the verb “springs” associate the place of Green Cove Springs with new seasons and beginnings. The place name implies the space that Janie now occupies in her new role as Joe Starks’s wife *and* as autonomous self-determiner, evidenced in her individual decision to leave her old marriage. “Green Cove Springs” reinforces the localization of Janie’s life and the spatialization of her internal evolution through the association of locality with newness, rebirth.

When Janie and Joe Starks arrive in Eatonville, they take up residence of the town through their occupation of space. As they establish their household, “Joe was on the porch talking to a small group of men. Janie could be seen through the bedroom window getting settled” (Hurston 36). This introduction to the porch as a male communal space, filled and possessed by men, establishes one of the novel’s central metaphors: the space of the porch, where Joe and the men are talking, exists in contrast to inside the house, where Janie occupies the bedroom. The passive syntax of the sentence, where Janie “could be seen,” demonstrates her passive existence there. Rather than hearing directly from Janie, who is ostensibly telling the story, we hear only from the men looking at her. The passive voice emphasizes her passivity in her current environment, while the modal verb indicates a potentially unfulfilled prospect. Janie *could* “be seen” only if the men look at her. Her

existence in the bedroom, the house, and by extension Eatonville becomes coded through male eyes, placing her in the resolutely feminized space of the bedroom. Janie's narrative presentation through men represents the male gaze which objectifies Janie, reducing her to a sexual commodity confined/defined by her environment.

Janie's life in Eatonville is characterized by her occupation of two spaces - Joe's house and Joe's store - and her exclusion from two other spaces - the male-dominated porch and the town community. When Joe tells her that he aims to be "'uh big voice [and] you oughta be glad, 'cause dat makes uh big woman outa you,'" Janie responds with "coldness and fear . . . She felt far away from things and lonely" (Hurston 46). Her farness from "things" - her relationship with her husband, the Eatonville community - increases as Joe rises in the community's "awe and envy" and Janie feels more separated from the community: "She slept with authority and so she was part of it in the town mind. She couldn't get but so close to most of them in spirit" (Hurston 46). Her spatial occupation of Joe's bedroom, implied through the action of sleeping next to Joe's authority, corresponds to the spatialization of her relationship with "the town," the people of Eatonville. We use the word "close" to signify intimacy, but the spatial implications of the term and its negation in Janie's Eatonville relationships reinforce Janie's distance from her husband and the people she lives among. This distance, as Janie occupies a space that is "far away from things and lonely," symbolizes the increasing distance between Janie and autonomy, empowerment, public occupation of space. Joe forces Janie into particular spaces which he owns - the store, the house, the bedroom - increasing Janie's sense of distance and disempowerment. In her inability to relate to people in Eatonville - her emotional distance from them - Janie experiences the side effects of Joe's constraining behavior. The state of her marriage worsens

as Joe *tightens* his control over Janie: the space that Janie can occupy as Joe's wife becomes physically smaller, confined to the house and the store, both extensions of Joe's identity as Mayor and primary businessman of Eatonville.

We see this tightening in Janie's experience of her marriage as Joe treats her with less and less respect. He orders her around in the store and the house, and when Janie calls attention to his highhandedness, he insists that he "thinks for" her for her own good and that neither Janie nor women in general can interpret their surroundings any better than livestock. Joe's treatment of Janie "put Janie to thinking about the inside state of her marriage. Time came when she fought back with her tongue as best she could, but it didn't do her any good" (Hurst 71). Hurst centers the *space* of the marriage as an entity with an inherent "inside," the private relationship that the public of Eatonville doesn't see. In the negation of Janie's voice, metonymized by her tongue, Hurst problematizes the concept of "voice" as the arbiter of autonomy and empowerment: Janie's use of her voice does her no good, failing to protect her from Joe's abuses, operating not as an exercise of free articulation but a counterproductive tactic that "just made Joe do more" (Hurst 71). Through the dimensional description of the "inside state" of Janie's marriage and the rejection of "voice" as inherently liberatory, Hurst demonstrates a spatial politics that take precedence over the traditional voice as the signifier of identity and power.

Janie considers the "inside state" of her deteriorating marriage in spatial-sexual terms: "The spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor. It was there to shake hands whenever company came to visit, but it never went back inside the bedroom again. . . . The bed was no longer a daisy-field for her and Joe to play in.

It was a place where she went and laid down when she was sleepy and tired” (Hurstun 71).

Janie personifies her marriage as inhabiting a public, rather than private, space: from living in the bedroom, a symbol of intimacy and sex, the “spirit” moves into the parlor, where it deals with external “company.” The division also desexualizes their relationship, making the marriage bed a place of fatigue and rest, rather than exertion and action. The final division of public and private space, with Janie’s marriage existing only in the public realm, concludes a pattern of Janie vacillating between the tenuous spaces of public wife, silenced by Joe, and private wife, attempting to take possession of a personal space that Joe denies her. According to the ideology of gendered separate spheres, Janie’s marriage as a public entity belonged to Joe; Janie characterizes the the marriage relationship as defined by and subordinate to the spaces it occupies. The marriage’s interiority, represented by Janie’s repetition of “inside,” “in,” and its enclosure within the house, subsumes the marriage’s “spirit” and makes it sterile.

Janie’s realization of the shifting spatial relations of her marriage continues when she thinks, “She wasn’t petal-open anymore with him” (Hurstun 71). The flower imagery suggests softness, sexuality, and vulnerability and recalls the pear tree from Janie’s first conscious self-definition; the openness suggests a specifically spatial element to her sexual availability. This closure of the openness between petals echoes Nanny’s advice before Janie’s first marriage: “Ah can’t die easy thinkin’ maybe de menfolks white or black is makin’ a spit cup outa you” (Hurstun 20). The metaphor of the “spit cup,” which holds unwanted juices from chewing tobacco, positions Janie as a vessel for men, in the way that

Rochester used Bertha to bring wealth to England. The spit cup and the flower symbolize and spatialize Janie's body as the site of male conquest, possession, to be "filled" by men.

The institutions of American slavery normalized the notion of "the black female body . . . as a naturally submissive, sexually available, public, reproductive technology"

(McKittrick 2006, 44). The submissiveness and availability of the spit cup and flower - inanimate, unconsenting, but receptive - echo the conception of black women as receptive reproductive objects to be "filled" by sperm and babies. This objectification of black female sexuality is a direct byproduct of slavery's logics about black women's bodies, which positioned them as breeders to reproduce the system of slavery (Roberts 22); the image of Janie as flower/spit cup echoes this conflation of the black female body, the black woman, with the "space" which holds and produces children. Physically, the womb or vagina represent the space to be "filled" in the spit cup or the flower; symbolically, however, as Nanny and Janie both imply, that space also represents Janie's self, the space that she occupies inside her body and as a corporal presence in the world. The spit cup signifies male use of space through its relation to chewing tobacco and "filling"; however, the flower's connection to the pear tree emphasize Janie's sense of self defined *by* herself. Although the metaphors of the spit cup and the flower essentialize Janie's identity as female receptacle and reproducer, Janie achieves a liberatory use of space in her growing consciousness.

Her narrative creates this spatialized autonomy: Janie chooses *not* to remain "petal-open" "when [Joe] slapped her face in the kitchen . . . before he stalked on back to the store" (Hurston 72) - specifically spatialized settings of violence and of Joe's escape. After the slap, "she stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there to see what it was. It was her image of Jo[e] tumbled down and shattered" (Hurston 72).

The “shelf inside her” creates a physical space inside Janie’s *body* which symbolizes the intangible space of her *mind*; when she “went inside,” she examines this thought, of Joe’s image retroactively demythologized - “just something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over” (Hurston 72). Janie has to go “inside herself” to realize that Joe did not exist as she had idealized him; rather than examine Joe himself, she turns inside, to the space inside her (her mind) where she suddenly realizes “a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him . . . things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where [Joe] could never find them” (Hurston 72). The shelf, the packing up, the putting away echo the language of Joe’s store. Janie conceptualizes herself through space: the new internal space of her mind conflates Janie’s identity and the store as a place of self-identification, demonstrating her continued dependence on Joe and the logics of Joe’s life. This spatially defined awareness shows both Janie’s progress toward a self-defined autonomy and her continued reliance on androcentric models to conceptualize herself.

However, “she was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them” (Hurston 72). Janie “saves up” her feelings on the “inside” of herself, an inner space that contains and hides her private self. After Joe’s death, “Janie starched and ironed her face and came set in the funeral behind her veil. . . . The funeral was going on outside . . . Inside the expensive black folds were resurrection and life” (Hurston 88). Janie conceptualizes her “inside” and “outside” selves as a more complex dichotomy than private vs. public expression; instead, she creates a spatial awareness of the funeral as outside of herself. She is partitioned from the rest of the world by the mourning veil, while inside the folds of the veil - inside her spatialized conception of self - she experiences rebirth. As she tells Joe before his death, “Mah own

mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me” (Hurston 86). Her metaphor echoes that of the spit cup as Joe’s corporally imagined mind forces her mind out of its own space to fill it himself. Minds here represent not only mental power and selfhood but also physical embodiment; Joe squeezed and crowded Janie’s body during his life through restraints on her mobility, her labor in the unpleasant store. Janie thinks of these restrictions in terms of space and constraint as she metonymizes both her body and identity through the spatialized metaphor of the mind.

Although the “saved up” feelings foreshadow a conventional marriage plot, whereby the narrative concludes with the woman’s marriage to an appropriate man, the novel does *not* conclude when Janie marries Tea Cake. Rather, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis explains, Hurston “writes beyond the ending” (4), continuing Janie’s story past the end of marriage plot’s “ending.” Hurston participates in a specific project of twentieth-century women writers: “to replace the alternate endings in marriage and death that are their cultural legacy from nineteenth-century life and letters by offering a different set of choices” (DuPlessis 4). In *Their Eyes*, Janie faces neither marriage nor death after her first two disastrous marriages, but when she does marry for the last time, over a third of the novel remains. Hurston writes “beyond the ending” in showing the aftermath of Janie’s weddings and describing the nature of her marriages, rather than leaving Janie’s narrative stranded at the altar. In keeping with this project, Janie continually experiences her marriage with Tea Cake through spatial terms: she narrates their meeting and courtship through the spaces of store, house, hammock, and porch that she and Tea Cake share. When she thinks about cementing their relationship, she thinks of it locationally:

“Jacksonville. Tea Cake’s letter had said Jacksonville. . . . The train shuffled on to Jacksonville . . . and there was Tea Cake in the big old station, hauling her off to a preacher’s house first thing. And then right on to the room [where] he had been . . . waiting for her to come” (Hurstons 116).

Jacksonville symbolizes the next stage of Janie’s life and of her relationship with Tea Cake; the repetition of the town’s name emphasizes its importance as a symbol and a space for Janie and Tea Cake to occupy. Janie describes her arrival in Jacksonville in terms of places - the station, the preacher’s house, and Tea Cake’s rented room, describing the progression of her arrival in spatial rather than relational terms. The station is meeting Tea Cake; the preacher’s house is the marriage ceremony; the rented room is the marriage’s consummation and beginning.

In fact, most of Janie’s experience of Jacksonville occurs in a specific space: the rented room. When Tea Cake disappears for a full day and night, Janie’s experience shrinks to the room where she waits for him. When he does, and when he proves his good faith to her, “Janie looked down on him and felt a self-crushing love. So her soul crawled out from its hiding place” (128). The conflict inherent in the sentence - the liberation of her soul while her “self” is crushed by love - gestures to the paradoxical space that Janie occupies at the beginning of her relationship with Tea Cake. Her love for him both liberates her and constrains her: while her soul finds expression in her love, she exercises little autonomy or self-determination in this expression.

While Tea Cake makes the decisions about where they live and what they do, Janie occupies the space that Tea Cake chooses for the two of them, but she does so willingly. When Tea Cake asks if she “aims tuh partake wid everything,” she says: “Yeah, Tea Cake,

don't keer what it is'" (Hurston 124). Janie chooses to partake in Tea Cake's life and locational transience; in fact, she demands to participate. Unlike Logan Killicks and Joe Starks, who force her into spaces they chose, the space that Janie occupies with Tea Cake she *demand*s to occupy, like Jane Eyre with Rochester at Ferndean. On "the muck," in the Florida Everglades where they go to work for the summer, Janie chooses to work beside Tea Cake and she tells him, "'Ah laks [to work]. It's mo' nicer than settin' round dese quarters all day. Clerkin' in dat store wuz hard, but heah, we ain't got nothin' tuh do but do our work and come home and love'" (Hurston 133). Contrasting the store, where Joe forced her to work, and the muck, where she works willingly, Janie establishes the duality of the two spaces. The store was "hard" because she did not love Joe; "here," on the muck, Janie prefers the freedom to spend time in the company of her beloved both at work and at home. Janie's occupation of space has progressed from someone else's space - Logan's farm, Joe's store, Joe's town - to a transient, abstract space, the unbounded expanse of the muck, where she and Tea Cake live together in the same spaces by their mutual choosing.

However, Janie and Tea Cake's relationship is not untroubled. When Mrs. Turner, an acquaintance on the muck, threatens Tea Cake's relationship with Janie by trying to convince Janie to love a "whiter" man, Tea Cake hits Janie to establish his primary control over and possession of her and to show the other men in the working community of the muck "he was boss" (Hurston 147). While Tea Cake intends to show Janie that he is *her* "boss" and dominates her sexuality, he uses physical abuse to show his primacy to the community at large. He tells a friend, Sop-de-Bottom, "'Ah didn't whup Janie 'cause *she* done nothin'. Ah beat her tuh show dem Turners who is boss. ... Ah jus' let her show Ah got control'" (Hurston 148). Tea Cake establishes his physical dominance over Janie to show Mrs. Turner,

who believes Tea Cake is “too black” for Janie, that he exercises power within the muck community and even within American society. Tea Cake’s display of dominance over both Janie and the Turners could stem from his systematic displacement and disenfranchisement in American legal and structural systems as a black man, incarnated in Mrs. Turner’s belief that Tea Cake is “too black” and thus not good enough for Janie, whose features she associates with white beauty standards.

Racial discrimination and victimization created an environment in which Tea Cake’s response to a threat was violence: “A major feature of the experience of African American men has involved coping with the challenges associated with being victimized by institutional arrangements that have been designed to hinder their capacity to achieve political and economic equality with White men” (Hampton 538). Tea Cake is a transient worker, picking beans on the muck, gambling, and moving around, prevented from more secure work and ownership (like Logan Killicks’s sixty acres) by structural impediments and violent racism. His exclusion from dominant ideological middle-class male “success” translates to dissatisfaction and unhappiness, which he expresses in violence not toward the source of his discontent, American racism, nor its immediate manifestation in Mrs. Turner’s comments, but Janie. “As far back as the American slavery era, African American men experienced intense anger, hatred, and frustrations that were sometimes displaced toward wives and lovers” (Hampton 539). Slavery and its structural continuations - chain gangs, land tenancy, Jim Crow - prevented African American men from thriving economically, exacted violence on them, and created an environment of menace and exclusion that instilled a need for a new self-definition to meet demands for masculine selfhood.

The inability to conform to dominant ideals of male success necessitated black men's redefinition of masculinity to align with "manhood ideals within the context of their subordinated status. [Thus] status is conferred on those males who are able to consistently manifest toughness in their interactions with other men and an exploitative orientation toward women with whom they maintain an intimate relationship" (Hampton 541). Tea Cake's beating of Janie confers "status" on himself by the standards of black masculinity created under subordinated conditions: he demonstrates his "toughness" by beating Janie, and later by telling Sop-de-Bottom that he did it even though he didn't want to. He says, "Ah didn't wants whup her last night, but ol' Mis' Turner done sent for her brother tuh come tuh bait Janie in and take her way from me'" (Hurston 148). Tea Cake *did* beat Janie as a form of physical domination, but he didn't want to, reflecting his control over his emotional desires, his toughness. Tea Cake demonstrates his status through controlling Janie's sexuality, resisting Mrs. Turner's attempts to segregate him from Janie, and circulating a narrative that reinforces his emotional strength.

In fact, Tea Cake's toughness is physically inscribed on Janie's body. Sop-de-Bottom expresses envy for Tea Cake's good fortune to have a woman on whom "uh person can see every *place* you hit her" (Hurston 147, emphasis mine). Those "places" on Janie's body - her bruises - show up because of Janie's comparatively pale skin, her "coffee-and-cream complexion" (Hurston 140) which Mrs. Turner values since it differentiates her from the darker-skinned people of color on the muck. "Tea Cake, you sho is a lucky man," Sop-de-Bottom tells him after the beating; "you can't make no mark on [the other black women] at all" (Hurston 147-8). Janie, Tea Cake, and Mrs. Turner live in a race system like colonial Britain's which values whiteness while denigrating dark skin; pale skin, even pale in

comparison to other people's bodies, signifies high value, strong moral standing, in a racialized hierarchy which inscribes moral value on black and white bodies. The marked places on Janie's body become the sign of her racialized bodily "value" and Tea Cake's strength. Janie's sexual availability as a black woman whose skin is light enough to show bruises is demonstrated literally on her body, while Tea Cake's masculinity specifically designed as black maleness shows in her bruises. In the utter absence of Janie's voice or reaction to Tea Cake's abuse, we have only the space of her body and the marks on it to indicate Janie's presence in her own beating. In this sense, Janie's body and the places it occupies and displays become subordinate to cultural institutions which devalue her as a black woman while Tea Cake enacts the demands of black maleness on her body.

Because of her dual love for Tea Cake and abuse by him, Janie occupies "paradoxical spaces" (Rose 138): she occupies several spaces at the same time which intersect in her identity and her body. Loving Tea Cake and allowing herself to be absorbed by him, Janie is both the subject-agent of her actions and subject to Tea Cake's absorption of her mobility. Tea Cake says, "Janie is wherever *Ah* wants tuh be" (Hurston 148), echoing Logan's sentiment that Janie has "no particular place" of her own, but Tea Cake's words have a notable divergence. For Tea Cake and Janie, Janie *does* have a place: next to him. After the flood which destroys the muck and their lives there, Janie and Tea Cake find "a place to sleep. ... No place to live at all. Just sleep" (Hurston 167). In this space, which lacks a locality and a geographic identification, Tea Cake asks whether Janie expected this panic and poverty when she met him. Referring to her time with Logan Killicks and Joe Starks, Janie replies, "Once upon a time, Ah never 'spected nothin', Tea Cake, but bein' dead from the standin' still and tryin' tuh laugh. ... So Ah'm thankful fuh anything we come through

together” (Hurston 167). Janie describes her past expectations in a specifically immobile space - “standing still” - marked by the failed attempt to express happiness - “tryin’ tuh laugh.” She locates her gratitude for Tea Cake in the space that they “come through together,” the storm and their escape from it. Janie’s space-based understanding of her relationship with Tea Cake, from stasis to mobility, reflects her occupation of “paradoxical space” in her ability to accept subordination to Tea Cake because she loves him.

In the courtroom, Janie occupies another paradoxical space. When Tea Cake is bitten by a mad dog and develops a murderous rage, Janie shoots him rather than be shot herself. She is put in jail, then on trial. In her occupation of the courtroom, specifically her “trial chair,” Janie is both subject to the legal system and subject of her own narrative: she wants to show that she killed Tea Cake out of love, not malice, so that the court does not misunderstand her true representation of events and condemn her. In her testimony, “she just sat there and told and when she was through she hushed. ... But she sat on in that trial chair until the lawyer told her she could come down” (Hurston 187-8). Her occupation of the “trial chair” ultimately sways the court in her favor; she is freed. Janie sits both as Tea Cake’s lover and his murderer; her murder of him *because* she loved him appears paradoxical, and the trial chair represents the literal space where this paradox is expressed through Janie’s testimony and her bodily occupation of the legal system. Janie’s need to demonstrate her innocence to the court and her fear of being misunderstood displays her dual role as subject of her narrative and subject to legal institutions which could condemn her; this contradictory subject position reflects Janie’s occupation of a paradoxical space in which she both maintains her agency but fears for its demise.

After the trial, Janie returns to Eatonville. The decision might seem odd in light of the constraint of her life there with Joe, but when the novel reaches (and returns to) Janie's porch, the place that structured the novel's framing narrative mechanism, Janie tells her friend Phoeby:

“Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now Ah kin set heah in mah house and live by comparisons. Dis house ain't so absent of things lak it used tuh be befo' Tea Cake come along. It's full uh thoughts, 'specially dat bedroom'” (Hurston 191).

Janie considers Eatonville her home despite the disdain she has met there and the constriction of her time with Joe Starks. In her metaphor of the horizon, she demonstrates the spatialization of her conception of the world; although she has not traveled exceptionally far locationally from Eatonville nor her grandmother's house, she has been “to the horizon” - to the edge of human experience and now she has returned to sit in her own house. Janie inherited the house from Joe and now owns it outright; that ownership changes the nature of the space and her occupation of it. In her own description of that space to which she has returned, she conflates the house with her own mind. Although she claims that more “things” now occupy the previously empty (absent) space, she clarifies in the next sentence that these “things” are thoughts - memories. Janie herself possesses these memories, not the house, yet she endows the space with her own lived experiences, thus creating a dual space - her mind as the house - which works to unite Janie *with* her space, integrating her occupation of the house with her spatial self.

This integration of self with space completes Janie's journey through the world and herself. Earlier, she regrets the failure of “her great journey to the horizons in search of *people*” (Hurston 89); now, having been and returned, Janie tells Phoeby, “you got tuh go

there tuh *know* there” (Hurston 192; original emphasis). The geographic sense of “there,” the motif of the horizon, and Janie’s assertion of her own knowledge about life and other people complete the spatial metaphor of self, incorporating Janie’s spatial conceptualization of the world into her spatially defined self. Rather than a paradoxical space, Janie comes to occupy a space wholly her own - “her room” (Hurston 192), a room *of her own* - and to constitute that space on her own terms: “She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder” (193). The horizon, the net, and the “waist of the world” (the equator) all unite through their meeting in Janie’s body - the draping over her shoulder. These multiple spaces - the horizon, the globe, a fish-net, a body - combine to reinforce Janie’s experience and her spatially defined knowledge. As a producer of knowledge and space, Janie creates a personal self through the understanding of bodily space, mental space, and external space as both co-constitutive of and ultimately subject to Janie’s own autonomous action.

### **The Significance of Space in *Their Eyes***

It’s tempting to read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a liberatory feminist novel untrammelled by patriarchal thought and white supremacist rhetoric. However, this would be to overlook the novel’s internal paradoxes. Hurston often objectifies Janie’s body or elides her voice, especially in the scenes of the beating and the trial. Janie may not be fully free as an individual, even after the court “frees” her, but she exercises “constrained agency” (Herndl 133), marking an important ambivalence in the novel. Crucially, “agency is a diffuse and shifting social location in time and space ... at the intersection of agentive opportunities and the regulatory power of authority” (Herndl 133). Janie’s experience of agency as a shifting *location* continues the spatialization of her subject position in which she both

exercises agency and is subject to authority, as in the courtroom where she speaks for herself because she is forced to defend herself to the regulatory institution of the law. As a “multiply situated subject” (Herndl 146), Janie occupies a paradoxical space of constrained agency. The mix of theories allows us to read her agencies as spatially situated, her spaces as both constrained and agentic.

This combination reads clearly in the last line of the novel: “She called *in her soul* to come and see” (Hurston 193, emphasis mine). The spatial preposition, *in*, creates a multiple meaning: Janie could be calling “*in*” her soul from the outside, or she could be calling from *with-in* her soul, but either way she means her soul to “come and see.” The syntax works with either prepositional reading. Janie both calls her soul to the inside (of the bedroom, of herself) and calls from within her soul: through her use of space as both internal and external, constitutive of the self and constituted by Janie’s conception of her self, Zora Neale Hurston creates a spatialization of black woman’s experience, self-knowledge, and perception. We might call this composite of spaces “standpoint.” Patricia Hill Collins describes standpoint as the production of knowledge “with reference to a particular set of historical, material, and epistemological conditions,” expressed in “Black women’s sense of our own experiences” (1990, 200). As an arbiter of her own experiences and thereby an agent of knowledge, Janie produces an understanding of the world’s myriad spaces and of her occupation of them through the spatialization of her self and knowledge about herself. Her standpoint, then, is that of a black woman, as she understands herself; she occupies space in the production of knowledge, in the processing of her own experience, and in the recognition of her own autonomous identity. Janie harnesses space not just as restriction but as liberation.

## Chapter Three

### Chalice: The Symbolics of the Spatial Body in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Where *Jane Eyre* and *Their Eyes* replicate specific historical periods, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986) takes place in an imagined country after the takeover of the U.S. by a theocratic dictatorship, Gilead. This regime and its use of bodies constitute the central subject of Margaret Atwood's novel. In Gilead, religious fundamentalists run the government, ordering society according to their ideas of divine law. There is no Congress, no Constitution, or United States; instead, the eastern U.S. has become Gilead, the Biblical term for a cure for sin (Jeremiah 8:22). Women are forbidden to read or write. All women fill prescribed roles: wife, handmaid, servant, or Unwoman. Since most women can no longer become pregnant due to environmental toxins, women with healthy ovaries are forced into service as handmaids, surrogate carriers, for the Commanders, powerful men in Gilead's political regime. These women are known by patronymics, "Of-Fred, Of-Glen, Of-Warren," marking them as male property. These women exist under the control of the new state, Gilead. Our contact with Gilead comes through the narration of a handmaid, Offred, otherwise unnamed. The handmaid role originates in the Bible: when Rachel found herself unable to conceive, she told her husband Jacob to go to her handmaid, Bilhah, so that Rachel could take on Bilhah's child with Jacob as her own (Genesis 29:29). Gilead stratifies its reproduction through the privileging of the Commanders' wives in its surrogate mother paradigm, wherein the handmaids are not considered "mothers" even in name: the mothers of the children they bear are socially and legally their Commander's wives.

The novel centers on the daily life of one handmaid, Offred, who lives with Commander Waterford and his wife Serena. Offred tried to flee the U.S. with her husband and daughter before Gilead took over the government, but they were caught before the Canadian border and separated from each other. Offred's narration is not chronological, including flashbacks to "the time before" in her narrative of her life in Gilead. There, she has almost nothing to do: she buys groceries with her designated shopping partner, lives in the Commander's house in what used to be Cambridge, and, every month, is subjected to "the Ceremony," when the Commander tries to impregnate her as a surrogate for his own wife. When the Commander attempts to initiate a romantic relationship with her, including playing Scrabble and reading old magazines (both illegal for women as well as men), Offred must comply, despite Gilead's rules against it. More consensually, she begins a relationship with Nick, the Commander's chauffeur, and joins an underground resistance movement of handmaids. When she is ultimately taken away from the Commander's house in one of Gilead's governmental vans, the novel leaves Offred's fate unclear. Its afterword, set two hundred years after Offred's narrative, specifies that her text was recorded onto a set of tapes found in a New England farmhouse, implying that she might have spent time there on her way out of Gilead. But Atwood left Offred's fate up for decades of negotiation.

Gilead has been read as an intensified version of patriarchy based in a fundamentalist religious oligarchy (Tenbus 2011). Although its legal, political, and social structures have roots in the Old Testament, such as the parable of Rachel and Bilhah, Gilead combines doctrines from multiple ideologies to support its aims. Its rhetoric of fundamentalist Judeo-Christian religion naturalizes its totalitarian rule reminiscent of "(Stalinist) communism and Nazism" (Christou 2016, 412). As Christou points out, the handmaids'

connection to Stalinist communism manifests in their forced wearing of red, their function as *laborers*, their indoctrination at the “Red Center,” and their repetition of the phrase “‘From each ... according to her ability; to each according to his needs,’ which, they are told, comes from the Bible but is in fact an altered version of a sentence taken from Marx” (Christou 2016, 412). This appropriation of both Marx *and* the Bible reflects Gilead’s institutionalization of control through its consolidation of power across religious, economic, and political structures, constructing a pastiche ideology out of multiple misinterpreted sources. Of course, in Gilead, neither the Bible nor anything by Marx is actually available to be read; books are forbidden. Gilead’s imputations of its laws to the Bible require highly selective biblical readings, while its justifications for its cultural regime often hinge on wholly inaccurate particulars. Gilead bases its national power on its own interpretative power.

Furthermore, Gilead’s dependence on historically institutionalized discourses demonstrates its appropriation of the lexical and symbolic orders to confirm and consolidate its own regime. As Atwood demonstrates through Gilead’s ideological linkage of theocracy and secular authoritarianism, “the horrors of Gilead do not necessarily or exclusively emanate from its interpretation of the Bible; what is more important, it is implied, is what is presented as the Bible, even if it is not” (Christou 2016, 412). Gilead rewrites the cultural lexicon through the revision of words, changing the meaning of “mother” - handmaids are not mothers, even though they bear children; Commanders’ wives are mothers, even if they never have children - and reinscribing Gileadean power through its own symbolic order which depends on misconstructions of now-forbidden texts. Gilead, then, operates like any society we have known through its dependence on its “regime of truth,” though it may differ

in its enforcement of this regime. In its appropriation of the Bible, misattribution of non-biblical sources to reinforce its power paradigm, and appropriation and re-interpretation of the symbolic and lexical order, Gilead enforces “the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true” (Foucault 1975, 131). Gilead’s discourse hinges on the reproductive economy codified in the function of the handmaids, whose bodies constitute the spaces of reproduction, violation, and nation itself. In its encoding of space through the body of the handmaid, *The Handmaid’s Tale* creates a discourse of space and the body that illustrates the power dynamics of Gilead’s gender regime.

### **The White Body**

Although the novel does not acknowledge that Gilead’s reproductive politics replicate global histories of oppression of women of color, the handmaids’ forced reproduction and separation from their children, as well as the biblical justifications for the violence enacted on their bodies, originate in the historical abuse of women of color. Implicit in the narrative logics of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, as well as Gilead itself, is white supremacy. The novel mentions people of color specifically only once, in a throwaway reference to the “Children of Ham” being forcibly “resettled” in North Dakota. The Children of Ham has been used as a moniker to signify people of color based on Genesis 9 of the Bible, when Noah curses his son Ham’s descendants with servitude - “Cursed be Canaan [Ham’s son]; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren” (Genesis 9:25). Despite the parable’s failure to clearly explain Ham’s transgression or Noah’s curse on Ham’s descendants, rather than Ham himself, the curse of servitude has been used to interpret Ham and his descendants as racially coded, a reading codified in the fifteenth century as a justification for racial hierarchy (Haynes 2007, 5).

As Europeans began the systematic enslavement of people of color, they searched for biblical rationales to make the relatively recently established racial hierarchy legible (Haynes 2005, 7). We know, then, that the moniker “Children of Ham” refers to people of color, and that Offred and the populace of Gilead do not suffer forcible resettlement because of their race - meaning that Offred and those around her are white. No one in the novel is described with explicit racial identifiers; in a Western literary tradition wherein the template for the body is the white body, this lack of identification stands in for whiteness, with whiteness signifying the ostensibly blank “racial standard” (Bloodsworth-Lugo 2007, 47). This erasure of actual people of color in *The Handmaid’s Tale* means that white readers are asked to apply the historic suffering of people of color to *themselves*, instead of the people these histories of oppression actually oppressed. Through the displacement of the Children of Ham, “Gilead obligingly moves black people away so the novel can present black people’s experiences without black characters” (Berlatsky 2017). The bodies in *The Handmaid’s Tale* are implicitly white bodies; the valued women are white women.

This privileging within the novel itself replicates standard forms of historical racism, encouraging white audiences to sympathize only with white characters, while dismissing or displacing the harm inflicted on people of color. This displacement manifests clearly in Gilead’s reproductive economy, which privileges *white* women’s childbearing. Both Gilead and the logics of the novel itself employ a form of stratified reproduction, which “validat[es] the reproductive futures of those with status (e.g., white women) while diminishing those of others” (O’Leary 2017, 312). In its stratification of reproduction through its use of white handmaids, Gilead continues its construction of itself *as* a nation through its “use of women’s

bodies to define nationhood” (O’Leary 2017, 311) according to Gilead’s evaluation of reproductive “quality.” In the following analysis of *The Handmaid’s Tale*’s bodies, it must be kept in mind that the novel appropriates the histories of violence against women of color in order to reinscribe the supremacy of white bodies in our cultural order.

### **The Body of Gilead**

Offred narrates her surroundings through particularly bodily metaphors: she walks “the gravel path that divides the back lawn, neatly, like a hair parting”; this lawn shows “worms, evidence of the fertility of the soil, caught by the sun, half dead; flexible and pink, like lips” (Atwood 17). The lawn fits into the bodily schema of a head, creating an understanding of the body as coded on the space, or the space of the lawn coded on the body, through the continuous metaphor of the head, its hair and lips. The area where Offred lives, what used to be Boston and its suburbs, is “the heart of Gilead” (Atwood 23), continuing the construction of Gilead itself *as* a body, a logic which simultaneously creates an understanding of the body as the spaces created and regulated by Gilead. As Aunt Lydia, the primary agent of Gilead’s indoctrination, told the handmaids, “The Republic of Gilead ... knows no bounds. Gilead is within you” (Atwood 23). Gilead exists *as* a body, both in its political imaginary of nation and its embodied physical reality. Recalling Anne McClintock’s theory of the nation as the macrocosm of the heteronormatively embodied family, as in *Jane Eyre*’s white British nation-family, Gilead operates through distinctly familial rhetorics. Here, if anywhere, women are the symbolic carriers of nation, the supporters of the national “family of man,” which passes literally through their bodies in their reproduction for Gilead (McClintock 1993, 63). However, this metaphor is impossible to maintain when women whose childbearing is encouraged are infertile, necessitating the use of handmaids to uphold

this construction of the nation. The domestic spaces that Offred both occupies and represents as a direct reproducer of nationhood correlate with the ideology of the body of Gilead: Gilead is both imagined as a body and reproduced through the handmaids' bodies, naturalizing Gilead's power through its theoretical and physical "embodiment" in physical space and the reproductive space that the handmaids represent.

As part of its appropriation of the lexical and symbolic orders, Gilead replaces conventional greetings with overtly religious sobriquets dealing explicitly with the symbolism of the body. When meeting in Gilead, citizens say, "Blessed be the fruit;" the standard response is "May the lord open" (Atwood 19). The rhetoric of divine opening reflects the Old Testament's language in describing God's action of granting Leah children: "he opened her womb" (Genesis 29:31). These greetings reflect the symbolism of Gilead's reproductive economy, the valuation of women's bodies through their reproductive capacity; "fruit" echoes biblical and Gileadean rhetorics of "fruitfulness," while the reference to "opening" explicitly invokes symbolic association with the womb and the perception of divine will as a primary justification of Gilead's reproductive policy. Gilead constantly reinforces its social and political focus on reproduction and childbearing through the repetition of phrases which centralize the body as space to be "opened" and filled with children. The fact that these phrases are required emphasizes Gilead's control of the symbolic order *through* its lexicon, the enforcement of power through language coded on the body.

Gilead articulates its own power through a metaphor of the body: its secret police and surveillance corps is called the "Eyes," spies who live among the citizens to surveil and report on their behavior. Anyone can be an Eye; their identities are secret. This sense of an internal but separate component, like a body part that operates within the body but can strike

against those it deems deviant, underlines the omnipresent fear and insecurity that uphold Gilead's power. The Eyes are a pseudo-natural part of Gilead's society, naturalized through their naming as a physical, bodily reality with a specific function, evoking the surveillance mode of power. The permitted form of leavetaking in Gilead is "Under His eye" (Atwood 45), reinforcing Gilead's desire that its citizens feel they are constantly under surveillance not only political but divine. The Eyes enforce Gilead's discipline; if you are seen doing something wrong, you will be disciplined, and you are seen all the time, by a hidden Eye. This surveillance evokes the possibility of the Eyes' discipline, which they mete out for any reason: one woman is shot in the street, "fumbling in her robe, for her pass, and they thought she was hunting for a bomb. They thought she was a man in disguise" (Atwood 20). Gilead's enforced surveillance depends on "a system of permanent registration" (196), replicated in Gilead through its regulation of everyone's "papers" - passes, shopping tokens, identifying documents which both locate citizens as Gileadean and reinscribe Gilead's power over them. Furthermore, the idea that a man in disguise represents an enemy of the state equivalent to a bomb, deserving of automatic execution, reflects Gilead's heteronormative gender regime wherein gender transgression and sexual transgression are conflated. (Those convicted of homosexual behavior are called "Gender Traitors" (Atwood 248), meaning that they have transgressed their prescribed gender role through their "treachery" to heterosexuality.)

The violence inflicted by the Eyes ostensibly functions to maintain the "national family," coded and compelled as heterosexual, and this violence on individual bodies to maintain the national body engenders "docile bodies" meant to conform to their imposed purpose within the nation (Foucault 1975, 138). This docility is a function of Gilead's

discipline, which “dissociates power from the body [to] turn it into an ‘aptitude,’ a ‘capacity,’ which it seeks to increase ... it reverses the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection” (Foucault 1975, 138). The handmaids’ bodies are docile in every sense: because the handmaids want to escape the violence of the Eyes, they must behave according to Gilead’s prescriptive rules; the handmaids’ bodies are transformed into reproductive vessels, as they are subjected to ritual rape to turn their bodily function, their “labor power,” into an extension of Gilead’s national power. Furthermore, the unknowableness of the Eyes means that handmaids must behave as though they’re watched, even when they’re not, internalizing Gilead’s disciplinary regime: this “conscious and permanent visibility [keeps] power ... visible and unverifiable,” so that one “must never know *whether* he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he *may always* be so,” an internalization of disciplinary surveillance which “assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 1975, 201). As Sandra Bartky notes, women experience this inscription of docility in particular ways, reflecting the “disciplinary practices that produce a body which in gesture and appearance is recognizably feminine” (1998, 313). Handmaids must wear red, keep their eyes down, arrange their bodies according to Gilead’s expectation of women. The handmaids become docile through the disciplinary surveillance enacted on their bodies.

Handmaids react to the disciplinary presence of the Eyes by accepting the regulation of their own bodies: they walk outside their houses only in pairs, they report their menstruation to their Commanders, they wear the winged bonnets which restrict both what they can see and who can see them, and most appallingly, they have to submit to the

Ceremony, the monthly ritual during their ovulation when their Commanders rape them as a substitute for their own wives in repeated attempts to conceive children. As Susan Bordo has pointed out, women's bodies represent both "a *text* of culture ... [and] a *practical*, direct locus of social control" (1993, 459). The handmaids' bodies are disciplined through their repeated rapes, their physical punishments in case of disobedience, their clothes, their constrained mobility, even their language. Handmaids aren't supposed to talk (at all, really), especially not to their Commanders or their wives, for whom the handmaids' value resides *only* in the body and its capacity to reproduce. Through their performance as "good" handmaids, behaving only within the confines of their embodied reproductive role, handmaids become conflated with their bodies, as though they don't exist apart from their bodies, the source of their labor. In Gilead, their bodies solely define them; "female subjectivity is constituted ... in and through the disciplinary practices which that construct the feminine body" (Bartky 1993, 316). Gilead's disciplinary practices disallow women's subjectivity by basing a "good" handmaid's body on her ability to conceive while associating the maternity of pregnancy with the Commander's wife, reinforcing the stratification of Gilead's reproductive context. Handmaids' subjectivity within Gilead is their objectification: the discipline embodied in the Eyes produces the handmaids as an extension of Gilead's national body, not even the possessors of their own bodies but simply their inhabitants, constantly reappropriated by Gilead.

The handmaids receive tattoos on their ankles, four numbers and an eye (like the Eyes of the secret police). Offred calls this "a cattle brand. It means ownership" (Atwood 254). Offred and the handmaids are owned by the state, part of the national body. The tattoos are

meant to ensure that the handmaids will never escape their roles as handmaids; the permanence of the tattoo prevents them from running away. Offred knows that “I am too important, too scarce,” to leave Gilead, and she defines her value to Gilead as an object: “I am a national resource” (Atwood 65). Her body exists in relation to Gilead, part of its “resources” like crops or fuel. Therefore the space of Offred’s body symbolizes the space of the nation, the national family embodied in the heteronormative family unit. Gilead uses women’s bodies as resources, forcing them to occupy their own bodies as objects, in service of the state. This pseudo-communal principle reflects Gilead’s interest in the Marxist doctrine of governmental control of all resources and production through alienating workers from their own production power. Gilead’s control of re-production conflates the handmaid’s bodies, the “resource,” with Gilead itself, the owner and extractor of its resources, “alienating” the handmaids from their own bodies, the source of their “labor” power (Mészáros 2006, 96). Through its conflation of the body with nation, Gilead itself becomes coded *as* a body, the incarnation of the “body politic.” Gilead uses these logics of resource and production to sustain its regulation of the symbolic order which mandates the use of women’s bodies for state ends.

### **Violence and the Body**

Offred’s first-person narration maintains and reflects the covert violence of Gilead’s regime. Though the state mandates violence both against its real or perceived enemies and on the handmaids’ bodies, Gilead’s regime nevertheless depends not only on visible violence but on the *threat* of violence, the sense of violence veiled but constantly present. Offred narrates in present tense interspersed with vivid past-tense flashbacks, so that even

apparently innocuous references catalyze her memories of pain, particularly the torture inflicted on the handmaids during their indoctrination at Gilead's Red Center (a repurposed school). Offred elides even these tortures in her narration, describing the place they occur in her characteristic evocative but ambiguous language - "the Science Lab[, ] a room where none of us ever went willingly," as well as their effect - "her feet did not look like feet at all ... they looked like lungs" (Atwood 91). Though we never know quite what happens to people in Gilead, part of Gilead's power lies in these indefinable, invisible brutalities; when you don't know what bad things could happen, anything could. Gilead expresses its power both through literal violence and the threat of violence inherent to a constantly surveilled society. Like her elision of the specifics of violence, Offred rarely describes handmaids' bodies, including her own, except through metaphor and allegorical imagery; both Gilead's violence and the bodies which receive its violence are concealed through the stylistics of Offred's narrative.

Offred encodes the body through her use of space and awareness of violence; the reader's first experience of Gilead introduces Offred's occupation and interpretation of spaces within Gilead according to a bodily logic and language. The novel begins with Offred's description of the gymnasium where, we learn later, women slept during their initiation into Gilead's conventions and ideologies. By the novel's third page, we are in Gilead proper, which we learn through Offred's surroundings which take on particular meaning through her narration. Offred maps the contours of the room where she sleeps through its trappings - "a chair, a table, a lamp ... They've removed anything you could tie a rope to" (Atwood 7). Already, even before Offred has explained Gilead, her description of

her spatial environment trips up the reader with language that hints at underlying violence. This violence becomes more explicit in the logos of the body: The ceiling of the room where Offred sleeps has “a blank space, plastered over, like the place in a face where the eye has been taken out. There must have been a chandelier, once” (Atwood 7). The muted violence in the sentence signals this pattern of covert, omnipresent violence, always under the surface, never wholly invisible or avoidable. Gilead’s power is enacted on the body through the symbolic removal of eyes in *women’s* spaces, eliciting Gilead’s spatialized removal of women’s bodily agency.

The novel’s early narrative revolves around Offred’s thoughts, though “there’s a lot that doesn’t bear thinking about. Thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to last” (Atwood 8). These unexplained, vaguely threatening interjections convey a sense of dread to the reader, an undercurrent of something terrible, heightened by the specific physical violence laid out in the metaphor of the ceiling and the missing eye. (As Offred discovers later, the bedroom’s ceiling chandelier was removed when Offred’s predecessor hung herself from it.) The mapping of the body onto Gilead’s spaces contributes to the construction of space through the body. Women’s bodies have traditionally been constructed *as* spaces, as Luce Irigaray pointed out; phallogentric medical and cultural ideology has positioned the vagina in particular as a “hole-envelope, a sheath which surrounds and rubs the penis” (Irigaray 1977, 384). Irigaray’s analysis of women’s bodies as space for men posits this space as inherently violent, wherein heterosexual sex involves a “violent intrusion: the brutal spreading of [the labia’s] lips by a violating penis” (1977, 384). The handmaids experience this violation during the Ceremony, an act of ritual rape, but Offred never narrates the

Ceremony's physically specific details, sustaining the sense of veiled violence imposed by a disciplinary society. Increasing the novel's implication of bodily violence, Offred knows that her room contains no breakable glass because "it isn't running away they're afraid of. We wouldn't get far. It's those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge" (Atwood 8). The image of opening up escapes "in yourself" using a sharp edge invokes an image of specific physical violence, absconding from "them" through cutting the body, the spatial prospect of escape enabled through the body as a space of violence.

### **Textual Violence**

The rhetoric of the *Tale* contributes to the textual violence performed on the handmaids: women in Gilead cannot legally read or write, a mechanism to strip them of their internal individuality and transform their minds, like their bodies, into tools of Gilead. Their bodies' reproductive capacity becomes a "national resource" (Atwood 65). Through indoctrination and the infliction of physical violence, the handmaids become legible in Gilead's reproductive economy: through their coercion or compulsion into the handmaid role, they become synonymous with their bodies, or rather, their uteruses come to metonymize them. This violence is textual as well as physical. In making the handmaids legible to Gilead, the state *reads* their bodies only in terms of their reproductive potential and enforces this reading through women's "re-education" into the role of the handmaid, rewriting their identities, making them legible as handmaids to Gilead's social order. Gilead reinforces this textual violence through forbidding women from literacy, from the revision or reinterpretation of language, since Gilead has appropriated the lexical as well as the symbolic order for its own ends. Women's bodies no longer signify *women's* bodies; they are Gilead's

bodies, the resources that Gilead needs to reproduce itself, and Gilead enforces this inherently brutal appropriation of the body through sexual and textual violence.

Almost from the beginning Offred is clear that her function in Gilead depends on her body. Handmaids in Gilead wear red: “everything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us” (Atwood 8). The “educational” facility where women receive handmaid training and education into Gilead’s ideology is called the Red Center; the Birthmobile that takes handmaid women to the houses of women in labor is a red van. Wives of Commanders wear blue; Marthas, the women who work in the kitchens, wear green. Describing the poorer women whose “striped dresses, red and blue and green and cheap and skimpy” mark the Econowives, the wives of poorer men, Offred reports that the undifferentiated dresses of these women show that “these women are not divided into functions” (Atwood 24) because they perform all domestic functions for their husbands. The difference between the Econowives and other women demonstrates both Gilead’s method of using clothing to performatively code bodily function and Offred’s awareness of her own “function” embodied in her blood-colored garb. Offred says of the handmaids’ red dresses, “Some people call them *habits*, a good word for them. Habits are hard to break” (Atwood 24). These particular habits are hard to break because the handmaids’ clothes reflect the coding of power on their bodies, their inability to exist outside their prescribed function. Gilead’s regime which regulates reproductive gender also mandates their function as handmaids. Clothes, like the handmaids’ tattoos, confer the body’s legibility under an ideology which requires that each body demonstrate and perform its function according to the central power: Gilead.

To enforce their legibility under Gilead's regime, women's clothes simultaneously hide their bodies and reveal their social function: sleeves down to the wrist, necklines up to the throat, hems to the ground, in a color which symbolizes their function. When Offred encounters a group of Japanese tourists on her mandatory weekly shopping trip with her shopping partner, Ofglen, these women seem to her "nearly naked in their thin stockings, blatant ... undressed" (Atwood 28). Her reaction reflects Gilead's regulation and subordination of women's bodies, expressed in their mandated clothing, which suppresses women's personal identities, sexualities, choices. Offred knows that her reaction has been created through her surroundings; she thinks, "It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this" (Atwood 28). The normally intransitive verb "to change" here takes on the valence of a transitive verb, implying that something other than Offred and Ofglen has acted on them to "change their minds," something outside their own independent cognitive process. Their red habits mark them as sexual and reproductive objects for men's possession while simultaneously concealing their bodies from intrusive gazing, where the stylization of the handmaids' bodies through their clothes makes them visually available but physically reserved for their Commanders. Gilead's power affects Offred's reading of other bodies, interpreting less modest clothing as nakedness tinged with moral opprobrium - "blatant," "repelled."

But Offred resists Gilead's symbolics to remember "I used to dress like that. That was freedom." In this memory and interpretation, clothes then take on a new significance, connoting freedom, personal autonomy; when Offred thinks about laundromats, she remembers "what I wore to them: shorts, jeans, jogging pants. What I put into them: my own

clothes ... I think about having such control” (Atwood 28). Gilead erodes women’s sense of individual control through the imposition of their reproductive function expressed in their undifferentiated clothes, which Gilead’s spokesperson Aunt Lydia says represent “freedom from.” Now, in Gilead, as handmaids “walk along the same street, in red pairs ... no man shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, touches us” (Atwood 24). Rather than freedom *to* control their clothes and lives, women in Gilead are given Gilead’s version of protection, “freedom” *from* street harassment without freedom to choose their own clothes. Women’s compulsory social function becomes coded on their bodies as their prescribed reproductive role, performed through their clothes.

### **Space and the Subjected Body**

Offred’s function is to produce children; therefore, she occupies a particular intersection of Gilead’s power, both restrained and protected. Offred is forbidden from everything we think of as fundamental to freedom: reading, writing, owning property or anything else, leaving the house except for approved expeditions. However, because of her prized ability to become pregnant, she is also relatively protected as a handmaid in a powerful house, out of immediate danger. By Gilead’s standards, Offred is privileged to suffer no worse than ritual rape, rather than execution or banishment to the Colonies. Because of her body’s usefulness to Gilead, she is both confined and protected. Offred articulates her awareness of this uncomfortable ambiguity through her spatial awareness of her bedroom in the Commander’s house, though she tries not to call it “her” room:

“This could be a college guest room ... or a room in a rooming house, of former times, for ladies in reduced circumstances. That is what we are now. The circumstances have been reduced; for those of us who still have circumstances. But a chair, sunlight, flowers: these are not to be dismissed. I am alive, I live, I breathe ...

Where I am is not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt Lydia said, who was in love with either/or” (Atwood 8).

Offred roots her understanding of her circumstances in a spatial metaphor: the physical space of her bedroom represents her “circumstances,” her relegation to the private sphere and immobilization by Gilead’s limits on her movement, which have been “reduced” to the small space of her room and her enforced responsibilities to Gilead. Offred’s articulation of her circumstances depends on space, too; she considers “where I am,” rather than *what* she is or *how* she functions. While Aunt Lydia, the handmaids’ handler and trainer, dichotomized prison and privilege, Offred uses the hyperbole “in love with either/or” to demonstrate her own disavowal of this binary and claim her occupation of ambivalence, her acknowledgement of her imprisonment within Gilead and her privilege to be living at all. Once again, Offred couches Gilead’s violence in euphemism, playing on the old-fashioned term “reduced circumstances” to imply death and violence, loss of “circumstances” standing in for loss of life and limb.

As the novel progresses, Offred loses some of her euphemistic tone. She also begins to describe her function as a handmaid more thoroughly, using more specific and evocative language. However, until she describes the Ceremony, the monthly ritual when her Commander attempts to make Offred pregnant as a surrogate for his own wife, she only hints at her real function in Gilead. The clues are obvious - her careful tracking of her menstruation, the doctor’s visit to check her ovulation where he offers to impregnate her - but Offred (and Atwood) is careful to provide only clues, maintaining the sense of veiled but omnipresent threat inherent in surveillance society - visible but unverifiable. In this

atmosphere of covert threat, Offred's body takes on physical and imaginative significance.

Bathing, she thinks,

“My body seems outdated. Did I really wear bathing suits, at the beach? I did, without thought, among men, without caring that my legs, my arms, my thighs and back were on display, could be seen. *Shameful, immodest*. I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely” (Atwood 63).

Offred's body appears “outdated” to her partly because she rarely sees it herself, bound in her red dresses, and partly because her experience of her body inside Gilead differs from her experience of her body before Gilead. She has remembered Aunt Lydia telling the handmaids-to-be that “to be *seen* - is to be - her voice trembled - penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable” (Atwood 28). The rhetoric of penetration invokes Gilead's horror of the male gaze, Laura Mulvey's 1975 theory of men looking at women, where “in their traditional exhibitionistic role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact” (Mulvey 1975, 837). In Mulvey's analysis, the male gaze *does* inflict a phallogentric fantasy on the body of the woman; in Gilead, however, escape from this gaze means concealment of the body, conflation of the body with reproduction without sex. Through Gilead's logic, then, Offred's body seen on a public beach meant the violation of her body, signified in the physical metaphor of penetration, implying a transgression of her body's physical boundaries into the “impenetrable” space of her body. Of course, this bodily violation more specifically manifests in the ritual sex enforced on the handmaids by Gilead's powerful men. Offred's dissociation from her body as “something that determines me so completely” reflects her

knowledge of her body as a function of reproduction, her whole self subsumed and metonymized by her reproductive capacity.

As Offred emphasizes the all-encompassing value of the body for its reproductive capacity, she intensifies her narration of her own body. Still in the bath, “I sink down into my body as into a swamp, a fenland, where only I know the footing. Treacherous ground, my own territory” (Atwood 73). Imagining her body as a specific place - swamp, fenland - Offred treats her body as simultaneously her own and not her own, “treacherous,” since despite her inhabitation of her own body she understands the logics of Gilead which make her body a “national resource,” possessed by Gilead’s national power. Her imagination of her body’s “treachery” centers on her present failure to be pregnant: “Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own” (Atwood 73). Menstrual blood, the bodily demonstration that she is not pregnant, signifies failure in the Gileadean reproductive economy, where only childbearing means success for women. Even within her own body, Offred cannot escape this economy since her body itself symbolizes and sustains this reproductive economy, internalizing Gilead’s expectations.

Offred imagines her body both as a participant in and subject to Gilead’s reproductive economy. Her sense of her body has changed: “I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will” (Atwood 73). Echoing her earlier musings on clothing and control, Offred thinks of her body in the temporal space of the past as part of her autonomy, a component in her control of her surroundings and her own bodily experiences. Now, her reading of her “outdated” body

entails the freedom to accomplish her will through the free use of her body. In Gilead, though,

“the flesh arranges itself differently. I’m a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more red than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping. Inside it is a space, huge as the sky at night ... Every month there is a moon, gigantic, round, heavy, an omen. It transits, pauses, continues on and passes out of sight, and I see despair coming towards me like famine. To feel that empty, again, again” (Atwood 74).

The extended metaphor of the body as the sky situates Offred as nebulous, like a cloud, and her uterus as “hard,” a palpable physical reality which defines Offred herself, “central” to her function. The space inside her body, where her uterus resides, echoes the “space” inside the uterus itself, which contains all Offred’s potential: Gilead values Offred solely for her reproductive capacity and defines her by her functioning uterus, the “central” object in her body. Irigaray critiques dominant models of the women’s body for their focus on the body as “nothing to see ... a flaw, a hole” (1977, 385). This “flaw” compared to the male body necessitates the prominence of women’s reproductive capacity in representations of women as well as women’s bodies. For example, the body’s actual composition does not reflect the spatial arrangement that Offred’s use of “central” implies; the uterus is low in the torso towards the front of the pelvic wall, but Offred describes its position in inaccurate spatial terms to emphasize its centrality in Gilead’s spatialized understanding of her body.

This misrepresentation of the woman’s body reflects nineteenth-century medical thought, which held that “the uterus is the largest, and perhaps the most important, muscle of the female economy” (Smith 1847 quoted in Poovey 1986, 145). The uterus’s imagined centrality in the woman’s body emphasizes the prevailing nineteenth-century belief that

women's "character, position, and value" were determined by their reproductive function (Poovey 146). Gilead enforces this ideology of the body through its valuation of women; while Offred's uterus remains empty (not pregnant), Offred does not use her uterine space productively and remains "empty." This emptiness, manifested in her uterus emptying through menstruation, compels despair; this despair comes "towards" Offred, rather than from within her, reflecting Gilead's external expectations which have become Offred's own expectations for her internal body. Offred's thinking about her own uterus relative to her body reflects her own internalization of Gilead's logics, even while she tries to resist them by remembering her past experience of her body.

### **Chalice: The Body as Container**

After the Ceremony, Offred's descriptions of the handmaids' bodies and duties begin to verge on the explicit, though she continues to couch her description in metaphor, diverting the outright violence of the Gileadean regime. Offred says, more bluntly than she has before, "we are for breeding purposes ... We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood 136). The language of "vessel" and "chalice" evokes Offred's interpretive imaginary, which she uses both to remember and to decipher her experience of Gilead. Furthermore, these images explicitly recall Irigaray's critique of the reductively spatialized woman's body, where women are imagined as spaces for penises and babies, echoing Nanny's metaphor of the spit cup in *Their Eyes*. Offred's interpretations adopt religious imagery that aligns with New Testament Christianity whereby women's literal bodies take on the sacredness of the Holy Grail, the Christ cup that Jesus drank from at the Last Supper and that caught Jesus's blood at his crucifixion. However, Gilead draws its overt

religious totalitarianism from the Old Testament, before the advent of Christ; the Christ figure does not figure in the Old Testament, Gilead's exclusive biblical source, and therefore does not appear in Gilead's logos of sin and suffering. The New Testament values - mercy, redemption, rebirth - are anathema to Gilead's model of discipline and power. As Offred links herself to the chalice, the metaphor exists inside Gilead, in Offred's intentional allusions to chalices as empty or filled, but separate from Gilead's theocratic totalitarianism, like "bits of broken symbolism left over from the time before" (Atwood 60). The metaphor of the chalice reflects a slippage in the symbolic order, since Gilead both ignores the Christ figure and demands the Christ narrative of its handmaids: self-sacrifice, moral purity, rebirth through reproduction. This slippage reflects the shoddy conglomerate of ideologies that Gilead attempted to synthesize in its own regime, informed by a cultural order that no longer exists except in Offred's interpretive imaginary.

Despite the repetition of "chalice" and "vessel" only four times each in the novel, Offred elicits the imagery of the chalice so powerfully that it takes on a momentous significance in her development over the course of the novel. "You must be worthy vessels," Aunt Lydia told the women at the Red Center (Atwood 65), foreshadowing the strict regulations on handmaids and their conflation with the imagined national body to enforce Gilead-appropriate behavior. When the weather warms, the tulips in the garden "are redder than ever, opening, no longer wine cups but chalices; thrusting themselves up, to what end? They are, after all, empty" (Atwood 45). The tulips' redness links them to the body since red is the handmaids' color, the color of blood and the uterus. To Offred, the tulips' emptiness

precludes the meaningful accomplishment of their will, as the appropriation of her body and her internalization of symbolic “emptiness” as a reproductive failure prevent her own “ends.”

The tulips’ emptiness renders them useless, as a handmaid’s inability to become pregnant would render her useless to Gilead, and Offred predicts the tulips’ end in violence: “When they are old they turn themselves inside out, then explode slowly, the petals thrown out like shards” (Atwood 45). This image of an “old” tulip resonates with Offred’s experience of her own aging body and the biblical reference to Rachel’s injunction to Jacob: “Give me children or else I die” (Genesis 30:1). Offred invokes this admonition during a visit to the doctor who offers to impregnate her in her Commander’s stead, thinking, “There’s more than one meaning to it” (Atwood 61). In Offred’s case, if she does not have children, she will literally die; Gilead will cast her out, exile her to the Colonies (a toxic environment populated by Gilead’s political enemies), or execute her. In the Red Center, Offred remembers being taught to pray “for emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled: with grace, with love, with self-denial, semen and babies” (Atwood 194). Although Gilead demands that its handmaids pray for emptiness, this emptiness has to be predicated on its eventual fulfillment through childbearing; the chalice, then, has to be full, a filled (pregnant) body, to have a legible purpose under Gilead’s social-symbolic regime. In Gileadean law, failure to conceive can only be due to a women’s barrenness, not a man’s sterility; only women, not men, can be empty, echoing Irigaray’s interpretation of the construction of women’s bodies *as* spaces for “semen and babies.” Through the metaphor of the chalice, the tulips and their deaths become hermeneutically linked to the space of the body, Offred’s as yet “empty” body, and her own fear of “emptiness” should she fail to conceive.

However, Offred's commander is aged, potentially past fertility, and he enters into an illicit pseudo-amorous relationship with Offred for games of Scrabble and contraband magazines. Offred situates both her body and the development of her pseudo-amorous relationship with her Commander in spatial terms, sustaining the project of space coded through the body. In the early Ceremonies, when the Commander has sex with "the lower part of my body" (Atwood 94), Offred "would pretend not to be present, not in the flesh ... existing apart from the body" (Atwood 160). Offred develops coping mechanisms for her ritualized rape by dissociating her consciousness from her body, constructing two spaces relative to her body - the ambivalently inhabited space of her body and the space outside her body - which contributes to her understanding of her body as a vessel, a vehicle of "fertilization" (Atwood 161). However, Offred finds herself unable to maintain this spatial project of self-protection when the Commander begins to treat her as a human, rather than a childbearing machine.

In the unsettling light of the Commander's continued attentions, Offred revises her survival techniques through the spatialization of her altered role. As the Commander's "mistress," a conventional woman's role in a male-ordered society despite the outward dissimilarity of Offred's function in Gilead, Offred thinks of herself as an "outside woman, they used to be called, in some countries" (Atwood 163). The implicit othering of these women through Offred's offhand reference to "some countries," meaning *other* countries' attitudes, reflects the narrative's focus on white, Westernized standards to the exclusion of imagined "other" countries on the periphery of Offred's (Atwood's) imagination, even though the figure of the mistress has had long-standing cultural purchase in every Western

country. By constructing her role as the Commander's pseudo-love interest as "outside," external to Gilead's political regime which informs its social policy, Offred invokes the space of the nation, the national family, as the *inside*, positioned against the external space of the Commander's anti-Gilead treatment of Offred as a person rather than a baby machine.

At least, this is how Offred interprets the Commander's treatment. Although she can't interpret his motives for their Scrabble games and demand to be kissed "as if she meant it" (Atwood 162), she understands the Commander's apparent preference for her as his recognition of her humanity. At the beginning of their faux-love affair, Offred won't dare refuse the Commander's desire to consort with her because "for him, I must remember, I am only a whim" (Atwood 159); four pages later, thinking of herself as his mistress, she acknowledges that while she doesn't love the Commander "he's of interest to me, he occupies space, he is more than a shadow" (Atwood 163). Offred contrasts the Commander's occupation of space with her own performance of objectification: "a large vase or a window: part of the background, inanimate or transparent" (Atwood 162), *not* taking up space. Offred's objectification in Gilead's reproductive economy and her conflicted interest in the Commander contribute to her sense that

"to him I'm no longer merely a usable body. To him I'm not just a boat with no cargo, a chalice with no wine in it, an oven - to be crude - minus the bun. To him I am not merely empty" (Atwood 163).

Through her relationship with the Commander, Offred re-encodes her body in her interpretation of the Commander's understanding *of* her body. Their late-night conversations, the fact that they are on "different terms" (Atwood 162), Offred's re-interpretation of her relationship with her Commander as his mistress, rather than just a "usable body" - these

revisions of Offred's circumstances in Gilead lead her to believe that the Commander sees her as "more" than empty, despite her sense of her own emptiness.

Describing her failure so far to become pregnant, Offred describes her body through several spaces: the boat, the chalice, and the oven. The metaphor of the boat and its cargo reflects Gilead's emphasis on (re)production, enforced procreation coded as national production for the national welfare; Offred has construed the body through the space of a boat before, when she considered the Commander's household as "the hold of a ship. Hollow" (Atwood 81). The idiom "a bun in the oven" refers colloquially to a woman's pregnancy, conjuring an image of cozy domesticity; Offred uses the phrase to relate the space of her own body to the domestic space of the oven. Rather than hollow or empty, Offred believes the Commander sees her as *other* than empty, not necessarily "full" - she is not pregnant - but measured against a different standard which elides the prescribed legibility as pregnant/not pregnant, "fruitful ... barren" (Atwood 61). Her internalization of the Commander's evaluation of her apart from her reproductive capacity leads her to believe that the Commander's attentions allow her to escape Gilead's textual violence which define her self by her body.

The rhetoric of vessels and emptiness recalls the bodily space that simultaneously represents reproductive potential through the operational uterus and serves as a reminder of women's unfilled and thus unfulfilled bodies in Gilead's reproductive economy. Offred alleviates her uncharacteristic bluntness about her circumstances - "breeding purposes," "two-legged wombs" - with the religiously coded diversion to "sacred vessels" and "ambulatory chalices," a euphemism for "walking receptacle." Her embellished language

conceals the violence done to women's bodies in the interests of Gilead's reproduction; describing the body as a vessel reduces it to a container, as a chalice elevates it to something holy but inhuman.

### **Conclusion: A Liberatory Space?**

The novel's notoriously ambiguous ending does not provide a conclusion to its extended metaphors of space, containers, and violence. At the end of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred gets into one of the Eyes' black vans. A friend has told her the van will take her to freedom; she knows it could have come to take her somewhere for punishment, should her illegal participation in a network of handmaids working against Gilead have come to light. Before the van arrives, Offred has begun to fear for her life. Her shopping partner, Ofglen, recruited her to the handmaids' network of resistance and then committed suicide before being taken in by the Eyes or revealing the identities of her co-conspirators. Thinking herself safe, Offred feels so relieved at her escape that she lets herself be taken in by Gilead's power:

“I'll obliterate myself, if that's what you really want; I'll empty myself, truly, be a chalice. ... I'll accept my lot. I'll sacrifice. I'll repent. I'll abdicate. I'll renounce. I know this can't be right but I think it anyway. ... Everything I've resisted comes flooding in. I don't want pain. ... I want to keep on living, in any form. I resign my body freely, to the uses of others” (Atwood 286).

Her sense that she has *escaped* Gilead's punishment, rather than her experience *of* its punishment, makes Offred feel that she has given in to its power. By describing herself according to Gilead's symbolism of the body - “I'll empty myself” - Offred appears to accept Gilead's regime to protect herself, internalizing Gilead's interpretation of women's bodies to avoid its discipline. In her promise to “become a chalice,” Offred rejects her previous coping mechanisms to take on the role of receptacle, a holy vehicle for childbearing; she resigns the

space of her body to others, her Commander and Gilead. For the first time Offred feels *no* power, not even the power of her internal narration which she has maintained as a defense against Gilead's attempts to "empty" her. Offred recognizes that "I feel, for the first time, their true power" (Atwood 286). Gilead's "true power" resides in its ability to force women to recode their own bodies in service of Gilead's reproductive ends to ensure *their own* survival: the regime's true power consists of its ability to enforce the internalization of Gilead.

Six pages after her pledge to embody Gilead's symbolic logics, Offred is taken away in a black van and the novel ends as she steps into it, before she resolves her extended metaphors of the chalice or concludes her resistance to Gilead's symbolism. However, as she leaves the house, she notices as she checks the clock that "it's no time in particular" (Atwood 294). The disciplining of the body through space corresponds to its disciplining through time; Bartky (1993) posits that "the body's time, in these regimes of power, is as rigidly controlled as its space [through] a division of time into discrete and segmented units that regulate the various activities of the day" (312-313). Of the novel's sixteen section titles, eight are temporal ("Night), seven are spatial ("Waiting Room," "Household"), and one is ambiguous ("Salvaging"). Offred has encoded the meaning of both time and space through her bodily experience before: "I'm waiting, in my room, which right now is a waiting room. When I go to bed it's a bedroom" (Atwood 50). She has operationalized her temporal purpose, the state of her body, to determine the nature of the space she occupies; as she says, "There has to be some space, finally, that I claim as mine" (Atwood 50). Offred determines the space of her bedroom through her own use of time there; when Offred waits in her bedroom, she encodes

the space as a space for waiting. Part of Gilead's hold on the handmaids is "the amount of unfilled time, the long parentheses of nothing" (Atwood 69), when the handmaids have nothing to do but practice the bodily movements of labor. Offred's purpose is to be pregnant; until she is pregnant, she waits to be pregnant; the space of her body, waiting to be "filled," reflects the space around her, where she too waits. Her days are regimented into "blank time" (Atwood 70), a blankness which mirrors the "emptiness" of a non-pregnant body. Thus blank time is linked to empty space, the regulation of the body through its spatial-temporal constraints. If it is "no time" when Offred leaves Gilead, then its regimented time has broken down; it is conceivable, then, that her body too has escaped or will escape Gilead's symbolic order in her escape from Gilead, whether through her spatial removal from the nation or her death at the hands of the Eyes.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred narrates both Gilead's infliction of its own symbolic logics on her body and her own interpretations of her spatialized body. Gilead uses bodies both literally, through forced reproduction, and symbolically, to reproduce its own imagined national body; meanwhile, Offred interprets and encodes the spaces that her body symbolizes, contains, and occupies in the context of oppression. In the ultimate breakdown of Gilead's temporal regulation, Offred might be read as escaping Gilead's spatial, symbolic, and physical control of her body - or she might not. Either way, her final action is to enter a new space inside the van, to "step up, into the darkness within; or else the light" (Atwood 295). These simultaneous and adverse possibilities, contained in the same undescribed space of the black van that has arrived to transport Offred some other place, represent the paradox that makes Gilead, like other oppressive regimes, ultimately unsustainable. In a Foucauldian sense, systems of oppression depend on their subjects internalizing their logics so that

“power is everywhere” (Foucault 1977, 197), expressed not only by structures of power but by the subjects themselves, in the assumption of surveillance. However, while the subjects of oppression exist as humans, as narrators, the logics that sustain their oppressions cannot resolve themselves, even through a symbolic and lexical order meant to annihilate the possibility of resistance. Offred never does wholly metabolize Gilead’s symbolic order. Her very arrest at the novel’s conclusion demonstrates her refusal to conform to Gilead’s logics: she is an “outside woman” relative to Gilead’s hermeneutics of bodily subjugation. Offred’s narration itself symbolizes Gilead’s inability to wholly monopolize its subjects; similar to Janie’s production of her own power in *Their Eyes* through her revision and reappropriation of space and of her own body, Offred represents the rejection of a totalitarian regime and the possibility of resistance at any time, in any space, to evil.

## Conclusion

*Jane Eyre*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* demonstrate women's power to use literature itself as a space of interpretation, negotiation, and empowerment. Read together as foundational feminist texts, these novels reveal the concerted effort by their writers and their protagonists to consistently re-interpret and re-imagine the spaces they inhabit. As Blunt and Rose (1994) argue, we should not understand gendered space as solely a product of patriarchy and racism, but also as a "social process of encoding and decoding" (3). This sustained interpretive method contributes to the realization of women's self-determination in conditions of oppression and to their efforts to transform these conditions to suit their own needs, as Christine de Pizan did in 1405 with the City of Ladies.

In *Jane Eyre*, the dialectic between Jane and Bertha Rochester draws attention to the co-constitutive nature of the British and the colonial subjects, using the spatial proximity of two differently situated women to underline their *subjective* proximity - the way their subject positions are constructed through each other, dependent on each other. Brontë's treatment of Bertha as the racialized "mad wife" and privileging of white womanhood through framing Jane as a nationalistically imagined feminine subject don't align with contemporary feminist principles. Yet her interpretation of space both to symbolize Jane's internal self and to emphasize Bertha's oppression in Thornfield lends itself to a postcolonial feminist analysis: *Jane Eyre* exposes the politics of space which contributed to Britain's construction of the British through its imagined colonial subject. Space in *Jane Eyre* is not solely comprised of restraints and enclosures, but also of a spatialized self imagined through its co-constitutive connections with Other. Moreover, Bertha does not represent an annex, either to Thornfield

or to the novel, but exists at its center, where her presence informs and enables the novel as a whole. Through this exposure of Britain's colonial politics in the spatial and ideological proximity between Jane and Bertha within Thornfield, the novel redefines, recodes, and reappropriates space itself. Its sustained metaphors of mental autonomy suggest the possibility of a feminist space through Jane's interpretive resistance, but its inscription of British colonial sovereignty indicates the importance of centering the margins to analyze the nature and implications of colonial space.

Zora Neale Hurston shifted the center in just this way in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, but this time the novel's center is unquestionably located in Janie as protagonist, narrator, and central subject. She claims, interprets, and imagines her space, radical acts for a Black woman in the American South, and through her own experience of love and independence she ultimately finds her *place* in the house that once represented her confinement but, subject to her own process of encoding, now represents her interpretive agency in defining her space and her self according to her own experience. From Joe's store to the courtroom to her own house, Janie produces herself as an agent of knowledge through her shifting definition of her spatial limits and liberations, analyzing her multiple spaces and selves from the house to the store to the muck, understanding her changing environment through her navigation of each context. If *Jane Eyre's* project is the space of whiteness and colonized subjectivity embodied in Jane and Bertha, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* centers black women's voices, spaces, and selves. Brontë and Hurston overlap in their use of space to position and interpret women living under conditions of oppression; Bertha and Jane and Janie show us the power of "women's space" to transcend the spaces imposed by patriarchy, racism, and colonialism, to locate our own power even under these constraints. Herndl's

theory of “constrained agency” illuminates the nuance of women’s experience under oppression, emphasizing the need to recognize both the reality of structural injustices and women’s ability to exercise agency even in oppressive conditions.

In light of this postcolonial, intersectional analysis, *The Handmaid’s Tale* could be an anomaly: its use of stratified reproduction privileges white women’s reproductive futures both in Gilead and the presumptive logics of the novel itself. Along with its exclusion of people of color, however, the novel uses the tradition of space to relocate women’s power in Offred’s revisions of the handmaids’ spatially understood bodies both within Gilead’s reductive discipline and in resistance to its interpretive violence. In their sustained engagement with “inside” and “outside,” body and mind, Janie and Offred share the discursive ability to *read* their bodily space both inside and outside the power paradigms of their environments. They both internalize and reject the dominant powers in each novel which impose understandings of women’s bodies as lacking, empty. Janie’s grandmother warns her against being made into a (white) man’s “spit cup” (Hurstun 20), evoking the metaphor of black women’s sexuality as “as a ‘void’ or empty space” (Hammonds 1994, 132) to be filled by men. Similarly, Gileadean logics situate Offred as “empty” in the phallogentric sexual economy which privileges women’s reproduction to the exclusion of their subjectivity, endorsing the vision of women’s bodies as a “hole-envelope” for the penis (Irigaray 1977, 384). However, Janie ultimately rejects this reductive vision of Black women’s bodies and sexualities through her understanding and pleasure in her own body as in her soul, as at the end of *Their Eyes* when she occupies her own house and “calls in her soul” to continue her project of self-identification through her coding of space. Similarly, Offred resists Gilead’s intended reduction of women’s bodies to reproductive machines by

re-interpreting and recoding the space of her own body. Her narration engages the ambivalence of both her bodily space and her environment to interpret her own body apart from Gilead's interpretive and symbolic violence. Both novels end in ambiguity: Janie locates her future in herself but the specifics are unknown; Offred's fate is unknowable. Hurston and Atwood, different women in different eras, work concurrently in the tradition of women's literature to interpret and revise women's space as a means of resistance to oppression, both external and internal.

The project of space in literature by women has contributed to the creation of literary spaces *for* women. In that sense, women writers have recoded "women's space" and "women's literature" for themselves, reappropriating these traditionally essentialist rhetorics to create a space within literature for women's autonomy and empowerment. The traditional application of "women's space" has reinscribed the patriarchal paradigm of gendered exclusion which has relegated women to domestic space. Although this exclusion has worked to prohibit women's public autonomy, the dichotomy has also remained generally uninterrogated as a mode of disempowerment, preventing an understanding of women's navigation of these "private" spaces and reappropriation of space even under conditions of constraint (Blunt and Rose 1994, 6). Women have engaged this form of constrained agency as a form of resistance to systems of oppression, often centering on their experiences of their bodies: Jane, Bertha, Janie, and Offred revise and recode their understandings of their bodies in opposition to the representations of women's bodies which have essentialized them according to socially enforced gender roles. Through the process of this literary engagement with space, literature by women has provided a model for readers. Not only women, but readers from any marginalized group, can and do read these novels as representations of

resistance to structural power. This is the legacy of spatialization in women's literature: the creation of a space for those who are traditionally and consistently excluded not only from cultural narratives, but from the spaces of power itself.

Combined, these three novels reflect the convergences and variations in the ways women have engaged space in their literature to realize women's particular need for a space of their own - a room, a body, in which to write and live. Christine de Pizan imagined this space large-scale with a whole City; Virginia Woolf imagined it smaller, a room; Brontë, Hurston, and Atwood illuminate women's coding of space from different experiences and different eras, but their novels contribute to the sustained project of space *for* women in women's literature. Their convergences demonstrate the scope and value of an intersectional literary analysis of women's writing: Jane and Bertha, Janie, and Offred testify to the varied forces that shape women's lives and the ways that women react to the conditions they inhabit. The revolutionary ideas of Charlotte Brontë, Zora Neale Hurston, and Margaret Atwood, filtered through the testimonies of their characters, have reinforced these novels' lasting importance in popular media, academic curricula, and feminist consciousness, taking women's space into the mainstream as a far-flung feminist community, like the original City of Ladies. These novels teach us to take their interpretations of space into our own battles with unjust powers, the spaces we can create within systems of inequality to cultivate hope, relief, and renewed determination. To take Christine de Pizan's metaphor, these central feminist texts represent both the *foundations* of feminism and the City's towers and turrets: these novels embody some of the promise of Christine's imagined space of liberation.

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