

Narratives of Possibility:
Body, Death, and Community in the Modern Novel

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*For my sons,
who have taught me what it is to be vulnerable
and to love other bodies beyond measure*

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Contemporary philosophy has been struggling for over a century with questions of the possibility or impossibility of modern community. One point of departure in thinking through questions of modern community is to begin not with abstract ideas of religious or mythical communion but with the most concrete and material, with the human body. All of us are embodied, and all of our experiences are filtered through our own flesh, our nerves and synapses. In many ways, this seems like an odd place to seek community since the body can be a marker for individual isolation. I inhabit a body, which can never be yours; my experiences can never be completely shared. Yet, a dichotomy between the isolated, individual body on one hand and the experience of community on the other is a false one. My body is never only an individual body because it is launched into the world in a social context. It is always already socially marked in ways that I cannot control—assigned a race, a sex, a class, etc. Its very existence is due to other bodies coming together. And, as any time spent with an infant reveals, the body is unable to survive childhood without the constant attentions of other bodies. The body is not sufficient unto itself from its very advent into the world outside of another's (a mother's) body. My body like all bodies is as much a social and socially-dependent body as an individual body.

The body can therefore function as a site of whatever experience we have of individual identity as well as a marker of possible community because the body already straddles this line. The relationship between community and the body is most apparent at birth and when the body is pushed to its limit in death. The dead body is a signpost for limits of many kinds: the limit of the living body, the limit of the human, the limit of language and narration. The dead body, then, calls attention to these limits and highlights the inherent vulnerability of being human. The violently

dead body pushes even further in pointing out the ways that our bodies are dependent on each other even after the stage of infancy. Viewing or witnessing the violently dead body is not community per se, but the witness' encounter with the dead body is an exposure to limits. Along with the limits of the human and of language, the dead body also exposes the limits of the individual. The violently dead body may be alone in death, but the body was first acted upon by another. Dead bodies may be alone, but they reveal that living bodies are dependent on others all around for continued life and well-being.

Encountering death as limit and reflecting on the essential vulnerability of human beings is not enough for community, though. It is only through the telling of the encounter with material death that community can be fully rethought or reconfigured. The narrative of this encounter with the limit is the constitutive element in modern community, the element that opens a space for community reconfiguration. Narrative is how human beings make sense of the world and of their place in it, so narrative, which already needs a community of actors to take place, is also fundamental to rethinking the organization of that world. The encounter with the dead body exposes the witness to multiple limits that foreground his or her own bodily vulnerability and relationality. The subsequent narration of the experience helps make meaning out of the encounter through reflections on current community configurations and on possible future iterations. Some previous forms of community and/or communion may no longer be possible in modernity, but narrating the encounter with the dead body can open a space for rethinking what modern community can look like and imagining new iterations of community based on a recognition of shared human vulnerability.

My responses to questions of community in the modern era come out of the thinking of three touchstone figures: Walter Benjamin, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Judith Butler. While these three

wrote/write in different historic and cultural contexts, their thoughts on death, community, and the body have shaped much of this project's argument. Albeit in very different ways, Nancy and Benjamin make radical claims about the basis of an (im)possible modern community. Published in 1936, during the buildup to WWII, Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller" reflects on the incommunicability of human experience in modernity because of the many changes wrought by capitalism, mass communication, and modern warfare. While Benjamin does not specifically use the term community, he writes about the difficulty or even impossibility of shared experience with the advent of modern forms of communication focused on information. This concept of shared experience is another way to think about community, and Benjamin gestures toward the human body as a key access point. He poignantly describes the transition from a simpler, communal society to modern technology and isolation: "A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath those clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body" (84). Modern community can no longer be founded on a shared worldview as in the past when change occurred more gradually and people and goods were much less mobile. The time in which groups of people found communion in shared religious or political myths is past.¹ Both Nancy and Benjamin trace this pivotal change wrought by modernity, and Benjamin's description of this transition points to another way to think about the possibility of community: through the body. The fast-paced changes of modernity and capitalism clearly trouble Benjamin, and the only thing left is the vulnerable human body. With the rapid

¹ For a more detailed description of such transitions away from a unified worldview, see chapter two of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*. He traces the decline of religious community and hereditary monarchy in Europe under the impact of changes in communication (specifically, the rise of print-capitalism), economic changes, scientific discoveries, and geographical exploration.

changes Benjamin describes comes a need to rethink community, and he points to the body as key in that rethinking. If community can no longer take place on a religious plane, maybe possibility rests in the material dimension, in the “tiny, fragile human body” that remains after the destruction wrought by capitalist economies, imperial conquests, and for Benjamin, the first and impending second world wars.

Jean-Luc Nancy’s seminal work on community, *The Inoperative Community*, was written much later than Benjamin’s essay. Benjamin wrote in the wake of WWI with the subsequent rise of Nazism and fascism across Western Europe. Nancy’s book was published in 1986 long after the end of the Second World War and the many other wars and political violence that took place throughout the twentieth century. Despite their very different historical contexts, Nancy similarly frames a response to the problem of community in terms of the frail human body. However, for him, it is specifically the dead body of another that can potentially evoke community. He writes, “Death is indissociable from community, for it is through death that the community reveals itself—and reciprocally” (14). The frailty of the human body reaches its ultimate limit in the dead body. Death, for Nancy, in the absence of traditional religious modes for processing and absorbing the death, becomes a limit—the limit of life, of language, of the human. Similarly important for Nancy is the fact that death also resists the utilitarian impulses of modern capitalism; it cannot be put to use or made into a work. Since Nancy is writing after many of the destructive effects of late capitalism became apparent, he wants to locate community in something that escapes this system. The singular death does, at least in part, evade the meaning-making and use-making impulses of capitalism. Even when a singular death is put to work, as in the case of political and religious martyrs, the work ultimately fails since there are always ways in which the death subverts the attempt to make it mean something or ways in which other deaths subvert the first. The dead body

is finally the repository of no meaning outside of itself. Because the dead body does not mean beyond the death, it can remind witnesses of their own embodiedness and their own limits. This encounter with death as limit might be a starting point for rethinking modern community from a point of vulnerability and humility.

Perhaps the very meaninglessness of death is what has led to the modern, bourgeois hiding of death. The singular death does not fit into the machinery of modern capitalism. Deaths in the plural can and often are embroiled in capitalist geopolitical struggles that make money for weapons manufacturers, construction contractors, etc. Yet, the singular death exposes the witness(es) not simply to a political or religious agenda but to his/her own limits. It moves us outside of ourselves as we recognize the extreme absence of another, according to Nancy's argument. The 'uselessness' of death and the confrontation it evokes with limits may be why, in modernity, technology has removed our exposure to death from everyday life, sterilized death and made it more abstract. Modern society has "by means of hygienic and social, private and public institutions...[made] it possible for people to avoid the sight of the dying. Dying was once a public process in the life of an individual," describes Benjamin (93). Benjamin recounts the change from the Middle Ages in which dying was a more public event because it took place in the home, and the dead body was often displayed in the home until burial. He criticizes the way death has been sanitized and made private. Benjamin views the exclusion of death from everyday life as the loss of the storyteller's source of wisdom and authority. The physical presence of a dead body as a source of wisdom has been mostly removed from public view.

Modern medicine also means that death is not only hidden in modernity because the site of death has changed; it is also more hidden because it happens less unexpectedly. Families no longer routinely watch the death of multiple children from simple infections, and modern life

expectancies have risen substantially. While this removal of death from public perception may change the collective relationship to some form of dying wisdom (as Benjamin asserts), it also makes of each witnessed death a bigger disruption in the life of the witness. The singular death more drastically evokes the limits of life and the limits of language since the death is less quotidian. It is a greater interruption in the fabric of daily life; this fact does not make death easier to mourn, but it changes the effect death may have on its witnesses. Modernity, for better and for worse, has removed death from public life. While this move partially obscures the fact that death cannot be made to work in a capitalist system, it also makes the dead body a powerful interruption. This interruption can draw attention to death as limit and impel witnesses to reflect on their own relationships and their own future death. These reflections and their narration can be a potential point of departure for rethinking or reconfiguring modern community.

What is it about the human body and often the dead human body that is so intimately tied up with reflections on community? Nancy, Benjamin, and many others have made similar links between the possibility of community and death. Death is the always unspoken future for each isolated, modern individual, the only absolute certainty for any human being. If community in the large, philosophical sense is possible, one point of access seems to be death as an exposure to limits and as a reminder of our interconnectedness. However, these Nancy and Benjamin deal more with abstract or theoretical notions of death and community rather than with specific deaths and bodily violence. What happens when we make these terms more grounded in the material and focus on unnatural or violent death? Judith Butler tries to think some of these ideas on a more material level in *Precarious Life*, imagining an ethics grounded in the fragile human body. The work is Butler's response to the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 and the United States' immediate recourse to discourses and practices of violence and retribution.

While Butler's project is not framed as a reflection on the possibility of community writ large, it implicitly works to ground an ethical system in a recognition of shared vulnerability, "a primary vulnerability to others, one that one cannot will away without ceasing to be human" (*Precarious Life* xiv). Butler argues that human beings as bodies in the world are by definition vulnerable to others. Our embodiedness "implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own" (*Precarious Life* 26). This vulnerability, which is linked to the possibility of violence and/or death, is a constitutive part of being human, and it is also a sign of the inherent relationality of being human. Much as we might think of ourselves as isolated individuals, as independent thinking subjects, our very status as living bodies depends in part on the good will or at least the disinterest of those around us.

Butler moves from the abstract dead body of another that Nancy describes and Benjamin's general descriptions of death in the Middle Ages to the body as the site of violence and death but also a basis for some kind of ethical community. Whereas Nancy and Benjamin focus on the dead body that could have died of any cause—including old age or a heart attack—Butler focuses on the body subjected to violence at the hands of another such as the bodies maimed and killed on September 11th and the Palestinian bodies killed by Israeli troops. She implicitly identifies a difference between viewing any dead body and being exposed to a body that has been violently harmed by another human being. Seeing the dead body of a loved one who has died of natural causes certainly brings as much pain and mourning as any other form of death. However, that body for Butler is not as effective as grounds for an ethical system. The natural death reminds us all of our humanity, but it does not reveal as much the inherent relationality of being human, the

fundamental dependence on one another for continued life and bodily integrity. The natural death may still reveal to those around the relationality of being human in the sense that we are emotionally bonded to other people, but it does not foreground the violence latent in human relationality. Relationality does not just mean an emotional attachment but also a vulnerability to physical and emotional injury. Butler and Nancy, different as they may be as thinkers, both identify the body—whether dead, injured, or always vulnerable to violence—as a marker for the possibility of community. The witness to death or violence, for both thinkers, is forced to confront his own possible death or injury and the future death of others around him in viewing a dead other. The witness is exposed to the limits of life, language, and the human and does not emerge from the encounter unscathed. Butler, in particular, highlights the way that violent death does all of these things and in a more extreme way while it also exposes the witness to his or her own bodily vulnerability and relationality in a way that natural death does not.

Butler and Nancy posit similar frameworks for thinking about death and violence, yet Butler focuses not only on more specific and violent death than Nancy but also on a less philosophical definition of community. Nancy reflects on community with a capital C—an almost mystical experience that cannot be a political or social goal. Just as Butler's argument is grounded in a more material understanding of death, it is also grounded in a more concrete definition of community. She reasons that although capitalism has changed human and social bonds, human beings are still fundamentally social creatures who desire some sense of community even if it is not Nancy's or Benjamin's capital "C" Community: "At the most intimate levels, we are social; we are comported toward a 'you'; we are outside ourselves, constituted in cultural norms that precede us and exceed us" (*Precarious Life* 45). Our bodies and ourselves are never quite our own; they are shaped by social and cultural forces and brought into being and subjected to physical touch (both

gentle and violent) by others. Human beings are born physically and socially needing other humans to survive and develop; we begin and live always a bit outside ourselves, exposed to others. Butler thus bases her argument on a very different definition of community. Community in this sense is not an abstract (im)possibility; it is a more material and universal vision of community as the experience of living together.

Yet, the living together that Butler describes is not just a passive living next door and ignoring one another. She seems to define community as living together that involves reflection on our own precarious situation as embodied human beings and recognition that we need each other and need to work toward a shared ethical system founded on these realizations. Butler's definition of community aligns with critic Raymond Williams' distinction between active community and "another version, which is sometimes the mutuality of the oppressed, at other times the mutuality of people living at the edges or in the margins of a generally oppressive system" (*The Country* 104). One can refer to a group of people who live together as a community in the sense of a synonym for town or group, but that group of people does not fulfill the definition of community for any of the thinkers cited above. People who live together may be a community of necessity in that they need each other's goods and services and/or an accidental community of birth because people are born in particular places surrounded by specific people and cultures, but neither of these forms of community constitute the kind of community Nancy, Benjamin, and Butler discuss. Butler, in particular, seems to be defining community similar to Williams' active community, as an intentional shared dependence. Whereas Nancy and Benjamin focus on an abstract, philosophical vision of community, Butler focuses more on the lived-experience of an active form of community based on recognition of the vulnerable human body and the ethics derived from that recognition.

The different definitions of community arise partly out of the bifurcated history of the English word, which has always been split between a more general and a more specific meaning. Raymond Williams, in his *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, describes the etymological history as already containing multiple definitions from the beginning of the word's use in English. He lists five senses of the word, which seemed to arise relatively concurrently, and the OED breaks these down into a total of thirteen different senses. All of them, though, can be categorized as coming out of the two different Latin roots: *communis*, meaning common, and *communitatem*, meaning "community of relations or feelings" (Williams, *Keywords* 39). Williams explains the distinction as between senses that "indicate actual social groups" and those that indicate "a particular quality of relationship" (*Keywords* 39). The definitions coming out of the *communis* root refer to particular groups, whether groups with shared interests like the scientific community or groups of people who share a geographical space like a neighborhood. Contemporary English retains these two different branches of meaning for the word community. Community can reference a group of people who share land, space, a neighborhood, a town. It can also designate the quality of relationship as in Williams' earlier definition of active community.

Williams continues to describe the trajectory of the word in the 19th century as being increasingly focused on direct and local relationships in the face of capitalism's rising industrialization and urbanization and the formation of modern nation-states. Thus, by the 19th century, community was frequently used as a contrast to society or the state, which are grander in scope and involve much larger groups of people. Williams ends his brief history of community with a pithy commentary on the tension caused by the two different and sometimes contradictory uses of the word: "Community can be the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships"

(*Keywords* 40). In Williams' formulation, community can be used to designate specific social groups that already exist or the possibility of future relationships and common interests. The different uses of the term by thinkers such as Nancy and Butler make more sense in this context. Nancy uses community in the sense of something that may be possible but does not yet exist, a shared feeling like the Latin *communitatem*. Butler uses community in both senses; at times, she uses community to refer to a specific group of people living or working together, but in her thesis for the essay "Violence, Mourning, Politics," she uses community in the aspirational sense of an alternative to existing relationships (*Precarious Life* 19). Nancy's community is less tangible and material than Butler's; however, the not-yet-achieved practice of community, an alternative to the current status quo, is still the primary concern for both thinkers.

Since both Nancy and Butler are looking toward a future community that does not yet exist, the question remains—how might any future revision or reconfiguration of community take place? As suggested previously, the encounter with the unnaturally dead body can be a starting point for the possibility of community reconfiguration. This encounter can be a material encounter with a dead body in which the witness sees or hears violence enacted upon another, or it can be a narrative encounter. In the case of an encounter with a story about violent death, the story must foreground the extreme physical violence enacted on a body by describing it in detail. In both kinds of encounters, the focus is on the body itself and the ways the human body is always open to physical violence at the hands of another. Furthermore, for the encounter with death to impel any rethinking of community, the dead body must be recognized as fully human, as worthy of mourning. Without this fundamental recognition, the dead body is not an interruption but a confirmation of difference and division between people of different races, cultures, religions, etc. When the witness does acknowledge the full humanity of the dead body, the encounter with

violent death draws attention to the witness' own embodiedness and relationality, which can open the possibility of rethinking his or her relations with the larger community.

Yet, the dead body as limit is not enough to impel this revision alone. The awareness of limits that the dead body exposes must then be narrated. As Nancy points out, the witness to the dead body also confronts the limit of language and of the human in the dead other before her. Being a witness to trauma and to violent death, standing before the dead other, radically interrupts conceptions of self-sufficient and stable identities because it prominently displays human vulnerability and its limits in death. This disruption or interruption can only be actualized through narrating the experience to another, and the act of narrating—involving the narrator and the narratee—can open a space for the reconfiguration of community. The only real witness to the death is the dead body, and the dead body cannot narrate. Yet, the pivotal encounter with death as the limit of narration simultaneously calls on the living to narrate. Judith Butler highlights the way that death, in her case grief over the death of another, can interrupt our conceptions of self and identity. Butler specifically points to the interruption caused by death as happening at the level of speech or narrative. She describes telling a story about one's grief as the process of language destabilizing the coherent self:

The very 'I' is called into question by its relation to the Other, a relation that does not precisely reduce me to speechlessness, but does nevertheless clutter my speech with signs of its undoing. I tell a story about the relations I choose, only to expose, somewhere along the way, the way I am gripped and undone by these very relations. My narrative falters, as it must. (*Precarious Life* 23)

To narrate one's reaction to another's death is to witness the failure of language not only in the dead body but also its partial failure in oneself. While Butler is specifically talking about grief,

which takes place after and is a response to death in a longer timeframe, exposure to immediate and material death—both the sight of and the story of a violent death—similarly seems to undo internal narratives of self-sufficiency and invincibility. It exposes the “we” and the “you” that also help to constitute the “I,” and in so doing can impel rethinking all those current relationships. This recognition of the instability and interdependence of the “I” begins with the sight or story of the dead body prior to narration, but narration is how the witness comes to make meaning out of the death. It is also a way to enact a community since narration demands both a speaker and an audience. The narration is how the witness comes to know on a deep level our fundamental vulnerability and relationality as humans.

While the graphic sight or detailed story of violent death can begin to catalyze rethinking community, the process of narrating that encounter is what moves the reconfiguration past its nascent stages. Narrative is one of the fundamental ways in which human beings make sense of the world, “the central function or *instance* of the human mind” according to Fredric Jameson (13). Human beings seem to need narrative to make sense of their experiences. J. Hillis Miller describes the function of narrative in similar terms: “The human capacity to tell stories is one way men and women collectively build a significant and orderly world around themselves. With fictions, we investigate, perhaps invent, the meaning of human life” (69). Narrative often serves an essential meaning-making function for human beings. Hayden White similarly defines narrative as “a particularly effective system of discursive meaning production” (x).² Narrative is the way that

² In *The Content of the Form*, White argues that narration also mediates between the real and the imaginary. See his insightful discussion in chapter one of the relationship between narrative and historical discourse in which he connects the narrativization of historical writing with moralizing judgments. In the context of my project, this means that the narratives examined here are attempts to make meaning and the meaning-making often has to do with advocating a specific value system about who belongs in a community and whose death is worth noting.

people produce meaning out of experience, so it can help make meaning of an encounter with violent death that highlights the limits of being human.

Even the etymology of the word “narrate” points to the relationship between narrative and meaning-making in Romance languages. The Latin root of narrate, *narrare*, literally means “to make known” according to the first definition listed in Charlton T. Lewis’ *An Elementary Latin Dictionary*. Only after this definition do more familiar terms such as “tell, relate, narrate” appear. *Narrare*, to narrate, is linguistically closely related to knowing since it comes from the Latin *gnarus*, “knowing or acquainted with.” To narrate, to tell a story, is more than a simple recitation of events; it is a way of making something known, of making meaning out of the world around us. This drive to make meaning and order through narration becomes even more important in the context of the encounter with unnatural death. Since the unnatural death is an exposure to limits in many forms, the witness needs a way to make sense of the radical interruption of his self-containment and identity. Narrative, with its fundamental meaning-making impetus, is one way to do so.

An encounter with violent death is also a point of uncertainty, which makes narrative even more critical in making sense of the death. The witness to an unnaturally dead body approaches the limit of language, narration, the human, and the individual, but the witness cannot himself cross those limits without ceasing to live. The witness approaches these limits, is exposed to them, but the limit can also reaffirm his own position as a living, speaking, and interconnected human being. The encounter with death need not always induce a rethinking of community; it can also reaffirm current community if the dead body is viewed as a distant other, as an outsider who has no part in the “we.” In a similar way, narrative can function in multiple ways and do so simultaneously. It can “reinforce the dominant culture and put it into question, both at the same time” (Miller 70). Narrative can help make sense out of an encounter with unnatural death, but it can only do so with

the recognition that the dead body bears some relation to ourselves. With this essential recognition of shared humanity, the narrative of an encounter with violent death is one way to make singular meaning out of something that calls out each witness' connection to and dependence on other living beings.

Narrative structure also plays a pivotal role in the reconfiguration of community. The positions of the narrator, narratee, and real reader all play a role in the possibility of rethinking community in the face of violent or unnatural death. In particular, my argument will focus on narratives in novel form. The novel, as pointed out by many critics, is the quintessential modern genre. According to Benjamin, "the birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual" (87). The rise of the novel took place at the same time that many of the other forces Benjamin identifies were radically changing human community—forces such as capitalism, industrialization, and the rise of print culture. Ian Watt similarly describes the rise of the novel as occurring in conjunction with this major social and economic upheaval:

Both the philosophical and the literary innovations must be seen as parallel manifestations of larger change—that vast transformation of Western civilization since the Renaissance which has replaced the unified world picture of the Middle Ages with another very different one—one which presents us, essentially, with a developing but unplanned aggregate of particular individuals having particular experiences at particular times and at particular places. (377-8)

The novel as a genre arose out of the shift from a unified world view to one based on individuals and particularities. The novel, then, is intimately related to the transition to modernity that altered our relationship to death and to other human beings. As such, it may also serve as a fruitful place

to think through the possibility of community reconfiguration in the face of death as limit and interruption.

The novel is constituted generically by a focus on everyday or ordinary life, and this focus by extension means that it is also tied to death as the ending and limit of all human lives. Benjamin points to journalism and the newspaper as primary examples of the move to information, and asserts that these print forms evacuate death of its meaning. However, the novel has potential to provide more than just information. In fact, Benjamin describes the isolation of the novel reader as so extreme that the novel and its events consume him (100). Benjamin also connects this isolation and solitary passion with death in the novels: “What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about” (101). Because death is hidden and sterilized in modernity, the novel may be one of the few places that many people encounter death as something besides hospital lights and beeping machines. The novel can be a site at which to encounter death and reflect on community when modern community is a question rather than a given, when individual readers may be isolated and alone. This reflection on community can open the possibility for reconfigurations of community that are more open and inclusive, a way to warm the lonely and shivering life through relationship with other lives. This dissertation aims to explore the tension between the novel as the marker of the modern, isolated individual and the novel as exploring and perhaps creating the meaning of life through exposure to limits in the form of unnatural death.

In keeping with the argument that in the modern era, exposure to unnatural death radically interrupts our conceptions of coherent identity and individual isolation, this dissertation examines three pairs of novels that center, in different ways, on unnatural deaths and the opening they create for community reconfiguration. Novels, besides coming out of the transition to modernity, also

present a bounded world and a focus on everyday life that can bring to the fore the radical disruption to that daily life caused by a violent death. My analysis will focus on 20th century novels that all foreground violent or unnatural deaths since the argument I am making can only be made in the modern era once death has been banished from daily life and the experience of community has dramatically altered. In addition, since the material encounter with death is what exposes the witness to his or her own bodily vulnerability and dependence on others, all six texts involve a physical body present before witnesses or the detailed narration of the dead body. Yet, the encounter with the dead body alone is not sufficient to impel the reconfiguration of community. In each of the six novels discussed in what follows, narrative plays a crucial role in rethinking community at the level of plot and story as well as at the structural level. The recounting of the encounter with death is where the real process of making meaning takes place and where the possibility of reconfigured community lies. The encounter with death serves as an interruption in the life of the witness that reminds him of his interdependence, but the interruption can be quickly forgotten if it is not shared. Narration offers a vehicle for articulating and sharing the witness' reflections on current community and hopes for future community iterations. All six of these modern novels also foreground the ways that present (for the novel) communities are configured in terms of race, gender, class, and religion that leave many people marginalized and disenfranchised. The opening created by the encounter with death and its narration allows for the possibility of rethinking these traditional configurations of community in the light of a shared vulnerability to violence and death.

My first chapter examines the narration of this pivotal encounter with death in rural communities in Ecuador and Guadeloupe. Rural communities are smaller and more intimate than urban ones. People are forced to interact with one another since there may be no one else from

whom to obtain goods or services. Maryse Condé's novel *Traversée de la mangrove* revolves around an unnatural death in such an isolated, rural community at the same time that it reveals the complex current community dynamics in terms of race, class, and gender. At the level of plot, the majority of the novel takes place at a wake, in the physical presence of an unnaturally dead body. The exposure to this body and the coming together of the village inhabitants evoke deep reflection on current community configurations, which opens up the possibility of reconfiguring community in this rural setting. In this case, the presence of Francis Sancher's dead body provokes the witnesses gathered at the wake to think through all of their relationships with him and with the others around them. The encounter with death for at least some of those gathered is a reminder of their own interconnectedness and physical and emotional vulnerability to one another. They are profoundly reminded of the ways they have hurt one another and been injured in return; their lives and their bodies are never fully their own. For a minority of mostly female characters, these reflections suggest the possibility of community reconfiguration beyond traditional affiliations of race, class, and gender.

While Condé's novel explores unnatural death and community in rural Guadeloupe, Alicia Yáñez Cossío's *La cofradía del mullo del vestido de la Virgen Pipona* examines community and death in a small town in the Ecuadorian Andes. The novel highlights the ways that the current community is divided along lines of race and class, and the current configurations are partially remnants of the past history of colonization in the region by both the Incas and the Spanish. In its current configuration, the wealthy, white Benavides women rule over the unnamed town while the indigenous Pando men sit watching in impotence. The two groups' competing claims for land and power fracture the community at many levels. The complex colonial history as well as the insular rural community are thrown into disarray by the violent death of a young child. This graphic death

forces many people to rethink the current iteration of community and opens a possibility for new iterations of community that do not disenfranchise the majority of residents because of their skin color, gender, or class.

The events of both novels focus on the rural community's response to an encounter with unnatural death. While Condé's text literally brings the local inhabitants together under one roof to keep watch over a dead body, Yáñez Cossío's work focuses on the way that the pivotal death reworks community and opens space for further reconfiguration in the future. Yet, the texts do more than just thematize death and community. I argue that witnessing a violent or unnatural death is not sufficient to evoke a reworking of community. The subsequent narration is key to the reworking, and both novels thus continue to explore community and death on the structural level of narration. First, *Traversée* as a text literally enacts the wake. Outside of a brief opening and closing chapter, the novel is constructed of twenty chapters narrated by or about different community members as they stand in the presence of the dead body and reflect. The novel itself becomes the wake and argues for a reconfiguration of community that allows all voices to speak and be heard, that brings together all people and recognizes their interdependence and vulnerability in the face of other human bodies.

La Virgen Pipona has only one narrator, but the novel's text is interspersed with proverbs that reveal the fundamental interconnectedness of the community despite the many conflicts and divisions. Local residents on all sides of these conflicts deploy proverbs or folk wisdom to defend themselves and their actions, and the superfluity of proverbs serves to unite them more than divide them. Despite their struggles over land and power, the inhabitants of this small town share an immense amount of cultural and historical experience. They are fundamentally exposed to and turned toward one another not only bodily but also at the level of language and narration. Almost

all of the townspeople in the novel cite proverbs, sometimes even the same proverbs, to bolster themselves in times of stress, and the narrator also describes them all with the same fond humor. Yáñez Cossío's novel on the narrative level calls attention to a kind of shared humanity that includes the many flaws and inconsistencies that are also a fundamental part of being human. The shared vulnerability the novel argues for is a recognition of shared human flaws and idiosyncrasies.

My second chapter moves from contained and intimate rural communities to communities that are grappling with issues of local identity in the aftermath of European colonization of and eventual withdrawal from much of Africa and the Middle East. The novels here toggle back and forth between specific local communities and issues of community at a larger national level. In such a context, groups of people often try to define a communal or national identity either in strong opposition to the foreign colonizer or in line with the colonizers' culture. Because the stakes are so high in attempting to define large groups of people who can no longer know and recognize each other face to face, the resulting violence is much more violent and graphic. This graphic violence is a constitutive part of both novels this chapter examines: Etel Adnan's *Sitt Marie Rose* and Tayeb Salih's *Mawsim al-Hijra ila' ash-Shamal*. Adnan's novel is set in Lebanon just before and during the 15-year civil war. The titular character is a Lebanese Christian woman who is kidnapped and brutally murdered by Christian militiamen for her work with Muslims and Palestinian refugees. The novel foregrounds the many ways that the community is in conflict over lines of religion, gender, and race. Marie-Rose herself transgresses many of the dividing lines and attempts to reconfigure the community through her own work across divisions, and her violent death in front of her deaf-mute students and the gathered militiamen opens a space for others—the witnesses—to rethink community.

As with the first chapter, the structure of the narration plays a pivotal role in this community reconfiguration. Within the novel, Marie-Rose's death seems to move multiple witnesses to reconsider current relationships and opens a space for reconfiguring those relationships. However, the narrative structure proposes even more radically the possibility of reconfiguring community in the face of violent death. The second half of the novel is divided into cycles of chapters narrated by seven different characters. The group of narrators includes the victim, Marie-Rose, along with at least four of her captors and her classroom full of deaf-mute children who narrate in one, communal voice. There is also one narrator whose position in the text is unclear but who may be another one of the captors. The possibility that this final narrator may be one of the captors is a drastic proposition because this narrator is also the one who displays the most sympathy and empathy for Marie-Rose and who after her death envisions an open and porous community that recognizes all members equally. The novel, then, enacts the very vision of community that it opens up. The potentially subversive narrator speaks alongside the racist, misogynist, and chauvinist militiamen and alongside Marie-Rose and her students. All of the voices, even the most violent, even the most marginalized, are given space in the text. The novel listens to even the most reprehensible of characters even while it condemns his violence and his vision of exclusive community.

The second part of the chapter continues to examine death and community reconfiguration in the context of postcolonial attempts to define national communities, this time in England and the Sudan. Tayeb Salih's *Mawsim al-Hijra ilā ash-Shamāl* similarly centers on not just violent death but incredibly brutal and gory death. The novel turns around not one but two central death scenes, and both events call into question many of the central assumptions about community identity in both postcolonial Sudan and in the English metropole. In both locations, locals attempt

to construct a community identity in opposition to an imagined colonial other, and these attempts mostly center on gender, race, and religion. Two of the three dead bodies are women who complicate any attempts to simplify and homogenize the local community. The two characters who confound simplistic definitions of the communities die atrocious deaths, but their violent deaths impel the narrator to rethink community on multiple levels. His exposure to the narration of both violent deaths (because he is never physically placed before the dead bodies) causes a personal crisis that leaves him stranded in the middle of the Nile calling for help at the end of the book. On the level of narrative structure, Salih's text also complicates notions of clear distinctions between the colonizers and the colonized by incorporating elements of many different genres. The novel alludes to classical English texts like Shakespeare's *Othello* and Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* while also beginning like a traditional Arabic oral tale as told by a *hakawati* or oral storyteller. It also includes quotations from both traditional English poetry and the Qur'an. The novel mixes diverse genres and modes and reveals in its structure the way that the communities of colonizers and colonized in the postcolonial period are not (and really never were) distinct and homogenous. The structure itself reveals the deep interconnectedness and interdependency that Butler argues for as a foundation for a new kind of ethics.

The final chapter of this project moves from issues of national community to community on an even more expansive scale. Both novels in this chapter foreground, more than the previous ones, community on a global or transnational level and the crucial role that narrative plays in making meaning out of violent death. Both Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and John Berger's *To the Wedding* portray an encounter with death as limit and rethinking community as a result of the subsequent narration. Both texts enact a vision of inclusive community both in content and in form. In the novels, witnessing an unnatural death and narrating that experience become a path to

not just individual but communal healing. *Ceremony* examines community on the Laguna Pueblo reservation just after WWII. The local community is fractured along lines of race, class, and gender, and the main character, Tayo, crosses many of these lines with his mixed race status and his post-war emotional breakdowns. Tayo's very body complicates the attempts to define the community as homogenous and insular. Tayo experiences terrible violence as part of the Bataan Death March, yet instead of hating the enemy, he sees them as similar to himself and his community members. Because of Tayo's racial status and his inability to categorically divide human beings and hate the enemies, a group of former friends attempt to kidnap and kill Tayo. He escapes, and he witnesses the men turning on each other and inflicting horrific violence on one of their own members. Tayo's subsequent testimony about his experiences with war violence and with local violence to tribal elders evokes a reconfiguration of community beyond traditional affiliations of race, class, and gender. In fact, Tayo's encounter with violent death and his recounting of the event bring about a kind of healing for him and his community, which in this case even includes the land. Witnessing violent death reveals to Tayo the way that human beings are deeply connected by our own bodily vulnerability to each other in the same way that we are deeply connected to the land that is similarly vulnerable to human activity and destruction.

The novel further pushes this argument about interdependence on a textual level as it interweaves the ongoing narrative with pieces of traditional Laguna Pueblo chants, stories, and ceremonies. The connection between the Laguna Pueblo chants and the 20th century narrative are not always clear or obvious, so the reader must work to make sense of the narrative interruptions. The text thus becomes a dialogue between the two elements that real readers must piece together and help to create. Even the 20th century narrative is already fragmented and disjointed, jumping quickly from past to present and back, a style which demands careful and critical reading to piece

together the story. The content of the story argues that only through the careful telling of and careful listening to a narrative can a violent death evoke the reconfiguration of community. This reconfiguration is figured in the novel as a form of healing, and the structure of the novel invites the real reader to follow in Tayo's footsteps. The reader must work hard to help build Tayo's narrative and in so doing is encouraged to follow Tayo's expansive reconfiguration of community based on a common bodily and environmental vulnerability.

Berger's novel also foregrounds the healing possibility of community reconfiguration after an encounter with death. In this case, the death is an impending one as the main character, Ninon, struggles to face an AIDS diagnosis. The unnatural death is not violent in the way that Salih or Adnan's deaths were violent, but the impending death reveals the physical violence done to the body in the struggle with AIDS as well as the emotional violence enacted upon the AIDS victims in the form of ostracization. Ninon is a young French woman, but her story is narrated mostly by different members of her surrounding community. By the end of the novel, her family and friends come together for her wedding just months before she dies of AIDS. In this case, Ninon's dying body is what literally brings the community together and opens the space for reconfiguring community. Since an AIDS diagnosis when the book was published in 1995 often still meant a quick and ugly death, Ninon's dying body is a kind of exposure to limits. The final pages of the novel recount an imagined death for Ninon in which her body utterly fails, and this failure includes the failure of speech and language. Her impending death brings together the community and impels them to rethink present relationships that marginalize people due to gender, class, and disease.

As with the other novels I examine, *To the Wedding* makes its argument as much on the structural narrative level as in the story. Similar to Silko's text, the novel proposes that witnessing

an unnatural death and the subsequent narration of the encounter can bring about healing and open up space for re-envisioning community. The narrative is made up of chapters narrated by a diverse cast of characters that includes a poor garbage collector and a blind prophet-beggar in Greece side-by-side with Ninon's close friends and family. This structure highlights the way that narratives themselves often necessitate a form of co-creation to come into existence. The reader here must piece together the complicated pieces of the story and listen with as much attention to a garbage collector as to the future groom. The best path for creating the narrative is through close reading and careful listening. This careful listening ultimately allows all of the narrators to speak and brings the reader along with them as they celebrate Ninon's wedding. The community comes together in the face of unnatural death and finds a temporary healing to the pain of marginalization and ostracization. They view the vulnerability of Ninon's body and do not run away in fear but embrace the opportunity to celebrate, to dance, and to be together in the face of their own vulnerability to physical and emotional pain.

All of the novels in this study focus on an unnatural death and on the way that narrating the encounter with the dead or dying body can catalyze community reconfiguration. The novels reveal the deep rifts in many contemporary communities and point to the encounter with material death as a means of rethinking community. The texts also propose that the process of narration is a vital part of this rethinking within both the stories and the structures of the novels. The novels draw attention to the importance of listening to and telling the stories of encounters with unnatural death to move forward in any meaningful way. It is only through the attempt to narrate, to make meaning together out of violence and death, that we may find a renewed basis for modern community. Violence and death are horrific, yet they also remind us how much we rely on one another for continued bodily existence. They remind us that our bodies are never only individual bodies and

instead are always social bodies immersed in a web of human relationships. Those bodies can be supported and nurtured by others, but they can also be injured or killed. It is precisely that vulnerability that ties all human beings together beyond divisions of race, class, gender, and religion. Recognizing our shared vulnerability and hence our interconnectedness and realizing the ethical implications of our own “fragile human body” (to quote Benjamin yet again) is the clearest way to open possibilities for community reconfiguration in the face of modern isolation. Maybe then, we will finally understand that we need each other on deep levels, that “you are already of me, and I am nowhere without you” (Butler, *Precarious Life* 49).

Chapter One

Rural Geographies and Limited Community

My initial consideration of the relationships between death and community begins with two novels, Maryse Condé's *Traversée de la mangrove* (1989) and Alicia Yáñez Cossío's novel *La cofradía del mullo del vestido de la Virgen Pipona* (1985), both of which center on rethinking community in the context of relatively rural, non-urban spaces. The shape and contours of community are always dependent on the local landscape. Therefore, the literal and metaphorical geography of the novels are fundamental in understanding the current community configurations and in any possibility of new configurations. Both novels are set in small rural communities bounded in part by mountains and isolated by distance from urban centers and from other communities. Rural communities are by definition smaller and more isolated than urban ones, community on a smaller and more intimate scale. The local residents have few options for economic and social transactions except with the other inhabitants. There is little room to remove oneself from the current community configurations by finding other social groups, and there are no other neighborhoods or suburbs to move to if one does not like the neighbors. The inhabitants often need each other's services, company, and money more than in a city where residents can find a different grocer, florist, or seamstress if any issues arise. In *Rivière au Sel*, the setting for *Traversée*, for example, there is only one teacher, one mail carrier, etc. The rural landscape forces residents to interact with each other to some degree despite any personal feelings of disdain or animosity. Because of the small scale, any divisions or hierarchies in rural communities are also highly visible and well known. The bounded communities in both novels are deeply divided by

race, class, and gender, and almost all of the local residents in both locations are aware of the divisions that they must live each day.

The isolation of rural communities also entails a greater exposure—emotional and physical—to the surrounding community members. A small act of violence cannot be easily forgotten by finding other friends or moving to another part of town. A violent or unnatural death becomes a major event that all residents witness and experience. There are few possibilities of avoiding contact with a death in the rural geographies of these novels, and the stories or narration of a violent death are passed quickly from resident to resident. The landscape, therefore, plays a crucial role in shaping both the communities themselves and their encounter with unnatural death. In both of these novels, the local residents at least open the possibility of rethinking community when faced with a local, unnatural death. Specifically, Condé's novel takes up questions of a community's encounter with and response to unnatural death in rural Guadeloupe, where these issues are deeply interwoven with a violent, racialized past. The novel is set in *Rivière au Sel*, a small coastal village profoundly riven by divisions of gender, class, and race. Yet, the community comes together for the space of one night for the wake of a mysterious stranger. It is during this wake—in the material presence of unnatural death—that the community begins to rethink itself. The weight of past relationships—of past grudges, insults, and crimes—is in the forefront of the characters' minds as they reflect on life during and after their encounter with death.

Yáñez Cossío's novel, published just a few years before Condé's, confronts similar issues of how a violent death can catalyze community reconfigurations, this time in the context of Ecuador's complicated history of colonization first by the Incas and then by the Spanish. The central conflict of the novel is about competing historical claims to land and power, and both groups dwell on past events as they seek to maintain or overthrow the current power structures. Yáñez Cossío's novel is

set in a small Andean town ruled by a group of white women whose families own the majority of fertile land in the region after tricking the patriarchal indigenous family out of their share years ago. On one level, the current community configuration complicates traditional hierarchies by making the women appear to be the clear oppressors in the novel. The women are also on the side of traditional patriarchal institutions such as the military and the church while the patriarchal indigenous group is aligned with social justice. Only with the accidental death of a young child do the women ultimately lose control of the village. The encounter with the dead and bloody body and the narration of the story throughout the town trigger social unrest as the local inhabitants work to reconfigure community in ways that do not disenfranchise the majority of the population.

In both texts, a violent death triggers a radical rethinking of community. A violent death exposes the witnesses to limits (of life, narration, and the human) as well as exposes their own bodily vulnerability and interdependence. The death in both novels is a material presence in space, and the witnesses are impelled to tell their story of the encounter with death. It is through the narration of the encounter that any reconfiguration might take place. In Condé's case, the act of narrating their encounters with the dead man moves multiple village residents to seek a more open and inclusive form of community elsewhere, a decision that would literally reconfigure the community of *Rivière au Sel* and the communities to which the characters are headed. Even if the characters do not act on their decisions, many of them reflect upon their own position in the community and the current relationships by envisioning something different for the future. On a structural level, the novel argues for a reconfiguration of community that does not exclude members based on race, class, or gender by including the voices of all those gathered before the dead body. The characters are portrayed somewhat sympathetically even when they have behaved

reprehensibly, and the novel itself becomes the narrative of an encounter with death that models the very community it proposes.

La Virgen Pipona does not as explicitly show the narration of the pivotal death, but the entire novel is predicated upon the way that narration in the form of gossip and storytelling is a foundational part of rural community. However, in the face of the young child's death, even the leading townswomen are at a loss for words. The death impedes the women's own narration and obstructs Manuel Pando, a local revolutionary who tries to explain the death in terms of local politics. This failure of narration leads to further unrest, and the women's husbands step in to take over and call on the military to control the situation. Community reconfiguration within the bounds of the story is possible only after unsuccessful attempts to narrate and make meaning out of the child's death.

At the structural level, Yáñez Cossío's text foregrounds language and narration in ways that point to an open vision of community.³ The narrator as well as many of the main characters recite proverbs at critical moments in their lives, which reveals how constructed are many of the divisions in the local community configuration. These characters' lives are intertwined and interdependent to such a degree that their narration and language mimic each other in spite of differences in race, class, and gender. The novel's organization reinforces the idea of interconnectedness because it pushes all of the characters and events into one long narrative without formal chapter divisions. In a way, this structure forces the voices to come together and coexist in the same way that Condé's multiple narrators do. *La Virgen Pipona* on a narrative level calls attention to the shared

³The novel not only thematizes the relationship between community and narration, but on a larger level, it participates in important conversations about literature and writing in Latin America. In particular, the novel is part of a literary community thinking through problems of hybridity in an Andean context. For a deeper discussion of the Andean context and the literary community with which Yáñez Cossío is in dialogue, see chapter three of Estelle Tarica's *The Inner Life of Mestizo Nationalism* and chapter three of Ángel Rama's *Writing Across Cultures: Narrative Transculturation in Latin America*.

vulnerability of being human—a vulnerability to others’ physical violence as well as vulnerability to others’ and our own idiosyncrasies—while the novel’s structure reveals the interconnectedness that is a constitutive part of being human.

While the central deaths in the novels create a space of possibility, neither text narrates a clear path forward. Condé’s novel ends with hints of future reconfiguration as multiple characters ponder radical transformations in their lives, including leaving the rural village. However, the novel concludes without indicating whether any of them take action. While the multivocal structure enacts its own form of community, even that structure leaves in place traditional gender divisions by having women narrate in first person and men in third person. They are textually marked as distinct even while the structure attempts to propose a more inclusive form of community, so the reconfiguration of community is not yet complete. *La Virgen Pipona* also leaves the future as an open question. The white Benavides women are no longer in complete control of the town, but there is no clear indication of who will take over next. Neither of the competing groups offers a satisfactory vision of community. The ending thus leaves the village leadership in question, but it seems to hold out for new community configurations that give neither the white women nor the patriarchal indigenous group full control of the village. The novel’s organization is also less than hopeful since the interconnectedness it argues for is based on human foibles and inconsistencies. The community is more one of shared flaws than one of common interest or social justice. In both cases, Condé and Yáñez Cossío gesture toward the possibility of community reformulation without completing the process within the story or the narrative structure.

Even though *Traversée de la mangrove* ends without fully enacting any community reconfiguration, the novel’s primary concern at the level of story and of structure is still with opening the possibility of new iterations of community. Readers are already forced by the structure

of the novel to reflect on notions of community before they even begin to sort out the complex web of relationships that make up the community of *Rivière au Sel*. The story is neither told by a single narrator nor structured in a chronological or linear manner, but instead, each member of the community divulges pieces of the story. The novel is bookended by an opening section entitled “Le serein” (dusk) and a closing section entitled “Le devant-jour” (dawn). These two sections are short, and the bulk of the novel is situated between them in the section titled “La nuit” (night). In this middle section, each chapter’s title is the name of one of the village inhabitants and is narrated by or about that character. The night section brings together the voices of many of the villagers who are physically gathered for a wake. The novel thus becomes the wake by bringing together these diverse voices and giving them room to speak that they may not actually have in village life. The novel structurally re-creates the village wake, but the structural wake proposes a more inclusive form of community than the wake as described in the story. The wake in the novel re-inscribes many of the divisions and prejudices that already exist in the local community. The novel, on the other hand, gives voice to all of the residents equally. In fact, the section begins and ends with chapters about two of the most marginalized community members: Moïse the postman and Xantippe the grief-crazed outcast. The stories of Moïse, Xantippe, and other marginalized community members are given as much or even more room than the stories of wealthy and powerful community members. On a structural level, Condé’s novel proposes a form of community that not only comes together to share space after their encounter with material death, but a form of community that gives equal voice to all residents and listens to the thoughts and reflections of the lowly postman as much as the aristocratic businessman. The residents may be an accidental community on a story level, but the structure of the novel suggests that reconfiguration is possible even in accidental communities provided there is close listening to the sharing of all

community members equally regardless of gender, race or class. Our own communities in the contemporary United States still have not learned this fundamental lesson of careful listening across divisions and would do well to learn from Condé's fictional proposition.

The novel's form not only models a kind of community based on equal sharing and listening, it also argues that the community members need each other on a deeper level than that of basic economics and survival. They are fundamentally dependent on each other and vulnerable to each other even while they narrate individually. While the central and unifying narrative elements of the novel are the arrival in Rivière au Sel of the stranger, Francis Sancher, and his mysterious death, this narrative is only revealed bit by bit through the reflections of eighteen individual community members at his wake. In fact, while any kind of action or events at the story level focus on Sancher, the bulk of the characters' reflections are about their own relationships to Sancher and the ways that his appearance in the village highlights the existing fractures in the small, rural society. The story itself sometimes appears almost an afterthought in the novel because the structural elements seem more concerned with revealing the fault lines of the community than telling a singular narrative. Despite its scattered nature, the story cannot be told without the coming together of the small village; only with communal participation does the story become a relative whole. This community is a community of necessity as a rural community, and it is also a community of necessity in terms of the novel's structure. The novel itself and its own narrative only exist when the community comes together in the face of unnatural death. The structure of *Traversée* both models an inclusive and egalitarian form of community and suggests that community stories need multiple narrators and perspectives to become whole. This radical suggestion calls into question the legitimacy of traditional historical narratives told from a third person, outside perspective and proposes that narrative itself needs full community participation.

The novel further reinforces this focus on community and its internal tensions and divisions at the content level. It centers on the appearance of an outsider or stranger in a small village. The confined space of a rural village is ripe territory for deeply ingrained community divisions, and the community divisions take on greater force when further limited by the oceanic borders of a small island. To put things in perspective, the combined area of all of the islands in the archipelago comprising Guadeloupe is less than two-thirds the size of Rhode Island, the smallest US state (“Guadeloupe”; “Rhode Island”).⁴ In this context, space is more limited, land more significant, and place more defined. Other possible iterations of community are removed by miles of water, and leaving is difficult when a small village like *Rivière au Sel* is surrounded on all sides by forest, mountains, and water. However, the entrance of the outsider, Francis Sancher, destabilizes these seemingly fixed community configurations, and his death allows for possibilities otherwise unthinkable in isolated, rural Guadeloupe. Sancher keeps to himself and tries to keep his past hidden except when he speaks of his impending death due to a family curse, yet many village inhabitants view the stranger as either a threat to established visions of operative community or a sign of hope that that vision is mutable.

The idea of stable community is already problematized in Sancher’s name. As pieces of his past are revealed through different characters, the reader learns that he was born Francisco Sanchez but goes by Francis Sancher in French-speaking Guadeloupe. Many scholars have pointed out that his last name in the Spanish spelling is similar to “sans chez” or without home in French, an appropriate moniker for his character (De Souza 185; Larrier 88). Sancher is a self-described wanderer trying to escape his family’s past; in the process, he refuses any rooted

⁴ Specifically, Wikipedia puts Guadeloupe at 1,628 square kilometers (629 square miles) while Rhode Island’s area is 2677.56 square kilometers (1033.81 square miles) according to the US Census Bureau.

existence or idea of home. Francis Sancher's name in the French spelling is reminiscent of "sans cher" or without loved ones.⁵ This meaning also aptly describes Sancher who shows himself even in his time in Rivière au Sel to be a solitary figure with a mysterious past and no real connection to other people. When two different local women successively move in with Sancher and are impregnated by him, he reacts the first time by secretly trying to abort the child (109), and the second time he cries and then avoids further physical intimacy with the woman (195-6). He avoids emotional intimacy with both women and tries to avoid creating familial bonds in the form of children. This lack of loved ones and home is an integral part of Francis' character, a trait to which his name already alludes. He is without firm community bonds or connections, yet it is his very arrival and presence in rural Guadeloupe that renders visible the current community configuration in Rivière au Sel.

Along with Sancher's name and isolation, the relationships between the novel's characters interrogate ideas of community. The characters' diverse reflections during Sancher's wake reveal the intense community divisions along lines of race, class, and gender, as they stood prior to Sancher's arrival and death. Their community is a community of necessity; they live together in the isolation of rural Guadeloupe and must find ways to co-exist. Yet, this forced living side-by-side does not mean the community forms a cohesive group nor does it mean that the inhabitants of Rivière au Sel actually share their lives. In fact, almost all of the characters reflect during Sancher's wake on their own social isolation. They ironically come together only to feel distant and alone. For instance, the first chapter titled with a character's name is about Moïse, the local postman. Most of the chapter focuses on Moïse's intense loneliness "parce que les femmes lui barraient

⁵ I mention here just two of the possible ways of deconstructing Francis Sancher's name, but Larrier has a more extensive list of the different valences and homophones suggested by his last name and their implications. See Larrier "A Roving 'I'" (91).

l'entrée de leurs coeurs et de leurs couches, que les hommes se moquaient de lui et qu'au fil des années ses rêves avaient séché comme pié-bwa en Carême" ("how the women were barring him from their hearts and beds, how the men were ridiculing him and how, as time went by, his dreams had withered like a tree during the dry season"; 30; Philcox 14). Moïse is marginalized by both men and women in the village, which leaves little room for him to experience any form of active community. His name makes his isolation even more obvious by contrasting lonely and powerless Moïse with his namesake Moses. While the Biblical Moses is a symbol of bringing people together and leading an entire community out of slavery, Moïse is lonely and ineffective. His nickname further highlights his status as a social outcast since the other villagers call him "Maringoin," a local word for mosquito (29). This nickname refers partially to his job as the mailman who buzzes around sharing local gossip as a function of his work. However, it also points to the villagers' attitudes toward Moïse as something less than human who is more of an annoyance than a full member of the community.

Other characters similarly think about the lack of positive social bonds in their tiny, rural village. They may occupy the same space, but the community members bemoan the lack of human connection. They are doubly isolated by geography and by emotional isolation in a community of necessity rather than an active community. Thus, Léocadie Timothée, the retired schoolteacher, describes her home as "la maison où elle vivait seule, entourée de souvenirs, de photos, de chats somnolents" ("the house where she lived alone, surrounded by memories, photographs, dozing cats"; 14; Philcox 2). Her description of the house is simple but sad. She moved to Rivière au Sel as an act of service, hoping that teaching poor, rural children would better the race, as she says. However, the community never welcomes her, and she grows bitter and hard-hearted in her loneliness. She returns at the end of each day to a house peopled by old memories and cats rather

than by intimate human relationship. Other community members spend Francis' wake reflecting on similar feelings of isolation. Loulou Lameaulnes, the wealthiest man in town, asks himself repeatedly about his mother: "Pourquoi ne l'avait-elle pas aimé?" ("Why hadn't she loved him?"; 123; Philcox 96). Loulou cannot discern a reason that his mother never loved him, but he cannot help repeating the question in his mind. He may be wealthy and powerful in Rivière au Sel, but he still feels inadequate when he remembers his dead mother's curses and hatred. Despite his wealth and power, he feels a sense of isolation from other human beings and expresses his frustration by scorning the company of other villagers. No one in Rivière au Sel—from the local schoolteacher to the wealthiest man in town—recounts stories of connection during Sancher's wake. Rather, the locals pass the wake remembering past insults and losses, and the only sense of connection they seem to express is to the dead man who arrived as a complete stranger. Because Francis was so mysterious and unknown, the villagers can project their own ideas onto him; they write their hopes, dreams, and fears on his body. As they gather before his now dead body, they see the material representation of their projections. The material presence of death opens a space for the villagers to confront their deepest hopes and fears and respond accordingly.

The villagers' responses reflect not only on their emotional and geographic isolation but also on the current, local community configuration. The characters' reflections after Sancher's death reveal the deep fractures in Rivière au Sel along racial and class lines. The chapter on Moïse, for instance, describes his childhood: "À l'école, la maîtresse l'oubliait, mi-Chinois, mi-Nègre" ("At school, the teacher forgot about him, half Chinese, half black"; 39; Philcox 22). Moïse's unusual racial mixture fixes his status at the margins of Rivière au Sel. Even the local prostitute rejects him because she is afraid of what others would say if she has sex with him. Race is clearly an important factor in determining the configuration of community here, and the current community is not one

predicated on inclusiveness. Therefore, other characters frequently single out the local Indian family in town despite the growing prosperity of their descendants. In fact, Léocadie Timothée describes the village perceptions of the family in the very first section of the novel. According to her, as the first and only Indian family in the area, they are already set apart. To add insult to the injury of their racial difference, the first Ramsarans opt to grow bananas rather than the traditional sugar cane. The locals react in anger: “Depuis quand est-ce que les Indiens font la loi ici?” (“Since when do the Indians lay down the law around here?”; 21; Philcox 8). The locals are angry not only at the changes the Ramsarans bring to the agricultural economy of the community but also at their racial foreignness. However, instead of quietly acquiescing to their place at the margins of the community, the Ramsarans compound their racial difference with socioeconomic differences. They become increasingly prosperous, and this further angers many villagers who complain that they “ne savent pas rester à leur place” (“don’t know their place”; 21; 8). The racial and economic difference of the family evokes outrage and envy from other villagers who may have a more socially acceptable racial makeup than that of the Ramsarans. They are still invited to official village ceremonies and are respected by most people because of their economic successes, but their differences isolate the Ramsarans from full acceptance in the rural community. Their social mobility also reveals the way that community configurations are never quite stable although many people attempt to reify them, often through verbal and physical violence.

The Ramsarans’ racial difference also keeps them from being accepted by the wealthy Lameaulnes family. When one of the Ramsaran sons attempts to speak with Loulou Lameaulnes’ daughter, she insults him with a racist epithet used in the Caribbean to refer to someone of Indian origin: “kouli malaba” (179). The Lameaulnes’ son, Aristide, expresses similar scorn of those in the village with less white ancestry than him. When Aristide stops at the local bar, the narrator

explains that he “avait toujours méprisé ces hommes à cause de la couleur de leur peau” (“had always despised these men because of the color of their skin”; 77; Philcox 56). The Lameaulnes family, as the whitest family in town, judges the rest of the village inhabitants based on how light their skin is or how much white blood they have. Similar divisions and hierarchies exist even among the other villagers as evidenced by Moïse and by Rosa Ramsaran. Rosa has a light-skinned daughter she adores who dies in infancy, and she cannot bring herself to love her darker-skinned daughter. The community is thus fractured along multiple racial fault lines before the arrival of Francis Sancher. Francis, however, appears unconcerned with skin color; instead, his major concern is a fear of his own ancestral past. He sleeps with Mira Lameaulnes who is known for her light-skinned beauty as well as with Vilma Ramsaran, Rosa’s dark-skinned daughter. He represents a vision where race is not one of the primary social divisions, and his death opens a space for the villagers to reflect on their own racial divisions. His wake literally brings all of the characters together into one space regardless of their racial status, and the characters’ stories before his dead body show some of them rethinking the current community configuration in favor of a more fluid and more inclusive vision.

The racial fault lines that shape community in *Rivière au Sel* are also deeply intertwined with issues of class. The whitest family is also the richest family in town. The poorest and darkest skinned inhabitants of *Rivière au Sel* are the recent Haitian immigrants who perform much of the manual labor in the region. They are frequently singled out in the chapters as lazy, dirty, and ill mannered—descriptions that have plagued large immigrant groups in many places, including the contemporary US. One of the local Haitian immigrants attends Francis’ wake, and his chapter immediately identifies him by his origins. While some chapter titles associate characters with their profession such as postman, storyteller, or historian, Désinor’s name is followed by “l’Haïtien”

["The Haitian"]. He is the only character to bluntly admit that he came to the wake not because he cared about Sancher but because of the free food. Other characters, such as Loulou and Aristide Lameaulnes, despise the deceased, but they manage to cloak their feelings in some semblance of respectability. Loulou may be getting drunk at the wake, but he remains relatively silent and reserved during the solemn evening (130). Désinor, on the other hand, gorges himself on food and eats with his hands. He even admits that "il s'en réjouit, car il le faisait exprès, d'être si sale" ("He behaved so uncouthly on purpose and took delight in it"; 198; Philcox 163). Désinor already feels so marginalized because of his low status in the racial and class hierarchies of rural Guadeloupe that he takes pleasure in upsetting the other villagers. No one ever asks him his life story; they just see his dark skin and his poverty and assume they know enough. Because they do not recognize him as fully human, as an equal member of the community, he refuses to recognize their social conventions. To reinforce the scorn directed toward the only Haitian laborer at the wake, the chapter ends when "l'estomac rassasié de Désinor emit un rot bruyant et ses voisins le regardèrent, horrifiés par la présence de ce Nègre malotru" ("Désinor's full stomach let out a loud belch and his neighbors looked at him, horrified by the presence of this vulgar nigger"; 203; Philcox 168). Not only does the third person narrator end the chapter with Désinor's bodily functions rather than with his mental reflections, but the last phrase also involves a racial insult. These details further highlight Désinor's status as completely shut out of the community based on his race and class. This small village community marginalizes many residents such as the dark-skinned Haitian immigrants, and this migrant retaliates by flouting their conventions of politeness. The villagers judge him and others like him based not only on their skin color but also on their socioeconomic status. And yet, the space of the wake allows all villagers to come together. Death, often called the great equalizer, brings even Désinor into the same space as the community's wealthier and lighter-

skinned inhabitants. While normally considered an outsider, Désinor is allowed into the physical community of the village only by Francis' death, which suspends overt community divisions for the space of one night. And, in terms of the structure, Désinor's narrative is given eight pages in the novel, the same number as the wealthy Sylvestre Ramsaran and only one less than the prominent Loulou Lameaulnes. The novel as a textual wake gives equal voice even to the poorest and most marginalized inhabitant of Rivière au Sel.

Besides being divided along racial and class lines, the community of Rivière au Sel is also clearly gendered from the opening of the novel. The rural inhabitants are further isolated from truly sharing their lives by patriarchal gender divisions. Already, in the first chapter, at Francis Sancher's wake, the men and women materially enact clear patriarchal gender roles. The men sit on the terrace drinking rum and telling jokes while the women prepare the food and recite psalms and prayers over the dead body (24). However, the community is also gendered on a very material level in the text. The main part of the text consists of 20 chapters titled with the names of 19 different characters, all of whom live in the village. All of the women narrate their chapters in the first person while most of the men's chapters are narrated in the third person. The two male characters who narrate in first person are both marginalized figures. One is a young boy trying to reject the traditional patriarchal male role as dictated by his father, and the other is a grief-crazed man who has given up the trappings of village life like a house and a job and spends his time wandering the woods alone. Neither character fits easily into traditional patriarchal gender roles, and their very presence in the novel denaturalizes traditional patriarchal definitions of masculinity as strong or violent.

This gender difference in narrative voice is important to think about in the context of what it means for the narrative and its propositions about community and death. First, it marks the way

that the current configuration of community is gendered according to traditional patriarchal systems in which the home is the province of women, and the public sphere is the province of men.⁶ In some ways, the first person voice can be read as the voice of the private sphere, the home and family, which is the traditional domain of women and children. The women narrate in first person because their place in the current configuration of relations is usually caring for hearth and home. They are private individuals without a public identity. The first person narration thus relegates the women and two transgressive males to a private world of emotion rather than to the public arena of politics and communal affairs. For instance, while the women speak for themselves in the novel, they are expected to play supporting roles in public village life such as reciting psalms at the wake rather than participating in the storytelling, joking, and drinking that the men enjoy. They are the background noise at the wake rather than the center of anyone's attention, so they remain inside the house taking care of the domestic details. The first person is more than just the voice of the private sphere, however; it is also the voice of the modern, isolated individual. Their first person narratives are symptomatic of modernity and its isolation as much as they are anything else. However, the first person voice need not be only confining. The first person female narration can also be empowering as Renée Larrier interprets it: "That the women relate their own stories while the men do not...shows that Condé is adamant about allowing marginalized voices to emerge" (89). The women get to tell their own stories in their own words; no one speaks for them. They have voices and personalities of their own revealed through their own words. Although the first person narration links the women to the domestic sphere, it also empowers them in that they

⁶ For a concise description of the way that domestic ideology functions and the ways it has, since the nineteenth century in Western Europe and the US, "engendered...sexual and spatial divisions," see Gillian Brown's chapter in McKeon's *Theory of the Novel* (481).

structure and interpret their own narratives. They narrate their own encounter with unnatural death without an intermediary.

The majority of the male characters (excepting the two mentioned above) have their stories told for them in the third person. One way to interpret this narration style is that the men are public actors and thus have access to the public and historical register of third person. They are important enough that someone else recounts their stories. Yet, it also disempowers the male characters. An unknown narrator interprets their words, thoughts, and gestures for them. This very clear difference in narration style is a clear textual marker of the gendering of the small community. The men and women's thoughts and reflections are presented in distinct and separate ways because their experiences of community are different based on their gendered position in *Rivière au Sel*. But, what might the gendered differentiation between the two narrative styles have to say about the larger questions of death and community that the novel explores? If first person narration is interpreted as powerful, then the gendered division reverses traditional patriarchal power relations and empowers women while disempowering the male characters. Looking at the end of many of the chapters also reveals that some of the women make strong declarative statements about leaving and seeking more open community elsewhere while the men's chapters often end with question marks. Perhaps the first person narrative, in this case, also marks a certain kind of self-reflection that is also a prerequisite for rethinking community. They narrate their own encounters with death in their own voices, which highlights their figurative closeness to the dead body. The men's third person tales distance them from their own narration of the encounter with death. They become bourgeois individuals who keep death at a safe distance. The female characters are the only ones who stay narratively close to the death as physical body and as limit, and this closeness helps them to read their own lives more carefully. The women, unlike the men,

manage to move beyond moping and self-pity to tell their stories, opening the possibility of new iterations of community.

Despite this link between first person narrative and self-reflection, the gendered chapter divisions also seem to indicate that the process of community reconfiguration remains incomplete in *Traversée* even at the level of the text. The men and women's chapters remain narratively distinct, and the women are the only ones who seem able to rethink community in the face of death. A more hopeful (but hope is not the same as reality) enactment of community on a structural level would acknowledge that there are men who might be capable of the reflection and deep listening necessary to move from an encounter with death to a reconfiguration of community. There are men who could remain close to death and reflect on it just as there are women who would try to hide it or sterilize it. A fully fluid and inclusive community would not relegate all men to staying put and letting others narrate for them, nor would it assume that all women have the capacity to listen closely and envision a different future. In this way, the work of the novel remains unfinished.

Yet, there are two characters who are exceptions to this gendered narrative division and who might be read as a sign of possibilities yet to come. The novel's final character chapter is narrated by the local crazy man, Xantippe. Xantippe's name already places him among the women since it is one of the Latinized spellings of Socrates' wife's name. In English, Xantippe has come to designate a woman who is shrewish and ill-tempered ("Xantippe"). While Condé's character Xantippe is not shrewish, he is more marginalized than the other men in the text, living outside the physical boundaries of the community without a job or income. Because he wanders around the countryside of Guadeloupe and lives alone in the woods after the tragic deaths of his wife and children, the other villagers think he is crazy. Xantippe, despite being physically male, actually

seems more aligned with females in the novel since his name is often a woman's name, he narrates in first person like the female characters, and, like the novel's women, he is marginalized from local public life.

Yet, the content of Xantippe's narration also links him with a sort of divine masculinity. In the first lines of his chapter, he describes an Adamesque move of naming creation: "J'ai nommé tous les arbres de ce pays. Je suis monté à la tête du morne, j'ai crié leur nom et ils ont répondu à mon appel" ("I named all the trees of this island. I climbed to the top of the hill and cried their name, and they answered my call"; 241; Philcox 201). Xantippe's opening declaration depicts a god-like act of naming the landscape and aligns him with the Judeo-Christian figure of Adam. According to the second creation story in the Book of Genesis, Adam was the first man, and he was tasked with naming creation. Xantippe's narration clearly echoes this story of a male figure given dominion over the land, and he explicitly identifies this process of naming and creation with male sexuality. He asserts, "En un mot, j'ai nommé ce pays. Il est sorti de mes reins dans une giclée de foutre" ("In a word, I named this land. It spurted from my loins in a jet of sperm"; 242; Philcox 202). Xantippe is thus creator as well as namer of the local landscape, but the creation is exclusively masculine without any female participation, a kind of mystical parthenogenesis. Xantippe does not need a female egg to unite with his sperm or a uterus in which to grow and protect a baby; he needs only his own sperm. This masculine, sexualized creative act sounds even more radical in the French, where the term used for sperm, "foutre," is a vulgar term, which in verb form means something more like "fuck" in English. He describes a violent, sexual creation, yet he also ends his chapter rejecting violence against Francis Sancher because "le temps de la vengeance est passé" ("the time for revenge is over"; 245; Philcox 205). Xantippe links creation to

a violent, masculine sexuality, but he disavows real violence in the community after losing his wife and children when jealous people set his home on fire.

Xantippe, then, stands at the margins of masculinity and femininity. He narrates in the first person like the women of *Rivière au Sel*, and sharing a name with Socrates' wife further marks him as feminine. Yet, he also describes himself as a male divine figure. Despite this masculinity, he rejects violence as a solution to community divisions unlike many of the prominent men in the community. While other local men espouse a patriarchal vision of the world in which men are associated with violence and power, Xantippe chooses not to continue the cycle of violence. Instead, he focuses on the natural world while mostly disregarding the human community in *Rivière au Sel*. Xantippe's complex relationship to gender and to community cannot be contained by the local vision of aggressive, patriarchal masculinity, so he remains at the margins of the community straddling the masculine and feminine. His very gender androgyny reveals the constructed nature of the community's gender divisions. He is living proof in the community that masculinity is not somehow naturally linked to violence nor is femininity naturally linked to creating and nurturing life. The position of his chapter as the closing of the section narrated by and about specific villagers also functions as a final destabilizing factor amidst all of the other characters' fixed ideas of community. Xantippe and his non-traditional gender performance destabilize the assertions of all the characters who come before him.

Along with Xantippe, the young boy, Joby, is the only other male character who narrates in first person. There is another young male character whose chapter is narrated in third person, but that young man strongly identifies with Francis Sancher. Joby, on the other hand, describes his only encounter with Sancher as bizarre and frightening. Joby is forced to flee as Sancher stumbles after him in the forest (98). Furthermore, Joby explicitly links himself with his mother as opposed

to his violent and oppressive father, Loulou Lameaulnes. After refusing to kiss his dead grandmother at her funeral, Loulou forces Joby to attend Francis' wake "pour que je voie un mort et me comporte comme un homme devant lui" ("so that I would see a corpse and behave like a man"; 93; Philcox 70). Loulou expects his young son to behave like an adult male, and he verbally berates Joby when he does not live up to his standards of masculinity. Rather than trying to be Loulou's idea of a good son, Joby cares little for his father's good opinion. Instead, he fantasizes about his death: "Je me demande si d'autres garçons détestent leur père comme moi. Je voudrais qu'il meure. J'aimerais qu'il soit allongé là devant moi à place de Francis Sancher" ("I wonder if other boys hate their father like I do. I wish he would die. I wish it was him stretched out in front of me instead of Francis Sancher"; 95; Philcox 71). Joby is a male, but he connects more with his mother than with his hated father.

Like Xantippe, Joby is a feminized figure in some ways; he is young and frequently scared. He prefers the company of his mother and his old wet nurse over that of his father and older brothers. He aligns himself with the women in his life rather than with the violent and aggressive masculinity represented by his father, Loulou, yet he does so by wishing his father dead. This violent hatred for his father problematizes Joby's place in the feminine sphere and links him with the violent and aggressive masculinity he so despises. Joby, thus, is not completely feminized in the text. Perhaps this is an indication that in the future, Joby will become more like his father and eventually move to the sphere of third-person adult male narrators. In the novel's present, however, he is removed from the traditional masculine sphere and is not allowed to participate in public village life much like Xantippe. Both characters are biologically male, but their marginalization and alignment with some female traits allows them to speak in the first person like all of the female characters in the text. They are both marginalized figures whose gender androgyny

reveals the constructed nature of Rivière au Sel's gendered community and gestures toward the possibility of future community reconfigurations that do not divide community members so clearly based upon their gender.

In spite of the hopeful possibility of Xantippe and Joby's gender ambiguity, the current community configuration remains clearly divided along gender lines. The chapter endings reinforce the village's gender divisions since the women's chapters often end with decisive statements while the men's chapters end in questions or in unimportant details. Sancher's arrival and death in Rivière au Sel act as the catalyst for life-changing decisions by many of the female inhabitants of the town. For instance, Mira Lameaulnes, the only character with two chapters to her name, ends her first chapter by deciding to run away from her family home to move in with Francis Sancher. She ends the chapter saying, "J'ai descendu la route" ("I set off down the road"; 64; Philcox 44). She has made her decision and is concretely acting on it rather than being a passive participant in village life. She defies the sexual mores of her rural village to move in with the mysterious stranger, an act of rebellion against the strict confines of Rivière au Sel. She is no longer willing to let the closed community dictate her personal behavior. Her second chapter is even more decisive. After leaving Sancher and giving birth to his son in her family's home, Mira decides at his wake to leave Rivière au Sel and claims, "Ma vraie vie commence avec sa mort" ("My real life begins with his death"; 231; Philcox 193). She refuses to submit herself to the arrogance, violence, and condescension of her wealthy family and instead decides to take her son away. She will not humble herself in front of her family or the village inhabitants after her sexual transgression, but rather, she will leave the village with head held high and seek her future on "les chemins du monde" ("the paths of this world"; 231; Philcox 193). Mira will no longer allow the community of Rivière au Sel to dictate the possibilities allowed for her as a young woman. In this

case, the connection between Sancher's unnatural death and the potential for a revision of community is explicit. Mira reflects on her life and the current community configuration in the presence of his dead body and narrates this encounter. Her narration brings with it a possibility for positive change in her life and that of her son. Mira wants to leave this fractured community she was born into to seek new iterations of community that will not judge her based on her light skin, prominent family, powerful sexuality, or gender.

Mira's stepmother Dinah similarly gains courage to leave Mira's violent and controlling father from her reflections on Sancher and his death. She encounters the limit of life and narration, and at the end of her own narration, she asserts, "Je quitterai Loulou et Rivière au Sel. Je prendrai mes garçons avec moi. Je chercherai le soleil et l'air et la lumière pour ce qui me reste d'années à vivre....Ce que je sais c'est que je les chercherai!" ("I'm going to leave Loulou and Rivière au Sel. I'll take my sons with me. I'm going to look for the sun and the air and the light for what's left of the years to live....What I do know is that I'm going to look for them"; 109; Philcox 84). Dinah ends her first-person narrative having decided to radically change her life. She will leave rural Guadeloupe, which is frequently characterized in the novel by its oppressive tropical landscape, and she will seek sun, air, and light away from the confines of the tropical mountains and the confines of the divided village community. Her decisiveness is further highlighted in the original French version by an exclamation point, and hers is the only chapter of the novel that ends so emphatically. While Dinah had little actual contact with Sancher, she fantasized about him in solitude. Like other characters, she projected her own hopes for the future onto his body. When his body dies, she is inspired to search for her dreams in reality away from Rivière au Sel. Sancher's unnatural death propels Dinah to re-envision her expectations of life within the human community and gives her the courage to seek out her vision elsewhere.

Another woman, Dodose Pélagie, also resolves to change her life because of her encounters with Sancher and her ruminations at his wake. Dodose's son, Sonny, has some kind of mental disability after a brain hemorrhage at birth. Sancher reveals to Dodose that he is a doctor and wants to help Sonny. Dodose rejects his offer of help after years of living at the margins of village life because of her abnormal son. Yet, Sancher's death moves Dodose to seek other medical opinions about Sonny at any hospital she can. She, too, plans to leave her inattentive husband and the judgments of Rivière au Sel to find help for her son. She ends her narration with the hopeful statement that "Voici venu le temps de mon re-commencement" ("Now is the time for me to start over again"; 214; Philcox 177). Only after the encounter with Francis' sudden and unnatural death does Dodose find the determination to leave and begin again in a place where her son might find healing or at least acceptance in a larger community. Rosa Ramsaran also decides to alter her life in a major way based on her reflections after Sancher's death. She decides during the course of the wake to go to her only daughter, whom she has neither loved nor treated well, and ask for forgiveness. She is motivated to heal one of the many rifts in the fabric of village community by Sancher's unexpected death. All of these women come into contact with the stranger Francis Sancher and with his dead body. They end their first-person narratives about their experiences with life-altering decisions about their own relationships to the divided community of Rivière au Sel. Many of them resolve to leave and seek their futures in places where community might be more inclusive than a rural Guadeloupean village. The novel never makes clear whether the women actually make good on their resolutions, but at the very least, they seem determined to try. Their encounter with death and their subsequent first-person narration of it impel them to actively seek to reconfigure community both by leaving their current community and by seeking out a more inclusive and open vision of community.

While many of the women's chapter's end with decisive statements, the men's chapters end most often in questions or in mundane details rather than in life-changing resolutions. The men who do not tell their own stories are perhaps too removed from the death to recognize their shared humanity with Sancher. They do not narrate their own encounter with death and do not, therefore, manage to move beyond their complaints to rethink community. While some of the men's chapters show them thinking about leaving the community, the narration wanders away from these reflections to end in less decisive ways than the women's chapters. All three chapters about male characters who dream of leaving repeat the one word sentence "Partir" or "to leave," which is an echo of Caribbean poet Aimé Césaire in *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. Césaire is describing leaving France to return to the Caribbean, while Condé's male characters reference leaving rural Guadeloupe. Césaire's narrator is returning to the Caribbean after a long absence, so his "partir" references a clear destination. The men of *Traversée*, however, dream of vague and distant places away from their island home, and most of them have never left before. One of the characters who dreams of leaving is Moïse the postman, but at the end of his chapter he seems to resign himself to village life: "Il inclina très bas la tête et mêla sa voix à celle du chœur" ("He bent his head very low and mingled his voice with the choir of others"; 48; Philcox 30). Moïse may think of leaving the community of which he is barely a member, but in the end he joins his voice with the voices of the women reciting psalms and hymns. He not only bows his head, but he bends it "very low" as if ultimately submitting to the traditional divisions of race, class, and gender that push him to the borders of the community. Unlike his namesake who led the exodus from Egypt of a whole community, this Moses appears too meek to stand up and leave the tiny village despite his marginalization.

Another of the men who considers leaving is Mira's half-brother and lover, Aristide. His chapter also includes Césaire's "partir," and he seems closer to actually acting on it than Moïse. Yet, his chapter ends as he takes another shot of rum like his father and poses the question: "Ne prenait-il pas le départ de sa vraie vie?" ("Wasn't he off to begin his real life?"; 80; Philcox 59). Aristide uses the same phrase, "vraie vie" or "real life," as his half-sister Mira, but he poses the question whereas Mira makes a definitive statement about beginning her real life. He also asks the question only after taking another shot of rum and letting the alcohol spread through his body. Mira's resolution comes out of sober thought at the wake, but Aristide's question might only be a result of liquid courage. Émile Étienne, the historian, is the third man who dreams of leaving Rivière au Sel, and he seems the most likely to act on his desire. He wants to write a history of Guadeloupe based on local memories and oral legends passed down through generations, and he even envisions "une terre où quoi qu'on en dise la couleur de la peau n'importerait pas" ("a land where, despite what they say here, the color of one's skin doesn't matter"; 239; Philcox 200). Despite Émile's dreaming, however, his chapter does not end as decisively as those of the women. Instead of a clear resolution, the final sentence continues the description of the idealized place Émile envisions: "Une terre-terre fertile à labourer" ("A homeland where the soil would be rich for the plowing"; 239; Philcox 200). The chapter never clearly indicates what kind of plowing Émile dreams of; in fact, the relationship between this final sentence and the rest of the paragraph about a colorblind society is left completely vague. The chapter ends on a note of mild confusion rather than on a positive note looking forward to some kind of possibility of community reconfiguration for Émile. All of these men's chapters reference leaving, but none of the chapters indicate a clear direction or sense of purpose like those of the local women. The men in this novel cannot narrate for themselves and therefore cannot begin the process of re-envisioning community in the

presence of Francis Sancher's unnaturally dead body. They do not manage to recognize Sancher's bodily vulnerability nor their own shared human vulnerability.

While Moïse, Aristide, Émile at least dream about leaving their village, most of the other chapters about men end with mundane and specific details about what is happening at the wake. Sonny notices Loulou staring off into space; Sylvestre Ramsaran smiles to himself despite the fact that his daughter is pregnant with Sancher's illegitimate child. The local storyteller gets distracted and misspeaks. These chapters reveal men who may reflect on their position in the local race, class, and gender hierarchies, but they are ultimately unwilling or unable to think outside of these traditional structures. Even the men who exist at the margins of the community (besides Xantippe and Joby) are unable to re-envision community. They are trapped in the confined space of a rural village, members of a local community which is not an active community by Raymond Williams' standards. The community in its current configuration is a closed and divided one rather than an active community based on shared ideals and interests.

The community of Rivière au Sel is thus profoundly divided by gender in terms of who speaks and how certain they are. The women may express themselves in the private sphere of first-person narrative, but they are also active creators of their own lives. Perhaps, it is their status as women who are outside of the masculine political and social structures that allows them to see new possibilities that the men seem less aware of. The women closely encounter death and recognize in the dead body a fellow human being. Their first person narration of their experience moves some of them to the possibility of reconfiguring their current community. The men, however, are narrated about in the third person. They do not seem to recognize as fully that Francis Sancher, outsider that he was, was a human being and that they are similarly vulnerable to injury. According to the narrator, many of them reflect during the wake on emotional injuries inflicted on them, but

they do not connect these reflections to a larger sense of shared human vulnerability. Their third person narration does not allow them to reflect deeply and share their stories enough to have any effect on the current iteration of community. Thus, at the structural level in Condé's novel, the reworking of community is not yet (and really never is) finished. While within the story, multiple characters appear to be rethinking community and seeking active community elsewhere, the narrative structure of the wake still indicates a community divided by gender. All community members are given a voice, yet the voices remain divided. As the community gathers before the dead body, only the women narrate the encounter themselves and might possibly move toward a new vision of community. Just as the men and women at the wake exist in the same space yet play different roles, the text interweaves the chapters of women with those of men, most often alternating them, the text also marks them as narratively different in style and in content. The reconfiguration is incomplete in both content and structure.

Condé's *Traversée de la mangrove* repeatedly highlights the problems of current (for the novel) community in rural Guadeloupe in both its content and its structure. It problematizes notions of idealized rural community and reveals the many divisions of race, class, and gender that often prevent local inhabitants from experiencing active community. While the novel does not propose a specific solution to the problems of community, it does point to the unnatural death of Francis Sancher and its subsequent narration as a catalyst for new possibilities of community. The novel becomes his wake with the book opening at dusk the night of the wake and closing with dawn the next day, and his wake brings the villagers together in the same small home for the space of one night. During the night, the village inhabitants all reflect on their previous interactions with Sancher and on their relationships to those around them. This deep reflection in the presence of death is the prerequisite for any kind of future project that could break down the community

divisions. As a result of their reflections, multiple characters express a desire to leave Rivière au Sel in the hopes of finding connection elsewhere despite the barriers of race, class, and gender. We do not know the result of any of the hopes and plans of Condé's characters; they may find new places just as isolating and confining as their rural island village. However, the final section of the novel is entitled "Le Devant-Jour" or "Before Dawn," a title that implies a sense of hope even in the darkest hour of the night. The moments before dawn may be dark, but they are also the moments closest to the coming of daylight. This final section may imply that the characters are able to find new community formations based on connection rather than division both in Rivière au Sel and beyond.

The title of the novel also gestures to a precarious but still possibly hopeful space: the mangrove. Mangroves are dense swamps in tropical areas with complex root systems both above and below the water. When Francis Sancher tells Vilma the title of his book is *Traversée de la mangrove*, she responds emphatically: "On ne traverse pas la mangrove. On s'empale sur les racines de palétuviers. On s'enterre et on étouffe dans la boue saumâtre" ("You don't cross a mangrove. You'd spike yourself on the roots of the mangrove trees. You'd be sucked down and suffocated by the brackish mud"; 192; Philcox 158). This negative reading of the novel's title leads to questions about the possibility of reworking community in Rivière au Sel. Crossing a mangrove is a near impossibility, as is the very name of the community: River of Salt. Yet, at the same time, mangroves can be a space of hope. In the Caribbean, for instance, runaway slaves sometimes escaped to mangrove swamps because their owners would never follow them in. They thus were spaces of near impossibility that also became spaces of freedom for escaped slaves. In biological terms, mangroves are incredibly resilient plants that can tolerate high saline levels in the water and soil around them. They thrive in estuaries and on shorelines where freshwater and saltwater meet,

and they provide protection from tidal waves and tsunamis in these areas. Furthermore, mangroves nourish incredible amounts of wildlife in their sediment-rich root system (“Mangrove Swamps”). Mangroves are therefore not only negative symbols but symbols of freedom, resilience, and productivity. Crossing the mangrove may appear as impossible as reconfiguring the traditional rural community of Rivière au Sel, but the novel still gestures toward both as distant possibilities. Francis Sancher’s death opens up the possibility of change even if the novel does not narrate a clear path forward. The novel’s structure hints at some ways to achieve its vision of open and inclusive community since it gives voice to all community members regardless of race, class, and gender. Its structure also draws attention to the deep interdependence of being human since the story itself needs all of the villager’s voices in order to form any sort of cohesive narrative. The novel argues on a structural level that human beings are dependent on and vulnerable to one another. The strongest possibility for basing future iterations of community on this realization is through the narration of an encounter with unnatural death.

The ambiguous possibility opened up by a violent death and its narration is also at the heart of Yánez Cossío’s novel *La cofradía del mullo del vestido de la Virgen Pipona*. While this novel is, on the surface, very different from Condé’s, it insightfully examines the complexities of a rural Ecuadorian town and the many divisive allegiances and injustices inherent in the current community structure similar to the structures of Condé’s rural Guadeloupean village. The novel is not an upbeat portrayal of romanticized rural life but rather an “acerbic narrative and merciless probing of a closed community structure” according to one reviewer (Wilson 168). Like *Traversée*, it makes its argument both within the story and in the novel’s structure. The novel’s long sentences and lack of chapter divisions force all of the voices together, and the characters’ and narrator’s frequent invocations of local proverbs reveal the narrative and cultural similarity between

all of the story's actors. The use of proverbs also serves to expose the ignorance and blindness of all sides in the town's political battles. All characters are equally idiosyncratic and blind at times, which implies that the shared vulnerability of humanity is founded on this recognition. Overall, the text thematizes narrative and narration in the form of proverbs, storytelling, and gossip to reveal that humans are vulnerable not only to one another's physical violence but also vulnerable to verbal violence and the violence of other people's idiosyncrasies. While the town's community is divided in many ways, they are also fundamentally connected and interdependent because of their shared flaws and their shared cultural context.

In terms of the plot, this small, fictional Andean town, which is never given a name, appears to be made up of two opposing factions: the Benavides women and the Pando men. The Benavides women are white women whose families now own most of the fertile land surrounding the town, and the women themselves run the Sisterhood (*cofradía*) of the novel's title, which is devoted to the town's religious icon, the Potbellied Virgin. The Sisterhood thus exercises incredible economic and religious power in the rural town where it "quita y pone alcaldes cuando le da la gana, que nombra y destituye a los tenientes políticos de todos los pueblos que están bajo la devoción de la Virgen Pipona" ("can place and replace mayors at will...they name and dismiss magistrates of all the towns devoted to the Potbellied Virgin"; 42; Gladhart 26). The Benavides women's power allows them to appoint people to the highest offices of the rural region and change the appointees if anything displeases them. The Sisterhood's power is compounded by the lack of a local priest for the last three decades. Without a male religious leader, the Sisterhood is the only religious power in town, and they seem to prefer it that way. The bishops have sent many priests over the years, but the Sisterhood tries to force each one of them to violate the secrecy of the confessional. These women refuse to cede any form of control over the town to an unknown male

even if he is a representative of the church. In fact, the president of the Sisterhood, Doña Carmen, “impelida por la desesperación y la urgencia... se ha candidatizado a sí misma. El único impedimento que podrían objetar es el de su sexo, pero a parte de las faldas, ¿quién más apta que ella en todo el pueblo?” (“has even, driven by desperation and urgency, nominated herself [as deacon]. The only possible objection might be her sex, but aside from the skirts, who in the town would be more suitable?”; 53; Gladhart 35). Doña Carmen and the other Benavides women control the town and would rather try to convince the Vatican to allow them to be deacons than let a male priest take away much of their own power. This rural community thus appears to be divided along stark gender lines with the white women controlling the town as opposed to the men of Condé’s novel.

The diffuse power of the Benavides women stands in stark contrast to the figurative and literal impotence of their primary male antagonists, “los cuatro viejos Pando” ‘the four old Pandos.’ These old men were the legal owners of the land the Benavideses now control, but they were tricked out of their legal claims years ago. They are economically impotent in the face of the wealthy, white Benavides clan, and their figurative impotence has become literal: “Se revuelven en su impotencia, porque después de haber poblado todo el pueblo...ya no dan más, y más bien hablan de labios para afuera” (“They squirm in their impotence, because after populating the entire town...they have given out, and now they’re all show”; 11; Gladhart 3). They spend their old age watching for ways to right the injustices done to them but with little effect. The Pando’s impotence in the face of the Sisterhood highlights the gendered nature of this town’s divisions. On first glance, this community formulation seems to reverse the patriarchal ordering so powerful in *Rivière au Sel* since the women are the ones oppressing the men. This reversal leaves the male Pandos angry, and it figuratively castrates them. The Pandos’ anger helps to calcify the divisions in

the rural community, and it also reveals that they are not capable of any community reconfiguration. Were they to gain power in the town, they would simply reverse many of the current structures rather than rethinking community beyond traditional hierarchies of race and gender. On a figurative level, their impotence also exposes the depths of their patriarchal thinking. Their visions of masculinity are so tied up with power and control that their own lack of power and control over the small town emasculates them.

While the town's gendered divisions appear to be a reversal of traditional patriarchy, they are not normative in the culture of the novel. For example, the two primary conservative powers aligned with the Sisterhood and the ruling Benavideses are the Catholic Church and the military, both traditionally male-dominated institutions with little room for women in positions of power. Furthermore, while the four old Pandos are, on one level, allied with social justice, they are also extremely patriarchal as mentioned above. Their rage at the Sisterhood is even stronger because they are being ruled by women, by a group they and much of their surrounding society consider lesser: "No han podido jamás imponerse, por más que han querido, a los caprichos de quienes están al frente de la Cofradía, y siendo como son: hembras y viejas" ("They have never been able to prevail, much as they have wanted to, against the caprices of those who head the Sisterhood, even though they're women, and old ones at that"; 42; Gladhart 26). The fact that the powerful Sisterhood is made up of old women underscores the complete lack of power the old Pandos feel. The Pando's frustration comes across even more strongly in the Spanish since "hembras" might better be translated as female. It is a term used to describe any female animal, and when applied to women, is vulgar and derogatory. The term thus biologically describes the members of the Sisterhood while also bringing them closer to the level of animals. For the Pandos, the town's gendered divisions only reinforce their traditional patriarchal attitudes. The Pandos and the

surrounding culture function according to patriarchal values, and the Sisterhood's power is a social anomaly.

The four old Pandos resent the reversed gender hierarchy of their rural community, and they respond by reinforcing the gendered nature of the town's divisions. These old men may not be able to act sexually or economically, but they know how to use gendered language to demean the more powerful Benavides women. Therefore, they insult the most beautiful of the young Benavides women, Magdalena, in sexual and gendered terms. According to the four old Pandos, Magdalena does not behave in gender appropriate ways, so they call her "la unica hombruna entre ellas" ("the only mannish one in the bunch"; 11; Gladhart 3). Because Magdalena has power and money and does not conform to her assigned gender role, the old men attempt to return her to her place. The Pandos also say to her repeatedly, "Carishina, guarmishina, pela papa en la cocina" ("Carishina, guarmishina, peel potatoes in the kitchen"; 11; Gladhart 3). "Carishina" is a Quechua word that much like the English word slut originally meant a woman who is bad in the kitchen or bad at housework. It also carries the connotation of a promiscuous woman because, of course, a woman who does not spend time learning to cook and clean must be spending her time in other ways according to patriarchal logic (Fernández-Rasines 128). The four old Pandos thus attempt to limit Magdalena's power and freedom of movement by sexually denigrating her. The narrator also describes that the four men "la comen con los ojos" ("consume her with their eyes"; 11; Gladhart 2) as she passes. Because they resent the power Magdalena represents, they attempt to bring her down by turning her into a sexual object. They use language to separate the community by gender and to assert their superiority as males in the face of their own economic, legal, and social impotence.

The old Pando's misogyny, however, is not limited to the Benavides women; the old Pandos see a clear hierarchy in which all men should rule over all women. They cite proverbs that demean women such as "a quien Dios quiso, hombre le hizo y la mujer, a parir" ("whom God loved, he made a man, and for the women, babies"; 25; Gladhart 13). The Pandos assert a sense of male superiority in the face of their oppression, and they again use a term that can have negative connotations in Spanish since "parir" is also the verb used to describe animals giving birth. Women, for these four old men, are reduced to an animalistic biological function. All women, the Benavides women and the local women, are more animal than human in this patriarchal system. Instead of recognizing any sense of shared oppression with any of the poor women around them, the old Pandos reinscribe a gender hierarchy to assuage their feelings of impotence in the same way that many of the men of Rivière au Sel make themselves important by reaffirming male superiority over women. In both cases, the men divide the community into clear groups and assign those groups roles in their patriarchal hierarchy. They are unable to imagine a formation of community that does not rank people according to their gender.

The four Pandos not only use words to construct a gender hierarchy, but in the past, they also physically asserted their control over women. In the passage about their sexual impotence, the narrator describes them as "ejercido durante años el derecho feudal de la pernada sobre las indias célibes" ("having exercised for years their feudal rights over the unmarried Indian women"; 11; Gladhart 3). This passage points not only to verbal abuse of women but also to physical abuse of their bodies. The Pandos may be figuratively castrated by the oppressive Benavides women, yet not long ago they were the agents of gendered oppression in the local Indian communities. The Pandos no longer rule over any women physically, but they use language and their memories of past sexual experiences to assert their power. They may be the victims of oppression, but their

marginalization from public life does not impel them to rethink the current community configuration. They want to displace the people at the top of the town hierarchy, not reconfigure anything. While separated in many ways, neither the Benavideses nor the Pandos are innocent of the injustices of this rural town. They are all implicated in the gendered divisions tearing at the fabric of the community, and they are all similarly vulnerable to the physical and economic power of others.

Furthermore, the Benavideses and Pandos also divide the local community along racial lines. The Benavides' ancestors came from outside the region and slowly took over from the darker-skinned Pandos. Since they pride themselves on their light-skinned foreignness, they try to cement their differences from the Pandos as a racial difference. They are desperate to maintain the racial purity that they believe marks them as different from the lower-class Pando clan even though the Pando's poverty is a result of Benavides crimes. The Benavideses pride themselves so much on their white skin and blond hair that their sons are required to marry blond foreigners and one of their blond daughters must give up her long hair every five years to make a new wig for the Virgin. Doña Carmen thinks about the divisions between the two groups as natural and inevitable and explicitly tied to race and class: "Los Pando militan, los Benavides visitan; los Pando son morenos, mestizos, de la tierra, los Benavides son rubios, blancuzcos, de otros lados; los Pando son pobres, los Benavides son ricos; los Pando son el pueblo, los Benavides la clase dominante" ("The Pandos serve, the Benavideses inspect; the Pandos are dark, mestizos, of the earth, the Benavideses are blond, pale, from far away; the Pandos are poor, the Benavideses are rich; the Pandos are the people, the Benavideses the ruling class"; 137; Gladhart 94). For Doña Carmen and the other Benavideses, the differences in class between them and the Pandos are closely tied to the differences in skin color. The two aspects, race and class, come hand-in-hand. As in so many

colonial encounters, the racialized difference justifies the economic exploitation of the local peoples for the Benavides family. Their ancestors stole land from the darker-skinned Pandos and justified it with a doctrine of racial difference and white superiority. The Benavides family regards the community divisions in their town as a direct result of differences in skin color, which they name race.

In opposition to the white, blond, Benavides, the Pandos are described as mestizos or mixed-race. The term mestizo already places the Pandos in a racial hierarchy since it is a term from the *casta* system used in Spanish colonies to determine economic and legal rights. Mestizos, usually part Spanish and part indigenous, had fewer legal rights than Europeans and their white descendents, but they had more legal rights and economic opportunities than the full indigenous peoples. For example, according to the body of laws the Spanish Crown compiled for its overseas colonies called the *Recopilación de leyes de los reynos de las Indias*, no Indian in any of its colonies could buy or possess a gun (Léon Pinelo Libro VI, Título I, Ley xxxi).⁷ Yet, a law from 1568 states that mestizos could own guns provided they owned a home and applied for a license to do so (Léon Pinelo Libro VII, Título V, Ley xiii). Despite having more privileges than Indians, mestizos were also often feared and pointed to as a corrupting influence in society. Thus, Juan de Solórzano Pereira, a Spanish judge who was appointed to various positions in Perú, wrote in his 1647 book *Política Indiana* that “Mestizos son viciosos, y se debe temer su abundancia” (“Mestizos are depraved and one should fear their abundance”;⁸ 218).⁹ On the very same page, he also writes,

⁷ The *Leyes de las Indias* have no page numbers, so I have instead cited them by the book in which they occur followed by the “título,” followed by the number of the law itself.

⁸ The translations of both quotations from Solórzano Pereira are mine.

⁹ *Política Indiana* is paginated, but the work is a multivolume one, which is divided into tomes, books, and chapters. The quotations above come from Tomo I, Libro Segundo, and Capítulo XXX.

“Los Mestizos es la mejor mezcla” (“Mestizos are the best mixture”; 218). Mestizos, because of their liminal position between Europeans and Indians, were better positioned in the hierarchy of the Spanish colonies, and they were therefore a greater threat to social order. The novel names the Pando family as mestizos, and this is the historical weight of the term. It places the Pandos in a racialized system, but it also points to them as the site of possible disruption in the entrenched community divisions.

The Pandos are marked as mestizos, but instead of fighting this racial hierarchy, they clearly buy into the racial system of which the term is a part. The narrator describes that when the first Benavides arrived, “Los Pando entonces tuvieron que castellanizar su apellido, cambiar las alpargatas por zapatos rotos, las cotonas por camisas remendadas y el señorío de la raza por un anodino mestizaje” (“had to Hispanicize their surname, exchange their rope-soled sandals for worn out shoes, their rough homespun for mended shirts and their racial pride for an anodyne mestizaje”; 12; Gladhart 3). The tone of this passage implicitly criticizes the Pandos’ change; the Pandos tried to become like the European Benavideses, but the attempt only led to an anodyne or inoffensive mestizaje. The coming of the white outsiders forced the majority of this community to acknowledge their place on the Spanish colonial racial hierarchy. The Pandos had to give up their ties to the indigenous communities around them and become like the white Benavideses. This change, however, does not seem to benefit the Pandos much as they are pushed below the Benavides family in the local power structures, and they also lose their sense of cultural pride and ownership. They can never be as white or as European as the Benavides family, so they become living markers of the Benavides racial superiority.

As the darker-skinned, oppressed group in the text, the Pandos appear to represent social justice and racial equality, yet this relationship is undermined by the Pando’s own racism against

the darker-skinned Indians who live in the mountainous region around the town. The Pandos care enough about their social position that they join with the Benavideses in denigrating the local Indians. One of the Pando descendents, Jorge Washington Pando, describes the ladies of the Sisterhood as “más ignorantes que los indios” (“more ignorant than the Indians”; 153; Gladhart 113). The Indians are reviled by all the residents of the town as backwards and ignorant; they are the go-to insult in the local community. The Indians are also symbols of servitude and backbreaking labor. When the Sisterhood essentially bribes the local magistrate, the man accepts their gifts and dreams of buying some land and hiring Indians to work it: “Y se ve calzando botas altas y golpeando con la fusta todo cuanto encuentra a su paso” (“And he sees himself wearing high boots and lashing out with his riding whip at anyone in his way”; 179; Gladhart 134). The Indians are the lowest class; they are the ones the magistrate thinks of employing to work in his fields and suffer his whip. They are the people that everyone, even the lowest of the town residents, can denigrate and despise. Even the local children’s games spread “el veneno del racismo para odiar al indio, al negro, al judío” (“the poison of racism...with its hatred of Indians, of Blacks, and of Jews”; 135; Gladhart 100). The town’s children—both Pando and Benavides—grow up inculcated with a hatred of the Indians along with other groups of people. They are raised to believe that the racial divisions of the rural community are clear and fixed, and they cannot yet imagine any sort of revision of community.

Despite the seeming inflexibility of the community’s racial divisions, the Benavides’ great efforts to make themselves racially distinct from the other inhabitants of the provincial town belie the fixity of these very racial categories. The categories are so weak and porous that they must be solidified and policed with each new generation, or they will begin to slip. In the case of this novel, one of the most important characters, Manuel Pando, is the bastard son of one of the Benavides

men. Manuel was even raised on the Benavides family's hacienda until he chose to leave after finding out his real parentage. He is the living embodiment of the Benavideses' unsustainable claims about their racial difference. He is articulate and educated, but he opposes the ruling classes and the economic exploitation of the workers. In an effort to contain him, the Sisterhood frequently refers to Manuel as "that uppity cholo" (139). "Cholo" in this context is a derogatory term used as an insult against mestizos. While many people of mixed race backgrounds have reappropriated the term in modern South America and the United States, Doña Carmen uses it in its original meaning as an ethnic slur. She must try to contain Manuel by obsessively characterizing him by his mixed-race status. It is as if she even has to remind herself of his mixed ancestry because he was raised for so many years as a Benavides and with the Benavides name. Manuel's acts of rebellion in leaving the Benavides family and changing his name demonstrate that being a Benavides is not only about blood ties or about racial purity; it is also about a choice to be part of the wealthy and oppressive ruling class. The concept of race in this case is simply not able to withstand the complexities of reality. In the same way, the community as a whole seems divided along strict lines of gender, race, and class, but none of those categories can contain the town's inhabitants as they really live. The divisions are never as clear as both the Pandos and the Benavideses would prefer.

As evidence of the fluidity of many of the current community's categories, Marianita Pando is another Benavides bastard who makes the reverse transition from that of Manuel Pando. She is adopted as an adult by the Benavides clan when they need her long, blond hair for the Virgin's wig. For much of her life, Marianita was an unacknowledged, illegitimate child of one of the Benavides men. The Benavides family ignored any claims she had on them as a blood relative. Yet, the townspeople recognized Marianita's relationship to the Benavideses. They describe Marianita as

“presumida como son todas las mujeres Benavides a las cuales se parece” (“conceited like all the Benavides women she so resembles”; 21; Gladhart 10). They also “dice que la Marianita se parece más a los Benavides que a los Pando porque tiene el pelo largo y rubio” (“say that Marianita looks more like the Benavides women than like the Pandos because of her long, blond hair”; 22; Gladhart 11). Despite her unacknowledged parentage, Marianita is living proof that the Benavides racial categories are incredibly constructed, and the local residents see through the Benavides’ attempts to maintain a racial purity. Despite her mixed heritage, Marianita looks like a Benavides; she has pale skin and blond hair. Marianita proves that physical appearance is not a reliable marker of racial difference, yet the Benavides family ignores this truth. She is eventually recognized as a Benavides only when they desperately need her hair for a religious ceremony. They even change her last name and have the local birth registries changed as well. The narrator of the novel, however, points out the ridiculousness of the whole situation by repeatedly calling her “La Marianita Pando que ahora es Benavides” (“Marianita Pando, who is now a Benavides”; 137; Gladhart 101). While the Benavides family attempts to maintain its image of racial purity by rewriting local history in the case of Marianita, the narrator reminds readers that their very attempts reveal the tenuous case for racial divisions in this town.

The narrator also mocks the Sisterhood’s desperate belief in the racial and class distinctions between the Pandos and Benavideses. They want to view Marianita’s move as a singular isolated incident that does not affect the larger divisions of race and class in their town: “Doña Carmen se toma un respiro, aunque los problemas de fondo no son para acabarse mientras existan los Pando por un lado y por otro los Benavides. Ambos grupos están unidos por lazos de sangre que son indisolubles, están reforzados por estratos sociales que no se pueden saltar así no más, como saltó la Marianita” (“Doña Carmen takes a deep breath, although the root problems

will never end so long as there is the Pando clan on one side and the Benavides clan on the other. Each group is united by indissoluble blood ties, which are reinforced by social strata that can't be hopped over just like that, the way Marianita hopped"; 127; 93-4). Doña Carmen somehow believes that there are inevitable differences between the two families that cannot be bridged, yet she is the one who suggested Marianita should become a Benavides in the first place. She cannot see that Marianita's very move from Pando to Benavides contradicts her beliefs in the concrete racial and economic differences between the families, but the narrator points out the irony in Carmen's statement. The Benavides racial purity is thus based more on a willful blindness or forgetting than on any true difference between them and the rest of the town. The community may be divided along racial lines, but those lines are not concrete walls. The barriers between the groups are porous as both Manuel and Marianita show by crossing over. Their presence in the town reveals that the current iteration of community is a construction, and other iterations, may be possible.

While the town's opposing families see the community as divided in many ways, Yáñez Cossío's novel complicates any attempt to view the power structures of this Andean town as straightforward. Neither the white women in charge of the Sisterhood nor the darker Pando men adequately represent a vision of social justice or equality. Neither group can read the signs of the opposing side or the signs of the changing times. While most of the younger village men are busily involved in building a communist party and advocating some form of revolution and change, the four old Pandos continue to sit on their bench watching the Benavides women and remembering past events. The narrator frequently begins sections about the Pandos with phrases such as "los cuatro viejos Pando dicen" and "comentan los cuatro viejos Pando" (27, 31) ["the four old Pandos say" and "as the four old Pandos recall" (Gladhart 14, 18)]. These phrases repeatedly emphasize

the old age of these Pando men by focusing the reader's attention on their predilection for rambling reminiscences. They sit in the town square smoking and remembering without taking any action like many of the younger townspeople. They are once again old and impotent; they cannot or do not care to read the signs around them and therefore do not present a possible alternative to the ingrained divisions of the small town.

In fact, despite their years of watching from the town square, the four old Pandos are so blind that they smoke the very legal documents that prove their claims to the Benavides' land: "Y siguen fumando sus tabacos negros, que no hay fumadores más empedernidos que ellos, y se están fumando sus afanes y esperanzas, que los papeles que hallaron tirados por los suelos son las famosas escrituras notariales" ("And they keep smoking their black tobacco, for there are no more inveterate smokers than they, and they are smoking their exertions and their hopes, for the papers found lying on the ground are the famous documents"; 136; Gladhart 100-101). The old men even comment on the quality of the paper as they smoke, never realizing that they are smoking the coveted legal papers. They do not look closely enough at the papers to see what they are, and they do not look closely enough at the community in which they live to see its broader pervasive problems. Even their quest for justice is incredibly narrow-minded, for they "están en lo que están solo por codicia y no por principios ideológicos ni porque el corazón les rebase la camisa" ("are up to what they're up to out of greed, not because of ideological principles nor because their hearts are bursting out of their shirts"; 90; Gladhart 64). In other words, the four old Pandos are not concerned with anything outside of their own interests. They do not seek any kind of systemic change; they simply want to invert the local power hierarchy and place themselves on the top. These old men are portrayed as just that: old, impotent men. They are not the hope for any reconfiguration of community in this rural Andean town.

Neither is the Sisterhood a viable route for any future iterations of community. Their name points to a myopic view of the world. Their full name, which is also the full title of the novel in Spanish, is *La cofradía del mullo del vestido de la Virgen Pipona* (The Sisterhood of the Bead on the Gown of the Potbellied Virgin). The name is so specific as to be ridiculous; the order's name reveals no purpose larger than a single bead on a gown of the local icon. Doña Carmen, the current president of the Sisterhood, admits the name is long and “ridículo, en oídos de quienes lo oyen por primera vez” (“can sound almost ridiculous when heard for the first time”; 80; Gladhart 56). Yet, Carmen justifies the name by comparing herself and the other women in the Sisterhood to the tiny beads on the Virgin's gowns; they are all supposed to be that tiny and humble. In actuality, the ladies are far from humble. They are the wealthy rulers of this town, yet they spend large amounts of time planning, arranging, and making elaborate outfits for the little religious icon rather than doing any constructive work with local education and infrastructure. They are more concerned with their own version of dogmatic religious observance than with the lives of the local people who share their town and who also cook, clean, and work for them. Because they view the community as inexorably structured along lines of race, class, and gender, they put no effort into rethinking community.

The Sisterhood also displays incredible short-sightedness in their religious devotion, which means they cannot read the signs of poverty and distress in the community around them. Thus, after a large celebration for the Potbellied Virgin, Doña Carmen sends the leftover cake to a local orphanage. The narrator recounts,

Cuando hayan terminado de comerlo—si en verdad llegan a comerlo—tendrán en los recovecos de sus tripas los desastres de una revolución...los huerfanitos se pasarán una semana entera sentados en las tazas des servicio...si Doña Carmen

fuera adivina sabría estas y otras tantas cosas que no puede saberlas porque está muy arriba y es molesto bajar a los tugurios y ensuciarse los zapatos, y oler el tufo de la miseria humana. (83)

When they have finished eating it—if they actually get to eat it—they will suffer in the twists and turnings of their intestines the disasters of a revolution...the little orphans will spend an entire week sitting on the toilet...If Doña Carmen were a fortuneteller she would know about these and many other things which she can't know because she is very much above them and it's a bother to go down to the slums and dirty one's shoes and smell the stink of human misery. (Gladhart 58)

Doña Carmen and her Sisterhood are not even interested in knowing the world outside of their own insular family and their religious icon. They are so blind that even their acts of charity are actually painful disruptions for the recipients. The Benavides women are rarely able to look beyond their specific and inane concerns to see the rest of the community, which is poor and suffering. They do not offer any great possibilities for rethinking community beyond the current divisions of race, class, and gender in rural Ecuador.

Like the four old Pandos, the Benavides women cannot read the signs of changing times around them. When a local boy paints Marxist graffiti around the town, Doña Carmen literally cannot read it. In one of the funniest passages in the novel, Carmen repeatedly and mistakenly tries to decipher the meanings of words like “oligarcas” [“oligarchs”] and “burgueses” [“bourgeoisie”]. When the Sisterhood convenes a meeting to discuss the graffiti, they finally realize that there are communists in town and that most of the local residents belong to some faction of the communist party. They have been so concerned with their own family's money and status along with their religious duties that they have not noticed what was happening in their own

community. The Sisterhood was so desperate to maintain a clear distinction between the ruling Benavideses and the low-class Pandos that they refused to listen to or observe anything that did not directly involve their economic and religious power in the town. As a result, they completely missed the biggest threat to their dominance: a growing communist movement. Both the four old Pandos and the Benavides Sisterhood display great blindness and illiterateness in the face of change in their rural community. Neither group can see past the traditional divisions of the community, and thus neither group represents a possibility for future community reconfiguration in the unnamed town.

While the Pandos and Benavideses try to remain separate, both their shared blindness to the community around them and the existence of Manuel and Marianita reveal their similarities. The text reinforces on a structural level the idea that the two groups are more similar than the characters allow, and this deep cultural and human sharing could be the basis for reconfiguring community. The novel, thus, is structured without any sort of chapter breaks. There are longer breaks in the text to separate sections with a few blank lines, but they are infrequent and irregular. Even many of the sentences extend for full paragraphs and pages that seem to run together. The text thus forces the voices and stories of all of the characters into the same space just as they are forced to live together in this isolated, rural town. The novel as a bounded text and a text without divisions reproduces the bounded geography of this small town. Condé explicitly marks each new character's perspectives with chapter breaks and writes a palimpsestic novel, with each chapter writing over parts of the last. Yáñez Cossío's novel is narrated in the third person, but the narrative voice often moves into free indirect style, meaning that individual character's voices are often

filtered through the third person narrative voice.¹⁰ This style technically only has one narrator, but it allows the characters a voice in the midst of third person narration. While the character's thoughts and perspectives are not clearly demarcated like the separate chapters of *Traversée*, they must still coexist in the space of the text as much as they must live side-by-side in the rural town. The free indirect style forces these separate voices together in the same way that the long sentences and lack of chapter divisions do. The thoughts and feelings of the old Pandos, the Benavides Sisterhood, and the rest of town share the pages equally even though they are unable to share the local resources equally. They are fundamentally interdependent and have much in common that they will not admit to. This free indirect style brings together the two groups and portrays them all as endearingly and frustratingly human. They all have foibles and blind spots, yet they are also somehow understandable. Despite their great efforts to remain separate, the two groups are much closer to each other than they wish to admit. They share a space and a community but are unable to connect across constructed borders of race, class, and gender.

The similarities of the two groups are further highlighted at the structural level by the interjection of massive numbers of proverbs by people on all sides of this divided town. As critic Dick Gerdes describes, "proverbs, sayings, popular verses, even onomatopoeic sounds, form part of the linguistic scaffolding of Yáñez Cossío's novel" (51).¹¹ The novel contains over one hundred and twenty proverbs and sayings scattered throughout its two hundred pages. The proverbs are spoken or thought by the Pandos, the Benavideses, the narrator, and just about everyone else in

¹⁰ H. Porter Abbott describes free indirect style as "so free and fluid, it makes you wonder about the status of the narrator and whether one can even speak of a narrator" (70). This reading of free indirect style supports my assertions about the structure of the novel and the implied multiple voices.

¹¹ Gerdes also makes an interesting argument about the novel as a battle between orality and the written word, but my argument differs from Gerdes in that I do not think the proverbs function in the text only as a marker of local conservatism.

town. Proverbs are generally thought of as expressions of popular knowledge and folk wisdom. While this general description is apt in this context, it is also important how and when they are used by the characters. In *La Virgen Pipona*, proverbs most often occur at moments of crisis in the life of individuals or the communal life of the town. They are a kind of emphatic narrative punctuation, and they become more and more numerous as events in the town grow more stressful and violent. Therefore, over three quarters of the proverbs occur in the second half of the novel when the conflicts between groups intensify. All sides in this divided community deploy proverbs as justifications or explanations for their actions. When frustrated or in doubt, they turn to traditional collective wisdom to bolster themselves. For example, Doña Carmen justifies meddling with the opposing factions of communists in town with the proverb “Que en la guerra y el amor todo está permitido” (“All’s fair in love and war”; 166; Gladhart 124). Even the Benavides men turn to this proverb as justification for their torture training. It is as if both Carmen and the Benavides men need to find popular knowledge to give them permission to do morally questionable or reprehensible things. The proverbs provide the security of tradition that has been repeated over time, so they serve to legitimate their actions.

The most striking example of a character justifying his actions with proverbs, though, is the local magistrate. He is deciding whether to accept the bribe the Sisterhood offers his family. While making the decision, the magistrate cites proverbs thirteen times in two and a half pages. The proverbs he chooses stress the need to take what you can get such as “Más vale pájaro en mano que dos te dará” (“A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush”; 177; Gladhart 132). The magistrate seems to need the support of conventional wisdom to abandon his dignity and accept the bribe. The proverbs serve as justification outside of his own limited experience that he is making the right decision. The very number of proverbs he lists as justification reveals his own

uneasiness with his decision. While Doña Carmen may have a few reservations about using the divide and conquer strategy to control the local populace, the magistrate has many reservations about accepting her bribe if we judge by the number of proverbs needed for validation. For the characters, proverbs do serve a sort of conservative function as detailed so well by Dick Gerdes. They can be a repository of traditional and often conservative values, so characters like the magistrate find them reassuring in the face of difficult situations.

Yet, in another sense, the novel reclaims proverbial wisdom by pointing out how it can still be a shared cultural experience. It is not only conservative then but also affirms that diverse people are often more similar than they imagine. The fact that all of the characters, Pando and Benavides, turn to proverbs for consolation or justification at pivotal moments highlights how similar they are despite their beliefs to the contrary. The general content of the proverbs differs slightly between groups, so the proverbs by or about the Pandos and villagers frequently teach resignation or address class differences such as “El que nació para medio, no puede llegar a real” (“He who was born for a nickel will never see a dime”; 86-7; Gladhart 62). Yet the number of proverbs used by the Pandos and other villagers is generally equivalent to the number used by the Benavides family. Despite the gender, race, and class differences, both groups turn to proverbs as legitimization in times of crisis, and the novel similarly describes them all with the ironic and humorous use of proverbs. The inhabitants of this rural town are in actuality very similar in their use of folk wisdom to reassure themselves in pivotal moments. The proverbs gesture toward a shared humanity that rests upon similar encounters with and responses to crisis.

The proverbs function for the characters as reassurance at times of crisis, but for the novel, they provide a glimpse of a possible foundation for reconfiguring local community. Since characters on all sides of the town’s conflicts deploy proverbs, their abundance highlights the ways

that the townspeople share a cultural and historical background. They may think of themselves as qualitatively different based on their race, class, and gender, but they actually have much in common. Dick Gerdes describes one function of proverbs according to Kenneth Burke as “to console, admonish, exhort, or foretell” (55). If thought of in this sense, then, the townspeople’s recitation of proverbs also reveals a deep human insecurity. They are all equally in need of emotional support to bolster their own decisions; they may not turn to the advice of a friend or neighbor all the time, but they turn to the collective cultural wisdom of the past. The frequent use of proverbs manifests their very human need for reassurance. They are vulnerable to doubt and criticism as much as they are vulnerable to physical violence. Furthermore, the many proverbs also show that the characters are so interdependent and exposed to one another that their language and narration mimic each other. Although they construct divisions and hierarchies in the local community, the proverbs show just how constructed these divisions are and reveal the possibility of rethinking community in ways that are more open and inclusive.

The novel’s structural and narrative elements not only argue for a shared emotional vulnerability as a basis for reworking community, but it also uses humor to point out the way that all human beings share flaws and idiosyncrasies as well. Just as the characters are brought together by their use of proverbs, the narrator describes them all with the same fond humor. Both the Pandos and the Benavideses are equally mockable. For instance, when the Sisterhood wants to take the Virgin out on a tour of surrounding villages, the Pandos rile up the townspeople enough that everyone takes to the streets to prevent the Virgin from leaving. However, this protest turns into an encampment where people start moving their possessions from inside their houses to the town square: “Y como salió el dormitorio y la cocina, también sale el comedor y tras del comedor la sala” (“And just as the bedroom and the kitchen came out, out comes the dining room and

behind that the parlor, for the people of the town are beginning to acquire a taste for this living on the street"; 104; Gladhart 75). The descriptions of the whole debacle of the traveling Virgin are wrought with irony and humor. One man even drags his radio out into the square while leaving it plugged in at home, so that it still functions. Yet Yáñez Cossío does not just mock the Pandos and their fellow townspeople. Virtually all the characters in this novel are derided at times. Even the soldiers sent to the town at the end of the novel to control the communist rebellion are mocked because they put on a parade and keep secretly changing clothes to make it look like they are more numerous than they are. And, not even the wealth of the Benavideses can keep the narrator from mocking them. In one passage where Doña Carmen encounters the word "oligarcas" for the first time, she tries to discern its meaning and decides it must have something to do with oil, which is "oli" in Spanish. She tries to find a relationship to oil painting, holy oils, cooking oils, and a local Pando woman who sells lard in the market. Her train of thought is entertaining to follow, and the entire scene makes her look silly and ignorant. The head of the Sisterhood is not powerful enough or rich enough to be above being satirized. All of the people in this town with their ingrained divisions and lack of connection to one another are fundamentally flawed and do things worthy of mocking. The novel does not posit some sort of perfect or easy solution to the rifts in the community but instead shows that all of the community members have faults and blind spots. They are all complex beings who might have things in common if they could overcome the great divides of gender, race, and class that keep them separate. The novel's structure that brings together their diverse voices in free indirect style and mocks them all equally posits that one (albeit negative) point of departure is from the shared recognition of everyone's flaws. All people are equally vulnerable to each other's and their own inconsistencies, so perhaps that recognition could give the community members the humility to re-envision itself.

Despite the structural intimations that the people in this town are more similar than they will admit, Yáñez Cossío's small Andean community remains stuck in its clear divisions of class, race, gender, and family until the accidental death of a young child acts as a catalyst for possible community reconfiguration. This violent and gruesome death shakes the community to its core, and the attempts to narrate the experience may open a space of possibility. The death comes about when infighting between communist factions kills an innocent child with a misplaced Molotov cocktail. Unlike earlier deaths in the community which are mentioned briefly in the novel but not described in detail, this death is described in all of its tragedy and goriness:

El pecho y la barriga del inocente son una flor abierta donde se ven como pistilos salpicados las costillas paradas de raíz, y la cabeza, una cabecita colmada de besos y de ensueños, le cuelga apenas sostenida por un pedazo de piel y de vértebras tronchadas que golpean rítmica y húmeda en las piernas de la madre. (202)

The chest and belly of the innocent are an open flower where you can see like spattered pistils the ribs standing on end and the head—a little head drenched in kisses and daydreams—hangs, barely supported by a bit of skin and snapped vertebrae that knock rhythmically and damply against the mother's legs. (152)

The description is horrible and bloody. This death is a memorable and tragic death for the residents unlike the earlier deaths of townspeople at the hands of soldiers. The passage has a macabre beauty, comparing the child's wounds to an open flower, yet that comparison only reinforces the innocence of this murdered child. He was barely able to talk, yet he dies as a result of the community's political and economic divisions of which he was not even yet aware. The graphic description highlights the violence of this death as well as the fragility of the human body.

The town residents encounter this violent death and begin to be aware of their own vulnerability to the violence of others and the injustices simmering below the surface of the town.

Many characters attempt to narrate the experience, to make sense of it, but in this case, narration fails. They are unable to make sense of the death of the innocent child. Instead, the needless death triggers yet more violence in the community and propels the Sisterhood to lose control of the town. Manuel Pando runs into the streets and attempts to explain the death to the townspeople, “pero nadie le hace caso y le vuelven las espaldas quedándose parado frente a su soledad y a la ceguera” (“But no one pays any attention to him and they turn their backs and remain standing in front of their solitude and their blindness”; 203; Gladhart 153). Manuel tries to make sense of the horrific death; he tries to recount his interpretation of the encounter, but no one will listen. The members of the Sisterhood are not even able to speak in the face of this violent death. At their afternoon meeting following the child’s funeral, “apenas hablan y tienen el desaliento de vivir” (“they barely speak and they feel utterly discouraged”; 205; Gladhart 154). Unlike Condé’s characters who all reflect deeply in the face of unnatural death and narrate their experiences, the characters here are unable to effectively narrate the experience. Perhaps this very failure to narrate the encounter with violent death and recognize in it a basis for a shared humanity beyond the many local divisions is what allows the violence in the town to continue. Any reconfiguration of the local community cannot yet be a possibility because no one in the town is really capable of narrating or listening to the encounter. Manuel Pando comes closest. He tries to explain things to people, but narration demands not only a narrator but a narratee. In the absence of such a narratee, the town devolves into further violence. Manuel’s encounter with violent death has encouraged him to try more actively to rework community in the ways he has envisioned the

entire novel, yet the process cannot be successfully completed until more townspeople are willing to listen to his narration.

The child's death and the spiral of continuing violence may not lead directly to a reworking of community, but it does expose the real configuration of power relations in the small town. While the Sisterhood appeared to have control of the town, actual power has always rested with the members' husbands and sons. They were allowed to do as they liked in the town until a real threat to the Benavides' economic interests arose. After the violent events, the Benavides men take over control of the town and quickly call in the help of the military, "que ya no pueden dejar las riendas del pueblo asesino en manos de mujeres a quienes mandan a hacer sus labores de bordado, cocina y oraciones" ("for they can no longer leave the reins of a murderous town in the hands of women whom they send off home to do their proper work of embroidering, cooking, and prayer"; 215; Gladhart 162). While the town power structures appeared to reverse traditional gender hierarchies, in actuality, the patriarchal system was functioning all along hidden by the auspices of the Sisterhood. Even the name of the Sisterhood in the original Spanish implies that these women were never completely in charge since "cofradía" comes from the Latin word for brother, *frater*. The Spanish "cofradía," unlike the word "sisterhood," does not indicate the gender of the group members, but it is etymologically related to groups of males. Thus, when things get out of control, the men in this town reassert their power and relegate the women to their traditional space of the home. The violent death uncovers the deepest layers of the town's divided community, but the inability to effectively narrate the encounter with death leaves the town still fractured along traditional lines of gender, race, and class.

While the child's violent death does not bring about a quick or certain possibility of rethinking community, it does reveal the deep structures of power at work in the town, which is the

precursor for any future reconfiguration. In order to rethink community, one must first grasp the current configuration. With the coming of the men and the military, many of the townspeople rally around Manuel Pando as their leader. He may not have been able to effectively narrate or make meaning out of the young child's death, but his attempt to narrate marks him as open to rethinking the current community relationships. While he was raised a Benavides, he has spent all of his time since disowning his paternal family in studying, teaching, and preaching about Marxism and communism. His clear, selfless focus on social justice is much the opposite of the four old Pandos' greedy search for personal justice, so Manuel becomes a symbol of revolutionary change: "Y hasta le han dado posada en el corazón de cada uno, y el hombre de carne y hueso, de debilidades y de insanias que era hasta hace poco, se convierte en la mística que el pueblo necesita para seguir adelante con tantos males" ("Each person has made a place for him in their heart, and the man of flesh and blood, of weaknesses and lunacy that he was until a short time ago, becomes the mystic the town needs to move ahead through so many troubles"; 222; Gladhart 167). The class and clan conflicts brought about by the death of an innocent child turn Manuel into a symbol of possibility. He is, after all, already a living sign that the divisions between Benavides and Pando are arbitrary and constructed. As the only character who attempts to make meaning out of his encounter with the violent death, he also seems to recognize the shared humanity and vulnerability of all the town's residents. His character represents the greatest possibility in the novel of a future reconfiguration of community.

Moreover, the possibility that Manuel represents does not simply invert the power hierarchy like the change the old Pandos seek. After all, Magdalena Benavides, the most beautiful of the young Benavides women dedicated to the Potbellied Virgin, runs away from town to be with Manuel. His union with Magdalena thus crosses borders of class and race; it shows that his

movement is concerned more about intention and desire than about the traditional divisions of the town. It is conceivably a harbinger of future reworking of community that moves beyond traditional divisions. The novel ends with Manuel, Magdalena, and many of the townspeople hiding out and fighting in the mountains outside of town. Their visions for transformation of the rural community's power structures have not yet reached the center of the town; the possibility for reconfiguring this community still resides on the fringes, in the mountains. The ending does not portray a clear revolution in the community, yet it hints at the possibility for positive transformation in the form of a more open and inclusive community. "Nadie sabe lo que va a pasar" ("No one knows what will happen"; 230; Gladhart 174), asserts the narrator on the last page. This sentence does not guarantee a restructuring of this Andean town, but it does leave room to hope that Manuel, Magdalena, and the other revolutionaries can reconfigure the stale divisions of gender, class, and race in the community. It at least implies that not even the all-powerful Benavides family knows how the conflict will end. The days of their almost omniscient power in this rural community have passed. The ending thus leaves the village leadership an open question and holds out for new community configurations that give neither the Benavides family nor the old Pandos full control of the village.

Both Condé's *Traversée de la mangrove* and Yáñez Cossío's *La Virgen Pipona* point to the limits of community, particularly in isolated rural contexts, in their content and structure. In both cases, the novels' stories complicate idealized visions of rural life and bring to light the complicated divisions of race, class, and gender that actually divide these rural communities. The small scale of community in the rural landscapes makes these divisions prominent to the residents and within the novels. The rural geography also makes an unnatural death in the community a real, material presence for most of the residents. They cannot escape the dead body nor its ramifications for the

rest of the community. In the case of Condé's text, hope for future change in ossified community structures comes from deep reflection about one's own position in the community and the narration of these reflections in the presence of death. Only from the deep reflection that arises after a death and the attempt to narrate the experience can a community begin to rethink its own configuration. Hope for community transformation in the case of Yáñez Cossío's novel is no more certain. The attempt to change the social and economic hierarchy of this town has taken on life in the revolutionaries hiding out in the hills whose movement was catalyzed by the death of an innocent child. The sole character who tried to narrate or tell the full story of the child's death is also the leader of the movement to rework or dismantle the town hierarchy. The future of this rural Ecuadorian town is just as uncertain as the future of Rivière au Sel, but the central death in both novels and the attempt to narrate it leaves the future open to the fulfillment of characters' dreams of open, inclusive, and equal community, a community that shares more than just the land they live on and the air they breathe.

On a structural level, both works attempt to give voice to the diverse community members and bring them together in ways that argue for just such a community. *Traversée's* multivocal text physically gathers the character's narratives together in the space of the novel and gives them all space to speak even though their behavior and reflections at the wake highlight the town's divisions. The difference in narrative voice between the male and female characters, however, shows that the project of rethinking community in Rivière au Sel remains unfinished even at the level of the novel. There is still the possibility of further reconfiguring the community, but as it stands, the gender divisions of the town are pervasive enough not to shift yet. *La Virgen Pipona* also brings together many different voices through the use of free indirect discourse and the deployment of over a hundred proverbs. The voices are still brought together in one space since

there are no chapter divisions, and they often speak in similar registers, citing proverbs and sayings to console themselves. At a structural and narrative level, then, the novel argues for an open and inclusive community based not only on a shared bodily vulnerability but a shared vulnerability to human flaws and idiosyncrasies. We are exposed to one another as human beings in multiple ways that include the physical and the emotional. This essential part of being human is made clearer in the encounter with violent death, with the dead body that can no longer narrate or touch or be touched. Both novels posit that maybe this negative starting point can serve as the foundation for a reworking of community that more fully includes all members because we always already need each other to make it, even more so in the isolation of rural landscapes.

Chapter Two

Violent Death and Divided (National) Communities

The problems of divided communities are more evident in the context of isolated, rural communities. Residents cannot escape to another neighborhood nor can they ignore the divisions they face each day around them. The rural landscapes of Condé and Yánez Cossío force people to share space and resources, but this sharing is often unequal and unjust. Yet, this very closeness is also what allows for the real possibility of change in community configurations. The scale of the community in a rural landscape is small enough to concretely envision reconfigurations. A single violent death in a small community becomes a public event; all of the local inhabitants come into material contact with death, with the frailty of the human body and the uncertainty of the future. They encounter unnatural death and all of the limits that implies, and they are often impelled to narrate the encounter. This encounter with death leads many of the residents of *Rivière au Sel* and the unnamed Ecuadorian town to reflect on their own positions in the local community, and they begin to envision an active form of community built on more than just living in proximity to one another. They attempt to narrate their experience to themselves and to each other, and their narration opens a space for rethinking current community configurations. It is perhaps the very bounded geography of these rural communities that makes the unnatural death and its narration so powerful. The isolation means that the narration spreads quickly to the limited number of inhabitants, and the landscape also shapes who narrates and how they do so. Within the stories of the novels and through their structure, they both argue that in a small community, narrating the encounter with unnatural death can suggest the possibility of future community iterations that move beyond divisions of race, class, gender, and family.

How might these lessons learned from novels about death and small, rural communities translate to larger communities such as the political community of the nation?¹² In the context of nation states, the community is much larger both in terms of geography and in terms of numbers. The increased size and geographic distribution mean that the community is no longer visible in the same way as in a rural town. The community members do not know each other by name or by sight, and they may live in vastly differing environments. They can more easily remove themselves from relationships and experiences they dislike, but they can also more easily self-segregate into homogeneous neighborhoods and organizations. Because the scale of the national community is so much larger, it is not a direct form of face-to-face community. Instead, the community of the nation state, as Benedict Anderson famously describes, is “an imagined political community...It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). A national community then is a project of collective imagination rather than a union based on characteristics such as language, culture, religion, etc., that citizens often believe and many nations claim are concrete and stable many nations claim. In fact, even those attributes of language, culture, and religion are contested and are in part products of collective imagination. Almost any modern nation state complicates simplistic notions of homogenous community. The imaginary construction of the nation involves both a selective remembering as well as a selective erasure of difference and of historical facts as pointed out by philosopher Ernst Renan. Renan specifies that “L’oubli, et je dirai même l’erreur historique sont un facteur essentiel de la creation

¹² While I argue that the rural context of Condé’s and Yáñez Cossío’s novel is the most important, Doris Sommers in her work *Foundational Fictions*, compellingly connects the Latin American novel to the founding of the nation. In this way, *La virgin pipona* is also engaged in these discussions of nation formation. However, while Sommers marks the Latin American novel, particularly the 19th century marriage plot, as an impetus to a particular kind of community formation, I think that an encounter with violent death is another axis on which to think nation and community formation.

d'une nation" ("Forgetting, and I would even say historical error are an essential factor in the creation of a nation"; 9).¹³ The nation, according to both Renan and Anderson, is based on social processes like imagining, remembering, and forgetting rather than on characteristics such as race and religion that national communities often claim are concrete.

This definition of the political community is useful for thinking through how a large group of people who cannot see and know one another can still think of themselves as a community. Raymond Williams points out that the definition of community became more focused on direct, local relationships in the face of industrialization and the rise of nation-states. Yet, community is not impossible for large political groups, but it is not a face-to-face, direct sharing. People can come together based only on an imagined sharing, but the very imagined nature of this community also makes it vulnerable. Unlike a village community, whose members are visible and knowable, the full national community cannot be seen or known outside of the imagination. It is a community on a much larger scale than a local, rural community. Because of its abstract and imagined nature, it can differ dramatically from person to person. If the imagined community is too rigidly and exclusively defined, then it can come into conflict with real, human communities, which are often much less coherent than those of the national imaginary. In that case, all those people and events that do not fit into the dominant narrative of national history and identity must be silenced or eradicated. The political community of the nation thus involves high stakes in terms of community identity. With national armies and modern weapons, these communities also bring the possibility of much more extreme violence than an isolated, rural town.

The concept of the nation is also already gendered, as so many previous scholars have pointed out. Thus, for example, the etymology of the word "nation" itself from the Latin "to be

¹³ Translation mine.

born” already genders the nation as feminine, as able to give birth. Historian George Mosse points out that women “played a symbolic role in the national mystique” with the rise of modern nation-states (23). It makes sense then that many of the physical embodiments of modern nation-states are female figures such as Marianne in France, Germania in Germany, and Columbia and later the Statue of Liberty in the United States. Colonial discourse further solidified the connection between gender and the nation by marking the colonies and their inhabitants as feminine. These gendered geographies further complicate attempts to develop coherent national identities, especially in the context of direct European colonization and its end during the 20th century. How could the colonial metropole of England be simultaneously embodied in the female figure of Britannia and yet be perceived as masculine when set beside the foreign colonies? How could foreign inhabitants be described in rhetoric that feminized and infantilized them while also often being perceived as hypermasculine as in the case of African men?¹⁴

This inconsistency was itself a threat to the construction of national identities. As Mosse points out, “Nationalism...assigned everyone his place in life, man and woman, normal and abnormal, native and foreigner; any confusion between these categories threatened chaos and loss of control” (16). Nationalism is often an attempt to unite the citizens of a nation-state by clearly defining the nation and its values, which often leads to exclusive definitions of the national community. Therefore, anything that disrupts these constructed categories can threaten the whole system. The rhetoric of imperialism and its accompanying colonialism is in many ways an extension of nationalism beyond national borders, an attempt to categorize the rest of the world in relation to the superior home nation. The rhetoric attempted to clearly differentiate between the

¹⁴ For a deeper discussion of how race, power, and whiteness were coded historically, see Chapters 7 and 8 in Reaser.

mother country and the colony, but the gendered national geographies actually served to show the incoherence of the system.¹⁵ In this context, novels can and often do interrogate the formation of national communities, and postcolonial novels in particular focus on these issues. The guiding question then becomes what are the implications for community of a violent death in the context of an imagined political community, especially in a colonial or postcolonial framework? Can a violent death still evoke a rethinking and reshaping of community when the community can no longer see itself?

My response to these questions will come through a reading of two twentieth century novels: Tayeb Salih's *Mawsim al-Hijra ila' ash-Shamal* (*Season of Migration to the North*) (1966) and Etel Adnan's *Sitt Marie Rose* (1977). Both of these texts complicate notions of coherent national communities because of their geographical and historical landscapes. Sudanese writer Salih's novel highlights the gender and power dynamics of both sexual relations and national identities in the context of Sudan's formal independence from British colonial rule. Adnan's novel examines similar ideas of gendered politics in the midst of the Lebanese Civil War, which was in many ways a conflict about how to define the imagined community of the nation. Both novels center on violent murders that expose some of the witnesses to the limits of life, the human, and narration. Their exposure to such bodily violence and their attempts to narrate the experience open up the possibility of moving beyond the gendered and raced definitions of the nation. At least one narrator in each text gestures toward a more open and inclusive form of community, and the structure of the works invites the actual readers to move in that direction as well. Salih's novel,

¹⁵ Wail S. Hassan argues in his article "Gender (and) Imperialism: Structures of Masculinity in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*" that race is what destabilizes gendered colonial geographies. I argue, however, that the entire colonial system is always already implicitly destabilized by the internal incoherence of the system.

specifically, points out the complex problems of gendered postcolonial communities and the problematic traditional dichotomies of colonial and postcolonial. Adnan's novel similarly points out the problems of trying to define community in the context of a complex and heterogeneous national community and proposes a more open definition of the national community than either side in the war will allow for. Both novels interrogate what kind of community is possible in the modern nation-state, and they both indirectly propose a flexible and interconnected community without fixed borders that can allow room for the actual complexity of national communities. Any other definition of the community of the nation is only a myth that leaves many people out and often leads to violence and destruction.

Salih's text, now a classic in Arabic postcolonial literature, is far from a straightforward response to any questions of national politics or community identity. The structure of the novel and narration interweave multiple stories and multiple literary genres that do not allow for any easy answers. The novel's narrator is an unnamed Sudanese man who returns to the Sudan after obtaining a doctorate in London. However, embedded in his narration are the stories of many of the villagers along with the story of Mustafa Sa'eed, another Sudanese man who has returned from abroad and settled in the narrator's village. In addition to the multiple stories, the text also shifts rapidly between different time periods and moves between rural Sudan, Cairo, and London. The multiple stories and settings make difficult any attempt to ascribe a simple meaning to the novel. The shifting narrators and shifting settings are rendered even more complicated by the novel's frequent direct and indirect references to diverse literary genres from the traditions of English and Arabic literature. Thus, the opening line of the novel is a direct address to a group of "gentlemen" ("نا سادتی"; ٥; Johnson-Davies 1). Scholar Saree Makdisi points out that this opening is reminiscent

of the old *hakawati* of the Arabic oral tradition (814).¹⁶ *Hakawati* in Arabic literally means storyteller, but it refers specifically to oral storytellers who performed in coffee shops or public squares. As in the case of the famous storyteller Scheherazade, the stories often continued for days or months and were designed to keep listeners returning.

If we think of that opening line like the opening of an oral story (as we must if we are to account for the direct address to an audience of unnamed gentlemen), then the text is complicated in terms of genre as well as in terms of narration and content. It is a twentieth century modernist novel with narrative elements of traditional Arabic oral storytelling. It includes long quotations of British poetry, frequent references to and quotations from the Qur'an, and references to Shakespeare's *Othello* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Saree Makdisi also points out this intricacy and describes the novel as spreading out "through and across the different registers of textuality, narrative, form, chronology, and history, none of which remain stable, and each of which is wrapped up in a series of endless and constantly expanding contradictions" (808). The structural and narrative complexity of the novel complicate any attempt to think through questions of national community through the text. However, this complexity can also begin to answer questions of community in the context of postcolonial nation-states. The novel's structure suggests that the answers have to do with an unstable synthesis between disparate groups just as the diverse literary traditions it incorporates come together and manage at the very least to coexist in the text of the novel.

Despite or perhaps because of these structural complications, Salih's work is an interesting one in which to think through the intersections of gender, the body, and violent death in the context of negotiating local and national community configurations in the aftermath of European

¹⁶ For more on the relationship between Salih's text and Arabic *hakawati*, also see Long 75-98.

colonization of Africa. The novel continuously toggles back and forth between local community configurations and the larger landscape of modern nation-states and empires. Even when the focus is on seemingly local events, the larger landscape of national communities always impinges on the local. The novel reaches two narrative climaxes, both of which are brutal events described in horrific detail. These events also function as markers for much of the gender and sexual violence of direct European colonization of Africa and its aftermath as well as the gendered violence of traditional patriarchal systems, wherever they may be. The narrator comes of age in an independent Sudan, and returns from a seven-year absence to work in the Ministry of Education in Khartoum. The secondary narrator is Mustafa Sa'eed, a man born a generation earlier, whose birthday and death highlight the extent to which he and the novel are meant to be read metaphorically as much as literally. As Wail S. Hassan and other scholars have pointed out, Mustafa Sa'eed is born in 1898, the year that the British military led by Lord Kitchener defeated the Sudanese Mahdist forces and effectively gained military control over the Sudan. Sa'eed then disappears or dies in 1953, just after the Egyptian Revolution, which also catalyzed the process of Sudan's independence from Britain (Hassan, "Gender (and) Imperialism" 311).¹⁷ Thus, the life of Mustafa Sa'eed, one of two main characters in the novel, coincides almost perfectly with the direct British colonization of the Sudan. Since a majority of the novel focuses on Mustafa or on the unnamed narrator's obsession with Mustafa, one lens through which to view the novel is that of a comment or critique of this period of colonization and its ensuing aftermath. The novel is therefore deeply involved in questions of nation-states and national identities in the Sudan and in England.

¹⁷ For a more detailed analysis of the ways that Mustafa Sa'eed's life intersects with major events in the history of European colonization of the Sudan and the rest of the Arab world, also see Wail S. Hassan's book *Tayeb Salih: Ideology and the Craft of Fiction*, 91-93.

Much of the novel's critique is embodied in Mustafa's character and his relationship to gendered violence. While Mustafa has settled in rural Sudan and appears to be nothing more than a farmer, he actually holds a Ph.D. in economics from an English university. His first name in Arabic literally means "chosen," and it is an epithet of praise for the Prophet Muhammad. Mustafa's name is ironic in many ways since he is a problematic character who is both villain and hero depending on the context. Yet, he was also literally chosen as a young boy by the colonial education system as the recipient of a grant to continue his education in Cairo and then London. Before his departure, Mustafa describes his personality as a child in the Sudan very differently from his later descriptions of himself once he leaves. He refers to himself as "cold as a field of ice" ("بارداً كحقل جليد"; ٢٦; Johnson-Davies 22). His behavior at school and at home as a schoolboy manifest this coldness as he has no friends and no interest in making friends; even his final goodbye to his mother is cold and emotionless.

However, his description of his journey north is punctuated by frequent references to the land as a woman to be conquered (and vice versa) and to sex as a form of colonization. As soon as he leaves Sudanese territory, he begins to describe his experience in gendered and sexual terms rather than in the cold clinical descriptions of his boyhood: "I felt as though Cairo, that large mountain to which my camel had carried me, was a European woman like Mrs. Robinson, its arms embracing me, its perfume and the odour of its body filling my nostrils" ("أحسست كأن القاهرة, ذلك الجبل الكبير الذى حملنى اليه بعيرى, امرأة أوروبية, مثل مسز روبنسن تماماً, تطوقنى ذراعاها, يملأ عطرها ورائحة جسدها أنفى"; ٢٨; Johnson-Davies 25). The Arabic name for Cairo and the Arabic word for city are both feminine, so it makes sense on some linguistic level to identify the city as feminine. What does not follow logically from a linguistically gendered word is Mustafa's anthropomorphization and sexualization of the city. His cold emotionlessness in the Sudan turns to hypersexualization and a

sense of masculine power over the feminized foreign city when he leaves his homeland. Mustafa becomes a colonizer and adopts the European colonial worldview in which the foreign Other is weak and feminized. Despite its geographical proximity to the Sudan, Cairo is foreign for Mustafa, a fact emphasized by his reference to it as a European woman, not just a woman in general. This feminized place also infatuates him as seen in the words he uses to for the city's smell, *عطر* and *رائحة*, both of which have positive connotations and most often describe sweet smells. *رائحة*, for example, frequently refers to the smells of food or perfumes. The word comes from the Arabic root *ر-و-ح*, which has to do with resting, breathing, and relaxing, so the word Mustafa uses to describe the scent of the city's body is one connoting something refreshing. The city not only infatuates him but also welcomes him, and his body responds with sexual yearning. Mustafa explicitly mentions a feeling of sexual desire in the same passage; the first stage in his trip north begins with an act of psychological and emotional colonization. He feminizes and sexualizes Cairo just as European colonizers feminized and sexualized the Orient in their descriptions of exotic locations. The difference here is that according to Mustafa's descriptions, he was welcomed with open arms while the British repeatedly had to use incredible violence to wrest and keep control of the Sudan. Mustafa, though, meets with no resistance in the first part of his journey.

While in Egypt, Mustafa not only feminizes the landscape, but he also turns his guardian and mother figure, Mrs. Robinson, into a sexual object. In London, Mustafa goes a step farther. His trip to London is a kind of reverse colonization, and like so many conquerors and colonizers before him, he views the local English women as the spoils of this war. He thus not only turns a sexual gaze on the women he finds there, but he also seeks to sexually conquer and control them. While he is a lone man without weapons unlike the European colonizers in Africa, he repeatedly refers to his mind as "a sharp knife" ("مذبة حادة" ; ٢٦ ; Johnson-Davies 22). The word Mustafa uses

here for knife is not just a kitchen knife or a butter knife but a butcher's cleaver, a knife that implies strength and violence. He may be coming to England technically unarmed, yet he is clearly prepared to do battle. He uses his mind to excel in his academic career and to manipulate local women into falling in love with and having sex with him.

One way in which Mustafa seduces the women in England is by using his sharp mind to play on their exotic fantasies. Just as European men were enamored with images of exotic women like those in Eugène Delacroix's famous painting *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, the European women that Mustafa Sa'eed encounters similarly exoticize the foreign Other in the form of Mustafa. He therefore regales them with fictitious tales of his life in Africa: "I told her that the streets of my country teemed with elephants and lions and that during siesta time crocodiles crawled through it" ("قلت لها أن شوارع عاصمة بلادى تعج بالافئال والأسود, وتزحف عليها التماسيح عند القيلولة.") ; Johnson-Davies 38). Even this short and ridiculous description of Mustafa's homeland reinforces the image of Mustafa as a cunning invader. He plays on all of Isabella Seymour's exotic stereotypes and even subtly describes his own status as a colonizer of the colonizers. The verb he uses to describe the crocodiles crawling through town, *تزحف*, does mean to crawl but when paired with the preposition *على* as in this quotation, the verb takes on the additional meaning of marching or being on the march against something else. The crocodiles in Mustafa's imagined home are an invading army, not just wandering tourists. This fact becomes even more significant when just a few pages later Mustafa assuages Isabella's distrust of his motives by calling himself an "aged crocodile who's lost its teeth" ("تمساح عجوز سقطت اسنانه") ; Johnson-Davies 40). Mustafa, like the invading crocodiles that he describes, seeks his prey when they are asleep or unawares. In this case, he turns the women of England into his prey, his booty in a war against those who came to his homeland as conquerors and colonizers.

In addition to Mustafa's fantastical stories that play on the orientalism of English women, his home, specifically his bedroom, operates in a similar manner. He has decorated his home and bedroom with assorted paraphernalia from across the Arab and African worlds. He enumerates some of the contents in the tale of his seduction of yet another English woman:

the sandalwood and incense; the ostrich feathers and ivory and ebony figurines; the paintings and drawings of forests of palm trees along the shores of the Nile, boats with sails like doves' wings, suns setting over the mountains of the Red Sea, camel caravans wending their way along sand dunes on the borders of the Yemen, baobab trees in Kordofan...Persian carpets, pink curtains, large mirrors on the walls, and coloured lights in the corners. (Johnson-Davies 146)

الصندل والند وريش النعام وتمائيل العاج والأبنوس والصور والرسوم لغابات النخل على شطآن النيل،
وقوارب على صفحة الماء أشرعتها كأجنحة الحمام، وشموس تغرب على جبال البحر الأحمر، وقوابل من
الجمال تخب السير على كثبان الرمل على حدود اليمن، أشجار التبلدى فى كردفان...السجاجيد العجمية
والستائر الوردية، والمرايا الكبيرة على الجدران، والأضواء الملونة في الأركان. (١٤٦)

The sheer length of Mustafa's list testifies to the massive effort he makes to seduce English women by playing on their orientalist fantasies. His list also demonstrates the typical orientalist conflation of all exotic cultures into one massive foreign Other. He possesses ebony, for example, which usually originates in India or West Africa, and he has objects representing Yemen, Persia, the Sudan, and Egypt. His boudoir also appeals to all of the senses with foreign smells, romantic images of exotic places, soft Persian carpets, and colored lights. Mustafa thus repeats one of the essential acts of colonization by conflating cultural difference in order to seduce the women of the colonizing nation. He reenacts or replays the conflation that has already been done to serve his own ends.

While Mustafa's London home can be read as a reappropriation of exotic stereotypes for his own ends, Mustafa's bedroom simultaneously functions as a sign of his own constructedness. He has come to England as a sexual colonizer, but he must give up any parts of himself that do not fit the colonial narrative in order to conquer sexually. He also becomes the hypersexual African male that so much colonial writing and thinking warned about. Mustafa, therefore, in his attempts to "liberate Africa with his penis" ("سأحرر أفريقيا ب...ى"; ١٢٣; Johnson-Davies 121) not only sexualizes foreign lands and foreign women, he turns himself into a walking stereotype with five different names but no stable identity outside of colonial stereotypes. Colonial systems posited fixed, stable and inferior identities for the colonized peoples while seeing the colonizers as heralds of progress. In one way, then, Mustafa escapes the attempt to stabilize his identity, but he does so at the expense of his own cultural and personal background. He becomes a charade of colonial stereotypes rather than a sincere human being. If Mustafa functions as some kind of symbolic critique of direct British colonialism in the Sudan as his lifespan suggests, then that critique is incredibly complex. David McInnis suggests that "Mustafa both represents the faults of the invading colonist, and simultaneously solicits responses from the women that expose the folly of the colonial mindset" (97). Mustafa exposes the many problems of the colonial mindset both in his own behavior and through the behavior of the women he seduces. His attempts to act as a sexual conqueror in England directly harm the women he seduces, but they also evacuate him of any kind of authentic self and detach him from his own past and culture. If there are any lessons to be learned from Mustafa as a metaphor for reverse colonization, one may be that it is potentially detrimental to all involved. Mustafa loses himself in the process and at least nine times in the novel refers to himself or is referred to by others as "a lie" ("الكذوبة"; ٣٢; Johnson-Davies 33). At the very least, reading Mustafa's character as a symbolic critique complicates any notions of individual or

national identity as stable and homogenous, particularly in the context of European colonization of Africa. As a marker of national communities, Mustafa also reveals that nothing about the ways national communities attempt to define themselves and build an identity is natural. They are imagined communities that are constructions to serve specific purposes similar to the way Mustafa's life and home in England are fiction and fantasy designed to seduce women.

Furthermore, Mustafa's time in England reveals gendered social divisions both in England and in the Sudan that are complicated and unstable in both locations. At first glance, Mustafa's time in England shows a clear divide between him as a foreign, black, Arab/African male and the white, British women he seduces. With Isabella, Ann, and Sheila, Mustafa is in control while they are the victims. He is the hunter, and they are the prey. He specifically uses the term "prey" ("صيد") multiple times in describing his pursuit and seduction of the women (٣٣; Johnson-Davies 30). His rhetoric thus shows that he does not think of these women as individuals or equals; they are all just objects or animals, the spoils of his war on the British. Mustafa is so convincing in his seductions that all three of these women commit suicide once they find out that he is not sincere in his professions of love and devotion. In each of these cases, the women fit the traditional British gender roles of the time which believed women were emotional, easily manipulated, and attached more emotional significance to sex than men did. Mustafa's emotional coldness, intellectual prowess, and desire for many different sexual partners is also in line with traditional ideas about masculinity in 19th and 20th century England. If these three women were the end of the story, then Mustafa's symbolic colonial venture would have been a relative success. His interactions with these three women would also have confirmed or naturalized the gendered divisions of mid-twentieth century Britain.

However, those three women are only footnotes to the real story of seduction from Mustafa's time in England: his own seduction by Jean Morris. Jean Morris' character belies many of the gendered divisions the other women embody, and she reveals the falseness of this simplistic gender dichotomy. She does not at all behave according to traditional mores for English women's behavior in the early twentieth century, and she is not seduced by Mustafa's dazzling oriental objects. In fact, she seems to see right through their pretty exterior to understand their importance in Mustafa's seduction schemes and thus destroys them. For example, she once shows up unannounced and demands Mustafa give her things in order to have sex with her: "She pointed to a silken Isphahan prayer-rug which I had been given by Mrs. Robinson when I left Cairo. It was the most valuable thing I owned, the thing I treasured most. 'Give me this too and then you can have me,' she said....Taking up the prayer-rug, she threw it on the fire and stood watching gloatingly as it was consumed" ("أشارت إلى مصلاة من حرير أصفهان أهدتني إياها مسز روبنسن عند رحيلي من القاهرة. أتمن شيء عندي وأعز هدية على قلبي قالت تعطيني هذه أيضا ثم تأخذني....فأخذت المصلاة ورمتها في نار المدفأة القاهرة. أتمن شيء عندي وأعز هدية على قلبي قالت تعطيني هذه أيضا ثم تأخذني....فأخذت المصلاة ورمتها في نار المدفأة" ; Johnson-Davies 157). Unlike the women Mustafa successfully seduces, Jean is not impressed by Mustafa's collection of exotic foreign objects. In fact, her response is quite the opposite of the women who fall into bed with Mustafa whispering about his dark skin and his sweat that smells like hot deserts. Jean burns his most precious foreign object, the prayer-rug, chews and spits out an expensive Arabic manuscript, and breaks a priceless vase. At the end of it all, despite having promised her body to Mustafa Sa'eed, she instead knees him so hard in the groin that he passes out. She is not the passive female body waiting to be conquered; she is not a passive object in the face of Mustafa's reverse colonization that marks foreign women as prey. Mustafa's time in England reveals that both the colonizer and colonized can be profoundly affected and changed by the encounter, and his interactions with Jean Morris show that the

colonized also participate in the process through multiple acts of resistance. The Sudanese did not passively lie down and let the British have their land and resources, and Jean Morris does not passively accept Mustafa's efforts at sexual colonization. Jean also shows that gendered divisions and broad categories like "women" rarely function as simple homogenous groupings since she is so radically different from the other English women Mustafa describes.

Similar to the early twentieth century British view of women as passive victims and men as active leaders, the inhabitants of the narrator's childhood village believe in very clear gender divisions in which women are the property of men whom they must passively obey. Yet, the lived reality in the village often contradicts the simplistic gender dichotomy the inhabitants envision. On one level, the local women are the property of men, so when Hosna, the narrator's love and Mustafa Sa'eed's widow, refuses to marry the elderly Wad Rayyes, she is quickly condemned.

Wad Rayyes exclaims, "She'll marry me whatever you or she says or does. Her father's agreed and so have her brothers. This nonsense you learn at school won't wash with us here. In this village the men are guardians of the women" (*إنها ستتزوجني رغم أنفك وانفها. أبوها قبل وإخواتها قبلوا. الكلام الفارغ الذي*) (Johnson-Davies 97-8; ١٠٢; *تتعلمونه في المدارس لا يسير عندنا. هذا البلد فيه الرجال قوامون على النساء*).

Hosna's refusal to marry Wad Rayyes means little to her father and brothers because she is a woman. Even though she is an adult, independent, and the mother of two children, Hosna is supposed to obey the men who are her guardians even if she disagrees with them, even if it is her own life they are bargaining about. Wad Rayyes and Hosna's family agree that her thoughts and feelings have no bearing on the decision to marry her off a second time, but the narrator clearly disagrees with the decision. He talks it over in frustration with his childhood friend and reacts in anger when his grandfather and father talk about it. While the narrator and other villagers might sympathize with Hosna, they ultimately leave the matter up to her family. Despite any sympathy

they feel, women in the village are not supposed to live independently or think for themselves; those things are the province of the men. This rural village believes in simple categories of appropriate gender behavior that follow a traditional patriarchal model in which only men are fully independent human beings.

However, despite the seemingly rigid divisions between genders in the rural Sudanese village, the novel also highlights the ways that these gender divisions do not always hold up in reality. For example, when the novel introduces the narrator's grandfather and his friends, one of the most striking facts is that the group contains a woman who smokes, drinks, and swears as much as or more than the men do. While none of this fits in with the inhabitants' traditional gender divisions (or those of the colonizing British), they nonetheless accept Bint Majzoub as a natural part of village life. As in England, the local women are not a monolithic group, and the borders between genders are actually more porous than many people in both locales will admit. The narrator does repeatedly refer to Bint Majzoub as masculine as when he describes her "mannish laugh" ("ضحكة بنت مجذوب القوية المسترجلة"; ٧٦; Johnson-Davies 70). The narrator and the village inhabitants therefore do not regard Bint Majzoub as a paragon of femininity, but neither do they ostracize her for her non-traditional gender behavior. In fact, the passage above makes the narrator seem a bit in awe of Bint Majzoub since in the Arabic, he describes her laugh as powerful as well as masculine. She is a woman, a woman who behaves in many traditionally masculine ways yet is simultaneously one of the inner circle of the narrator's devout and traditional grandfather. She converses with the men openly about her past sexual experiences and theirs as they mutually mock one another. Bint Majzoub's presence in the novel and her presence in the grandfather's inner circle reveal that there is room even in this rural village with clear gender divisions for women who do not fit into those categories. Just as Jean Morris calls into question the traditional gender role of

weak, passive, and emotional English women, Bint Majzoub complicates the fixed notions of gender in this rural Sudanese community. Both women show that the lived reality of socially constructed gender divisions is actually much more complex and nuanced than Manichaean dichotomies allow for. Mustafa journeys to Britain believing the women will all be easy victims of his anti-colonial seductions and returns to the Sudan thinking that a quiet village life will be simple and straightforward. In both cases, deeper examination shows that the gendered divisions are incredibly complex and less rigid than they first appear.

These gender divisions mirror many of the imagined divisions between the national communities in the Sudan and in Britain. Many of the British people Mustafa encounters treat him with complete disdain and believe he is qualitatively different from them because of his skin color and birthplace. One of his Oxford professors says to him, "You, Mr Sa'eed, are the best example of the fact that our civilizing mission in Africa is of no avail. After all the efforts we've made to educate you, it's as if you'd come out of the jungle for the first time" ("أنت يامستر سعيد خير مثال على) أن مهمتنا الحضارية في افريقيا عديمة الجدوى, فأنت بعد كل المجهودات التي بذلناها في تثقيفك كأنك تخرج من الغابة لأول مرة"; Johnson-Davies 93-4). Mustafa Sa'eed's professor sees him as wild and primitive despite his incredible academic success. In his statement, the professor like many others turns all of Africa into a jungle even though Mustafa's north Sudanese homeland is mostly desert and the Nile valley. The facts of Mustafa Sa'eed's life are not important for Professor Maxwell Foster-Keen; the important thing is Mustafa's dark skin and African origins. These differences mark him irrevocably in the eyes of most of the people he encounters in England. The English people he encounters believe there is a concrete border of difference between this colonial Sudanese man in London and themselves. In many cases, this difference is a liability as in the case of Mustafa's Oxford professor or the parents of Sheila Greenwood. For many of the English people Mustafa

encounters, he is foreign, black, and thus different from them and theirs with no hope of connection or active community. Even the best education at an elite university and multiple publications and books cannot put Mustafa on equal footing with white British people. He will always be a colonial subject to them rather than a full human being.

For the women Mustafa seduces, his foreignness is not a liability or a negative attribute. His difference is exotic for them, and their relationships with him make them transgressive. Regardless of the positive valence of Mustafa's difference for these women, they still place him in a different category from themselves. For one of the women, Isabella Seymour, Mustafa is so different and exotic that she turns him into a god. She even says to him, "You are my god and there is no god but you" ("أنت إلهي، ولا إله غيرك" ; ١١٢ ; Johnson-Davies 108). Isabella's phrase is a clear echo of the *shahaada*, the Muslim statement of faith, but her wholehearted submission is to Mustafa rather than to any abstract religious deity. Isabella's extreme devotion turns Mustafa's foreignness into a divine attribute, but it also serves to categorically differentiate him from her. They are not equals because his difference is always already present for Isabella and for the other women seduced by him. Isabella and the other women are seduced by Mustafa's foreignness, yet their positive vision of Mustafa's foreignness is not that different from the negative view that most of their contemporaries in England hold. Just like Professor Foster-Keen, the women also view Mustafa as wild and primitive. Ann Hammond, for example, enjoys smelling Mustafa's sweat because she wants to inhale "the smell of rotting leaves in the jungles of Africa, the smell of the mango and the pawpaw and tropical spices, the smell of rains in the deserts of Arabia" ("رائحة الأوراق المتعفنة في" ; ١٤٣ ; Johnson-Davies 142). Ann, just like the professor, associates Mustafa with jungles and the tropics. She even uses the same Arabic word for jungle as Professor Foster-Keen, so the novel linguistically connects

both of their Orientalized views of Mustafa as coming out of the jungles of Africa despite his childhood in the desert and the Nile valley. Furthermore, Ann conflates two different continents in describing the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula alongside the jungles of Africa. Both Ann and the professor see Mustafa not as a unique human being from a specific time and place but as a walking symbol of all African and Middle Eastern foreignness. Mustafa's lovers and his detractors alike mark him as distinctly foreign and qualitatively different from themselves as white English people.

The inhabitants of the narrator's village also want to establish clear differences between the communities of British colonizers and the local Sudanese population. Upon the narrator's initial return to his village, he is peppered with questions about the people in Europe. The villagers are shocked when he responds "that Europeans were, with minor differences, exactly like them" (Johnson-Davies 3; ٧; "الأوروبيين, إذا استثنينا فوارق ضئيلة, مثلنا تماماً). The narrator then tries to convince his fellow townspeople that the Europeans he met have much in common with them. They remain unconvinced and prefer to quickly divide the world into an "us" and a foreign "them." For many of the village inhabitants, though, the divide is not only racial but also religious (and gendered). For instance, Wad Rayyes asks the narrator about the foreign women he met while abroad. The English translation uses the word "infidel," which is not really an accurate translation of the Arabic word "النصارى" that Wad Rayyes uses to describe the foreign women. The Arabic word actually refers to Christians, not infidels. Wad Rayyes could have used the Arabic word for infidel, كافر, but instead uses the word for Christians, which is less harsh. His word choice differentiates between himself and the Christians in Europe, but he does not bear animosity towards them. Most likely, he does not describe the foreign women negatively because his primary interests in life are women and sex. Bint Majzoub, however, does view the European women as different in negative religious and gendered terms. In contrast to the local women, European

women are “uncircumcised” (“غلف”; ٨٤; Johnson-Davies 80). The term that Bint Majzoub uses here means uncircumcised, but it can also mean rude and uncivilized. Bint Majzoub marks the European women not only as different but also as less developed, less civilized—a direct reversal of the colonizers’ frequent descriptions of the Sudanese as uncivilized and backwards. In the same scene, the narrator’s grandfather also calls the European women “الغير مطهرات” (٨٥). This term is again translated into English as “uncircumcised,” but it literally means “not pure or immaculate” (81). While Wad Rayyes’ word choice only indicates that the European women are different in terms of religion, the grandfather and Bint Majzoub’s language highlights them as negatively different in body. They turn the artificial genital difference into a difference of morals and behavior and see the European women as clearly distinct from the Sudanese girls in the village.

Both the majority of the English and the Sudanese in the novel believe that there is a rigid boundary of difference between their communities and between genders, yet the novel ultimately argues that many of these differences are much less stark than some of the characters seem to believe. Communities are more complex in reality than in the mental categories people use to try to understand the world, and the categories themselves are actually fluid and unstable. The text’s unnamed narrator is one of the few characters who is sometimes able to recognize this complexity. He does count himself as one of the villagers at the beginning of the narrative when he returns home. When describing the Europeans to the villagers as “exactly like them,” in the Arabic, the narrator actually says “like us” (“مثلنا”) and thus includes himself in the population of the village. He wants to fit back in with village life as he did before he traveled abroad for seven years, and he imagines himself “like that palm tree, a being with a background, with roots, with a purpose” (“مثل” ; Johnson-Davies 2). The narrator describes himself as a tree that literally has a trunk (أصل), but on a metaphorical level, أصل means origin or family lineage.

The narrator wants to believe that he is as stable and unchanging as that palm tree, but people do not stay in one place like trees nor do they remain static throughout their lives. The narrator also sometimes describes the village as unchanging and “stable” (”ثابت“; ٥٢ ; Johnson-Davies 49). At times, he tries to convince himself that his grandfather and his home have not changed even while he has left for many years and settled in Khartoum.

Despite claiming himself one of the villagers and describing the unchanging nature of the village and his grandfather, the narrator also has moments of recognition in which he sees that the local community and the larger community of Sudan are not fixed and unchanging. Thus, twice in response to Hosna’s family trying to force her to remarry, the narrator exclaims, “But the world has changed!” (”ولكن الدنيا تغيرت“); ١٠٤ ; Johnson-Davies 99). The villagers do not want to agree with the narrator despite the evidence to contrary, yet he can sometimes recognize that life there has changed even if that change has been slow. The narrator is also able to recognize the absurdity of the attitudes of the English toward Mustafa. He critiques both Isabella’s devotion to Mustafa and the contrasting denigration by English men: “How strange! How ironic! Just because a man has been created on the Equator some mad people regard him as a slave, others as a god” (”يا للغرابة.“); ١١٢ ; Johnson-Davies 108). The narrator agrees neither with the Sudanese villagers nor with the English people that human beings can be easily divided into discrete and isolated communities based on their gender or place of birth.

Unlike the narrator, Mustafa seems to divide the world into starkly different groups along cultural and gender lines similar to the Sudanese villagers and his English acquaintances. Even though Mustafa plays into the bifurcated and exaggerated orientalist views of English people about him, he views himself as qualitatively different from them as well. He is a completely different

person in England than he is in the Sudanese village, and while in England, he repeatedly refers to himself as “a colonizer” (“مستعمر”). European colonizers rarely saw the local inhabitants as equals, and Mustafa’s term implies a similar unequal power structure and a position of cultural and moral superiority. He reverses the traditional roles of colonizer and colonized and thereby keeps the same dichotomy between himself and the foreign others. His homes in both locations embody this division of the world into simple categories. Thus, in London, as detailed above, he decorates his home and bedroom like a stereotypical Middle Eastern harem. When he settles in the narrator’s ancestral village, he secretly constructs a full replica of an English study complete with walls of books and a fireplace, which he keeps locked at all times. Mustafa is simultaneously attracted to elite British metropolitan life and rural Sudanese life, but he cannot find a way to reconcile the two. Instead, he builds discrete foreign spaces in each of his homes but does not allow the two spheres to mix openly.

Furthermore, when the narrator stumbles upon Mustafa’s autobiography, it is dedicated “to those who see with one eye, speak with one tongue and see things as either black or white, either Eastern or Western” (“إلى الذين يرون بعين واحدة ويتكلمون بلسان واحد ويرون الأشياء إما سوداء أو بيضاء, إما شرقية أو غربية” ; Johnson-Davies 150-1). Mustafa’s book is dedicated to those who see the way he tries to see, with clear divisions between the Sudan and Britain, between black and white, between colonized and colonizer, between men and women. Mustafa attempts to maintain such clear borders by playing into orientalist fantasies in England and by concealing his past travels and education in the rural village. However, Mustafa’s book is blank except for that strange dedication. He could not write his life story because life (his and that of others) is not as simplistic or Manichaeian as his dedication wants it to be. His life story does not exist because he spent so much time living a lie in both London and rural Sudan that there is no longer anything to record. On the

level of story, then, Mustafa's life story is blank. On a larger narrative level, so much of the novel is dedicated to telling his story that the novel becomes, in part, an attempt to write the unwritten. The novel allows Mustafa much more of a voice than he manages to find himself, and it marks an unstable synthesis between the many dichotomies. Mustafa cannot manage to synthesize all of the disparate parts of his own life, but the novel proposes that an unstable synthesis is indeed a possibility. In Salih's novel, the synthesis only becomes a possibility after the narrator tells his story of his encounters with Mustafa and the stories of violent death surrounding him in both London and the Sudan.

While Mustafa attempts to maintain firm dichotomies, Jean Morris blurs many of the divisions that he tries to maintain. Not only does she not fall easily into the appropriate gender category, she also refuses the orientalist lens in her view of Mustafa. Perhaps because of her differences from the other women, Mustafa is no longer able to remain emotionally detached in his relationship with Jean. He comes to England as a conqueror and colonizer, to use his own descriptors, but Jean Morris does not readily submit to him. Instead, she reverses the power structure of Mustafa's typical relationships with women and responds to his advances with physical violence. Mustafa reacts to her disdain and violence by falling in love: "yet, against my will, I fell in love with her and was no longer able to control the course of events" (ولكنني رغم ارادتي أحببتها, ولم) (Johnson-Davies 156; ١٥٦: أعد استطيع أن اسيطر على مجرى الاحداث". Mustafa's description in this passage highlights his loss of control. He is no longer the powerful male colonizer and instead has ceded control over his heart and life to Jean. The cold emotionlessness that Mustafa experienced with his mother and with the other women he seduces turns into an obsessive passion. While Mustafa expends so much mental energy differentiating himself from the English and remaining

emotionally distant from all of them, Jean forces him to recognize her as a human agent despite the constructed borders of cultural and gendered difference.

It is perhaps Jean's threat to Mustafa's stable dichotomies that ultimately leads to his brutal murder of her. His description of the event (which is the only version we have in the novel) highlights Jean's passiveness and his newfound control. When he first returns home and finds her waiting naked in bed, he explains that he felt "that I am in control of the situation." ("إنني مسيطر") (على زمام الموقف"; ١٦٢; Johnson-Davies 163). This quotation reveals how important it is to Mustafa to feel in control especially when it comes to women. The passage uses the same Arabic root (س-ط-ر) to talk about power or control as the earlier passage about falling in love with Jean. In the first passage, Mustafa uses the verb form to describe himself not controlling events. The later passage instead uses the active participle, denoting agency. In Arabic, therefore, it does not say that he is in control but rather that he is the ruler or overlord ("مسيطر") who holds the reigns ("زمام") of the situation. This minor grammatical change shows a change in Mustafa who is now an active agent who controls the situation the way a person riding a horse controls every aspect of the horse's movements with a slight pull of the reigns. The English translation of this phrase does not adequately convey the rush of power Mustafa experiences. The strong image depicted in the original Arabic makes Mustafa seem more power-hungry and more dominant than in the translation. After years of submitting to Jean, Mustafa is finally in the position of power he had in all of his other relationships with English women.

Once Mustafa feels this moment of control in the relationship with Jean Morris, he brutally murders her. Based on his description of the scene, Mustafa clearly enjoys the power reversal in their relationship. Mustafa describes Jean pleading for him to have sex with her while he just watches her desperation. Jean becomes a passive recipient of Mustafa's gaze during the long

foreplay in which she neither speaks nor acts independently. She only looks at what Mustafa looks at, “as though she had been robbed of her own volition and was moving in accordance with my will” (“كأنها أصبحت مسلوقة الإرادة تتحرك حسب مشيئتي” ; ١٦٣ ; Johnson-Davies 163). The woman who earlier threw vases and burned manuscripts to flaunt her control now behaves like a voiceless puppet in Mustafa’s drama. Mustafa describes this passive following as erotic for both of them. In a very graphic scene, when Jean is weeping with sexual desire, Mustafa finally stabs her in the chest with a dagger: “I put the blade-edge between her breasts and she twined her legs round my back. Slowly I pressed down. Slowly. She opened her eyes. What ecstasy there was in those eyes!”

"وضعت حد الخنجر بين نهديها, وشبكت هي رجليها حول ظهري. ضغطت ببطء, ببطء. فتحت عينيها. أى نشوة فى هذه (; ١٦٤ ; Johnson-Davies 164). This violent experience is orgasmic for Mustafa. He closely observes Jean’s reaction to him stabbing her in the heart and takes his time so much that he repeats the word “slowly” in his description of the act. The description is a clear distortion of sexual intercourse in which the dagger acts as the phallus instead of the penis. Mustafa no longer needs his mind to be a sharp knife; he wields the knife himself. According to Mustafa, Jean also finds the experience orgasmic if we are to believe the ecstasy in her eyes. The English translation makes the ecstasy certain by including the only exclamation point in the long description of Jean’s death. The Arabic is more tentative with a question mark, but it still implies that Mustafa views Jean as enjoying the stabbing. If she does enjoy the stabbing, it further highlights the complexity of human behavior that does not fit into easy boxes. Either way, in Mustafa’s tale, sex and violence become the same thing. Mustafa uses them both to reclaim his masculine power. He is in a position of power as the narrator of this gruesome death, and his narration highlights his killing of Jean as the ultimate act of control over a passive feminine body.

The detailed description of Jean's death reinforces the horrific nature of the act as well as her passivity. He describes the act in graphic detail: "I pressed down the dagger with my chest until it had all disappeared between her breasts. I could feel the hot blood gushing from her chest" ; ١٦٤ ; "وضغطتُ الخنجر بصدري حتى غاب كله في صدرها بين النهدين, واحسست بدمها الحار يتفجر من صدرها). Johnson-Davies 164-5). Mustafa is lying on top of Jean while he stabs her, close enough that he feels the still warm blood from her wound. The detailed nature of Mustafa's story as he recounts it to the novel's narrator shows the material nature of Jean's death. Mustafa's violent attempts to control and colonize women's bodies in England are mostly vague tales of passion and deception. In contrast, Jean's death is visceral and graphic because Mustafa is metaphorically destroying the person who most complicated all of his neat categories and his own identity. Jean transgressed traditional gender roles for her time and violently revealed the constructedness of Mustafa's identity as a foreign Arab-African man in England. The text does not make it seem as if Mustafa learned much from his own encounter with Jean's violent death since he references it with yearning, but the unnamed narrator may have learned more. While Mustafa's autobiography reveals that he persisted in dividing the world into discrete communities even after Jean's death, the narrator is never as sure about anything as Mustafa was. In fact, it is upon leaving Mustafa's house after hearing about his time in England and the murder of Jean that the narrator can see the world's boundaries as more porous. He describes the village at dawn (a liminal time) as "suspended between earth and sky" ("مُعلَّق بين السماء والأرض"); ٥٢ ; Johnson-Davies 48). The narrator does not only see things in black and white. In moments of clarity such as this after hearing of Jean Morris' death, he can acknowledge that his village has changed, and he can see the world as complex, without fixed boundaries.

Mustafa, on the other hand, looks back on Jean's death as the most important moment of his life, but it does not fundamentally alter his bifurcated view of the world. He returns to the Sudan after serving his prison sentence but still builds his secret English study. Mustafa is incapable of synthesis; he cannot allow for complexity and instead constantly relives in his mind the moment in which he killed Jean Morris and all of the gender and cultural complexity that she represented. Mustafa—who was born with the advent of direct colonization of the Sudan and disappears as the English leave—represents the bifurcated and simplistic colonial vision of the world in which the colonizer and colonized can never find community together, in which their cultures remain distinct and homogeneous. The colonizers killed those who got in their way and deployed racialized discourses to try to maintain the divisions between them and local populations. Mustafa the colonizer kills Jean Morris for getting in his way and defends his actions with eroticized descriptions of female passivity.

Yet, the violence in the novel is not isolated to England and to the colonizers. Mustafa and the English people he meets want to clear divisions between them, but they are actually similar in many ways. Mustafa murders Jean in England, but there is also a horrific murder in the narrator's village in the Sudan, and one of the victims in the Sudan is a woman who quietly tries to defy some traditional gender roles like Jean Morris. Mustafa's widow, Hosna, who was forced to marry the aged Wad Rayyes, kills him and then kills herself when he tries to consummate their marriage. The scene is brutal, so horrific that the villagers refuse to speak of it to the narrator until he plies Bint Majzoub with alcohol. She somberly recounts finding Hosna bint Mahmoud and Wad Rayyes' naked bodies in detail:

The red straw mat was swimming in blood. I raised the lamp and saw that every inch of Bint Mahmoud's body was covered in bites and scratches—her stomach,

thighs and neck. The nipple of one breast had been bitten through and blood poured down from her lower lip. There is no strength and no power save in God.

Wad Rayyes had been stabbed more than ten times—in his stomach, chest, face, and between his thighs. (Johnson-Davies 127)

"كان البرش الأحمر يعوم في الدم. ورفعت المصباح. وجدت بنت محمود معضوضة ومخدشة في كل شبر من جسمها. بطنها أوراكاها. رقبته. عض حلما نهدها حتى قطعها. الدم يسيل من شفتها السفلى. لا حول ولا قوة إلا بالله. ود الرئيس مطعون أكثر من عشرة طعنات. طعنته في بطنه وفي صدره وفي محسنه. (١٢٨)

Even describing the event is so traumatic that Bint Majzoub has to stop repeatedly to finish the story. Hosna and Wad Rayyes both die violent deaths as Wad Rayyes attempts to rape Hosna. She fulfills her promise from earlier in the book and kills Wad Rayyes rather than agree to their marriage. In fact, she not only kills him but fittingly stabs his penis. In the Arabic, they refer to Wad Rayyes' penis as his محسن, literally his beautifier or embellisher, yet his penis and his attempts to use his penis—both metaphorically and literally—as an instrument of patriarchal power are what cause his violent death. Wad Rayyes cannot stand the fact that this woman who is legally his wife does not want to have sex with him, that she does not view his penis as a beautifier. Hosna has already symbolically castrated Wad Rayyes first by refusing his marriage proposal and then by refusing to have sex with him once they are married. Hosna controls their sexual relationship, which should be Wad's prerogative as the man and husband in a traditional patriarchal system. Their violent deaths are in some way a result of the rigid distinctions made in the village between men and women in terms of appropriate behavior and power. The woman who attempts to transgress the social gender norms is violently eradicated, but she takes with her the person and the phallus who are her symbolic oppressors.

While Wad Rayyes is stabbed in the penis, Hosna's worst injury besides the bitten nipple is appropriately a stab through the heart. Bint Majzoub describes: "We found her lying on her back with the knife plunged into her heart" ("وجدناها على ظهرها السكين مغروز في قلبها") ; ١٢٨ ; Johnson-Davies 127). The word "plunged" used to describe the knife's action implies incredible violence, which was most likely self-inflicted. Hosna claims to have loved her first husband, and she wanted to live her life in peace after his death, raising their children. Her wishes, the desires of her heart, however, are disregarded by many of the village men, particularly her family, because she is a woman. Wad Rayyes as a man has a right to act on his feelings and his desires even at the expense of other people, but Hosna's heart matters little. She finally acts on her feelings in killing Wad Rayyes but then must kill herself before the rest of the village kills her as punishment for her transgressions. Even after their vicious deaths, the other villagers devalue Hosna's feelings and blame her for not accepting Wad Rayyes. The narrator's mother, grandfather, and best friend all call Hosna names, but no one besides Wad Rayyes' first wife places the blame on Wad Rayyes for forcing a woman forty years his junior to marry him. The narrator's friend Mahjoub says of her that "If it wasn't for the sake of decency she wouldn't have been worth burying—we'd have thrown her into the river or left her body out for the hawks" ("لولا الحياء ما كانت تستاهل الدفن. كنا نرميها في البحر") ; ١٣٣ ; Johnson-Davies 133). Even in death, the woman who defies her assigned role must take the blame, but no one in the village suggests similar treatment for Wad Rayyes' body. Hosna as a rebellious woman is not quite fully human to the village community, so her death is neither transformative for them nor is it considered worthy of grief.

The villagers seem to learn little from these horrific deaths. They appear to persist in their vision of the world as clearly divided along lines of gender, culture, and religion. One of the primary reasons they give for not understanding Hosna's behavior is because she previously

accepted “the stranger” (“الغريب”) as a husband (١٣٠; Johnson-Davies 129). The Arabic term used in that passage can mean stranger, but it is also the word for foreigner and shares a root (ب - ر - غ) with the word for the West. This linguistic sliding implies that for the villagers, all outsiders are foreign and foreignness is associated with the West, with the people who colonized their land. The village residents envision community as small, local, and closed. Hosna not only did not follow appropriate feminine behavior for her small village on the Nile, but she also married a stranger or foreigner. She reveals the instability of the categories the villagers use to make sense of the world, so her violent death is unmourned. The villagers lay all of the blame for the unspeakable violence that occurs at her feet. Her violent death and her murder of Wad Rayyes do not clearly bring any of the villagers to reexamine their views on community. Those villagers like Bint Majzoub and Mahjoub who manage to narrate their encounters with horrifically violent death do not recognize Hosna’s death as mournable and therefore cannot recognize in her death an exposure to their own limits as human beings and as a community. The rest of the villagers refuse to even attempt to narrate the encounter with violent death and do not yet show signs of rethinking the current community configuration.

The narrator, however, finds himself more obviously affected by the events and fully mourns Hosna’s death because he believes hers counts as what Butler terms “a grievable death” (*Precarious Life* xv). Despite her own acts of violence, Hosna was a human being with her own desires and dreams. The narrator, therefore, hears the story of her death and is impelled to rethink his community and his own position in it. As described previously, he was already one of the only characters who is able to recognize complexity and to see the world as moving and changing rather than static. The first time the novel describes him recognizing a liminal moment is after he hears of Jean Morris’ bloody death, and he has a similar albeit more intense experience after he hears of

Hosna and Wad Rayyes' deaths. He recklessly decides to enter the Nile River and swim to the opposite shore to relieve his anger. He makes the decision at dawn and describes, "The objects on the two shores were half visible, appearing and disappearing, veering between light and darkness. The river was reverberating with its old familiar voice, moving yet having the appearance of being still" "كانت الأشياء على الشاطئ نصف واضحة، تبيين وتختفي، بين النور والظلام. كان النهر يدوى بصوته القديم" (Johnson-Davies 166; ١٦٥; المؤلف, متحرراً كأنه ساكن". The narrator describes a moment with extremely porous boundaries between opposites. It is neither night nor day, dark nor light, and the river is neither moving nor still. The narrator has been clearly affected by his encounters with violent deaths and his narration of these encounters open the possibility of re-envisioning community in both England and the Sudan.

In both encounters, the narrator hears the graphic and bloody details of human bodies violently killed, and he leaves better able to see the complexity of the world and the flexible boundaries between community divisions. This second time while in the river, the narrator describes a profound moment of confusion and loss of direction in the midst of the shifting and changing of the river and the world: "I veered between seeing and blindness. I was conscious and not conscious. Was I asleep or awake? Was I alive or dead?...I found I was half-way between north and south. I was unable to continue, unable to return" "أصبحت بين العمى والبصر. كنت اعى ولا) اعى. هل أنا نائم أم يقظان؟ هل أنا حي أم ميت?... فإذا أنا في منتصف الطريق بين الشمال والجنوب. لن استطيع المضي ولن استطيع العودة" (Johnson-Davies 167; ١٦٦). The narrator describes an extreme liminal moment in which the boundaries of the world around him and the boundaries of self all blur. However, this loss of sense and direction occurs in the middle of the river. He is in serious danger of drowning, so for the first time in his life, he makes a decision to live. In his own words, he screamed "like a comic actor shouting on a stage" "كأننى ممثل هزلى يصيح فى مسرح" (Johnson-Davies 169; ١٦٨). This

final line of the novel implies that the narrator could escape his dire predicament since comedies traditionally end happily. The opening line of the novel further supports this reading since a drowned man cannot narrate a tale to a group of gentlemen. Assuming that the narrator does make it out of the river, there is hope that his encounters with violent deaths have changed him. After all, he does make a clear decision to live for the first time rather than just follow the path of least resistance. His survival would also mean, though, that he cannot continue in a liminal state. He must choose a shore to swim to and a life to lead. He would necessarily have to retreat a bit from the two immersive moments of liminality, which shows just how difficult it is to think of the world and of communities without fixed categories.

Within the story, then, the narrator is one of the few characters whose worldview might shift at all due to the violent deaths that form the two climaxes of the story. The two deaths both allow the narrator to experience moments of liminality, but he does not concretely reflect on community. The novel, however, does have a specific narratee: the audience of men gathered to hear the narrator's story. There remains the possibility that recounting these two violent events could change the stated audience's views of community. But, the strongest possibility for a reformulation of community from the novel comes from the larger audience of real readers who can read closely and pay attention to the ways in which these violent deaths relate to divided communities. Careful readers notice the strong connections between the violence in metropolitan Britain and the violence in rural Sudan. Both acts of violence are deeply related to traditional patriarchal gender norms, which may look different in different geographical contexts but nonetheless serve to reinforce male hegemony at the expense of women. The novel critiques the hierarchical and unequal gender paradigms in both locations. It reveals the constructedness of gender boundaries and shows the violent consequences for women who transgress them. Salih's

text simultaneously critiques the way that European colonialism in Sudan and the rest of Africa attempted to neatly define and divide local culture from Western European culture. Mustafa's own distorted and multiple identities show what happens when one takes the colonial narratives of difference and division to the extreme. The novel questions categories of gender and definitions of national communities and ultimately argues that both are much more complex than most of the novel's characters allow for. The novel shatters the simplistic binary lenses through which many characters view the world and leaves an open space of possibility in their place. If the novel argues anything about community, it is that communities, local and national, are complex and interconnected. The violent deaths show how dangerous it can be, though, to espouse a more open vision of gender and community. The novel is too complex to offer clear solutions, but it opens a space for reflection about these complicated issues of community in the context of Europe's colonization of Africa.

The ending of Salih's text opens up a space of reflection for its stated audience of male listeners and for its real audience of readers where future changes in community in the Sudan and in England may be possible. This possibility is echoed in Etel Adnan's novel *Sitt Marie Rose*. Adnan's work, published in 1977—over a decade after Salih's work—describes attempts by female characters to expand ideas of the Lebanese national community beyond the exclusive definitions proposed by male-dominated political factions during the Lebanese Civil War. The text reveals the ways that the discourses of gender and race attempt to reify particular iterations of national identity and maintain those iterations through emotional and physical violence. Set in a divided Beirut in the midst of the fifteen-year conflict, the novel describes the war's opposing factions, which all seek to violently purify the national community along religious and racial lines. The text is divided into two parts: Time I and Time II. Time I opens before the war and continues into the early months

of conflict. Like Salih's work, its narrator is unnamed; in this case, it is an educated Lebanese Christian woman. The second section contains three cycles of seven chapters, with seven rotating narrators, including the titular character, Marie-Rose. This section tells the story of Marie-Rose, a Lebanese Christian woman who refuses to align herself with only one community in the midst of the horrific civil war.¹⁸ The seven narrators collectively tell the story of her kidnapping and murder by a group of Lebanese Christian men. The kidnappers and many other participants in the war attempt to clearly demarcate the boundaries of the Lebanese national community in terms of religion, gender, and race as opposed to Marie-Rose who holds out for an idea of an inclusive national community without such divisions.

Like Condé's novel, the structure of *Sitt Marie Rose* already proposes a radically inclusive form of community. The eight total narrators in the novel include the unnamed narrator of Time I, Marie-Rose, a group of deaf-mute children, three Lebanese Christian militiamen, a conservative Catholic priest, and another unnamed narrator. The three militiamen and the priest ultimately kill Marie-Rose, and they do so with incredible violence: she is drawn and quartered alive. The novel's content clearly opposes such brutal violence and instead advocates for an open and inclusive definition of the national community. Yet, the structure of the novel gives these four men—Mounir, Tony, Fouad, and Bouna Lias—individual chapters narrated in first person. Their voices are still included in the multivocal novel even while it argues against their violence and their closed vision of community. Their voices still speak alongside the titular character, and their views stand side-by-side with the views of Marie-Rose and her deaf-mute students. Adnan brings these eight narrators

¹⁸ In the novel, *Sitt Marie-Rose* is Lebanese, but the novel is based on an actual woman, Marie Rose Boulos, who was a Syrian Christian woman. Marie Rose Boulos worked in a school for children with mental handicaps, another detail that Adnan alters for the novel. However, like the character in the story, Marie Rose Boulos was killed by a group of Christian militiamen for her support of the Palestinian cause (Harb 83).

together into one, diverse community of speakers who violently disagree but are all given room to speak. After all, if a community does not allow its enemies a voice, then it can very quickly reproduce the oppression it critiques. The novel seems to recognize on a structural level that an open vision of community must include everyone, even those who violently attempt to demarcate an exclusive national identity. Communities and this novel cannot and should not condone such brutality, but they must still recognize the humanity of the brutalizers in a profound act of inclusion.

Time II is thus radical in bringing together the voices of Marie-Rose and her murderers, but it also contains an unnamed narrator who seems to bridge the divided communities of wartime Lebanon. This narrator explains, “Je connais la mafia Chabab, le clan des garçons...Je connais les curés, les ulémas, les soi-disant héros et lettrés, les femmes” (“I know the Chabab mafia, that gang of boys...I know the priests, the ulemas, the self-proclaimed heroes and scholars, the women”; 47-8; Kleege 39-40). The seventh narrator knows the Christian priests and the Muslim scholars or ulemas as well as the Chabab and the women. S/he somehow manages to bridge these deep divisions and expresses sympathy for Marie-Rose and her vision of inclusive community in intensely lyrical language. Two of the strongest possibilities for the identity of this narrator are the unnamed narrator from Time I or Mounir’s close friend Pierre because both of these characters mysteriously disappear in Time II. Time I describes Mounir as always surrounded by Tony, Fouad, and Pierre. It is logical, then, to assume that Pierre might be with Mounir and the others for the kidnapping and murder of Marie-Rose. If we follow that thought to its logical conclusion, then the novel really does enact a radical form of community. The character most sympathetic to Marie-Rose would actually be of the same party as her murderers. If even one of the so-called enemies in the novel can sympathize with Marie-Rose and criticize his comrades, then

communities are far too complex to be reduced to simple us versus them formulations. On a structural level, then, the novel enacts the very form of community that Marie-Rose proposes—a vast and open national community with room for everyone’s voices.

The content of Adnan’s novel repeatedly reinforces this vision of inclusive community by implicitly criticizing the rigidly gendered and religiously divided Lebanese national community as it exists at the beginning of the novel and the beginning of the conflict. The Lebanese Civil War involved many factions with often-shifting allegiances, but the basic division was most often along religious lines. When Lebanon achieved nominal independence from the French, the country’s political system was built around a sectarian quota system that was meant to ensure shared governance between the many different religious groups including Maronite Christians, Sunni Muslims, Shi’a Muslims, and the Druze. With the creation of the state of Israel, however, tens of thousands of mostly Muslim Palestinian refugees fled or were forcefully expelled from their homes and crossed the border into Lebanon. This massive influx of Muslims upset the sectarian balance, so the refugees were forced into camps (where many still reside) and denied citizenship. The sectarian tensions eventually led to the drawn-out civil war in which most of the different factions defined community in terms of religious and racial sameness.¹⁹ These exclusive definitions of what it meant to be Lebanese created a clear “us” versus “them” based on religious confession and demanded clearly separate masculine and feminine spheres in which men filled the traditional role of actors in the public sphere while women remained in the private sphere of the home.

The factions in the novel fit into this schema with most of the characters belonging to a Christian militia that believes they are different from and superior to the many Muslim factions in

¹⁹ For a much more in-depth analysis of the factors that led to the Lebanese Civil War as well as the factions that participated, see chapters 10-12 of Fawwaz Traboulsi’s book.

the country. Mounir is the leader of a small group of male militia members, and they all expect women to tend to hearth and home while they take care of public and political work. The passive role allotted for women in this community is evident already in the opening pages of the novel. The female narrator describes watching a movie screening about a male hunting trip. Mounir, the filmmaker, “a un public de femmes dans l’une des plus belles maisons de Beyrouth” (“has an audience of women in one of Beirut’s most beautiful houses”; 8; Kleege 2). The women’s passivity as Mounir’s admiring audience is in direct contrast to the men on screen who actively shoot bird after bird out of the sky. The gender roles here are clearly divided as the women sit on the floor while the lone male stands and narrates the film. The French word “public” in this passage is ironic as a description of the women’s position. They are an audience, spectators, a public, yet they are not allowed to be public actors. They may be “un public,” but they fill that role only in the context of the private home.

These women are wealthy or at least associating with wealthy men based on the description of the home they gather in, yet their wealth brings the women little power to act in the public sphere. Mounir reinforces this gendered division when he later comments about the Syrian Desert, “Il faut voir! Seulement vous, les femmes, vous ne le verrez jamais...Vous, vous ne pourrez jamais” (“You have to see it. Only, you women, will never see it...You, you’ll never be able to do that”; 10; Kleege 4). This scene describes the separation of masculine and feminine domains in pre-war Lebanon; women are to nurture and support but not to act. Mounir repeats “jamais” (“never”) in this short passage to really drive home his point that women are spectators to the active life of men and are **NEVER** allowed to participate in public life. He uses the future tense in this context to indicate that there is not even a possibility of future change in their position. Women do not travel, explore, or hunt; nor will they ever do so. Mounir reasserts this separation between women

supporters and male actors when the narrator attempts to help him with a new film. He tells her, “Non, non, tu ne comprends pas. Toi tu fais le texte, moi je fais le film” (“You don’t understand. You’ll write the script. I’ll make the film”; 13; Kleege 7). The female narrator wants to be an equal partner in the creative process, which is something Mounir cannot allow. Instead, he wants her to remain behind the scenes in the supporting role of scriptwriter. He refuses the narrator an active role in his filmmaking because women should be passive in Mounir’s gendered worldview.

These deep gendered divisions play a central role in the construction of a national community identity for Mounir and many of his contemporaries in the Christian militias. According to their gender hierarchy, women are domestic figures while public life and national politics are the domain of men. Thus, one of Mounir’s best friends, Tony, praises his chaste sister who “ne sort jamais sans être accompagnée de ma mère” (“never goes out except with our mother”; 68; Kleege 60). It is interesting that in the French, the mother is Tony’s mother, not “our” mother as in the English translation. It is as if she belongs to Tony; he does not share her even with his sister. Women for Tony, especially those in his family, are objects to possess and control, not independent and active human beings. In the context of this clearly gendered community, Marie-Rose’s greatest transgression is attempting to be a public actor in Lebanese wartime politics. The unnamed narrator of each seventh chapter in *Time II*, asserts about Marie-Rose, “Elle était femme, et femme impudente, et passée à l’ennemi, et se mêlant d’événements politiques, leur chasse gardée, d’habitude” (“She was a woman, an imprudent woman, gone over to the enemy and mixing in politics, which is normally their personal hunting ground”; 110-11; Kleege 100). Marie-Rose gets involved in the masculine public sphere of politics and defies the gender hierarchy that her killers posit as integral to their vision of national community as patriarchal, Christian community. Her very involvement in public politics and her effectiveness in

that arena reveal the fragile and constructed nature of their gender hierarchy, so she poses a threat to the men's attempts to stabilize a gendered national identity. According to the passage, her public political actions mark her as rebellious. The original French actually uses the adjective "impudent" rather than "imprudent," which underscores her rebellion against patriarchal power. She is not lacking in judgment (imprudent); she is lacking the respect she was supposed to have for men in a male-dominated society (impudent). She has no shame or modesty about things she should be ashamed of according to their worldview. The same narrator explains even more explicitly a page later: "Toute action féminine même bénéfique et apparemment non politisée est considérée comme une rébellion" ("Every feminine act, even charitable and seemingly unpolitical ones, were regarded as a rebellion"; 111; Kleege 101). This unidentified narrator again links female action to a violation of gendered social roles. The men who kill Marie-Rose cannot allow such violations of their clearly gendered national community to continue. They want women to remain at home, remain chaste, and embody the imagined purity of the national community as they define it: patriarchal and Christian. Any public action on the part of these women endangers the construction of their exclusive community in which there is no room for women outside of the home.

As mentioned above, this intensely gendered community is also a closed community that asserts a clear us versus them in racial and religious terms. The first part of the novel brings these divisions to the fore along with the gender divisions. Thus, the film *Mounir* asks the female narrator to help with revolves around the arrival of modernized Lebanese Christian men like himself in a backward Syrian village. He wants to highlight that the villagers change after their encounter with the Lebanese men: "Ils sont étonnés. Ils nous admirent. Je me lie d'amitié avec eux...Ils ne sont plus les mêmes. Ils nous ont vus" ("They are astonished. They admire us. I make

friends with them...They are not the same since they have seen us”; 12; Kleege 5-6]. Mounir sees his own arrival with a machine gun as drastically altering the lives of the Syrians. The Syrian villagers, in fact, are placed in the same position as his earlier audience of women. They admire, watch, and are acted upon by Mounir, but they themselves do not act. Any changes in their life are a direct result of their encounters with the modern Lebanese Christian men, not a result of anything else. Mounir cannot admit that the Syrian villagers might be independent actors nor can he admit that his trips to Syria might have changed him as well. Instead, he wants to make the film from the point of view of the hunters with their fancy cars and large guns. The female narrator attempts to point out Mounir’s egocentric view by explaining that the Syrians are subjects rather than just objects of Mounir’s fascination: “Ces gens-là ont des problèmes, une vie à eux, quelque chose de peut-être fort intéressant à dire” (“These people have problems, their own lives. There’s something very important to be said”; 14; Kleege 7). The narrator tries to show Mounir the ridiculousness and self-centeredness of his narrative about the Syrians. She asserts that the lives of Syrian villagers do not revolve around a short visit by urban Lebanese hunters. In fact, the English translation of the last phrase is inaccurate in its lack of a clear subject. In the original French construction, it is the Syrians who have something that might be important to say; it is not the film or the narrative that might say something important about them but the Syrians themselves who have voices and things to say. However, Mounir ignores the narrator’s assertions because he sees himself as qualitatively different from the rural Syrians and refuses any attempts to think in terms of commonality; his community is strictly walled off without room for difference. His vision of community is predicated on imagined qualitative differences between his group (Lebanese Christian men) and foreign others (Syrian, probably Muslim, villagers). The Syrians and the many

other groups, including women, that he excludes from his vision of the national community are objects of his gaze and have no right to become acting and speaking subjects.

The titular character, Marie-Rose, also begins as the object of Mounir's gaze when they are teenagers. As a sixteen-year-old, he finds her physically beautiful: "Tu n'as pas l'air arabe, lui disais-je....Je la croyais digne de moi puisqu'elle avait les yeux bleus" ("You don't look like an Arab, I told her...I believed she was worthy of me because she had blue eyes"; 42; Kleege 34). Mounir fondly remembers this adolescent crush, but the focal point for his memory is Marie-Rose's physical attractiveness. He does not point to any unique qualities in this woman that made him fall in love, just her beauty like that of the movie stars. In fact, when he claims that he fell in love with Marie-Rose, he says that after meeting her he stopped loving his bicycle "et puis, voilà, j'ai aimé son visage" ("After that I loved her face"; 42; Kleege 34). It is not Marie-Rose's kindness or intellect or any other of the countless personality and character traits Mounir loves; it is Marie-Rose's appearance. She is the object of his gaze, and thus her thoughts, her passions, her personality matter less than her physical beauty. Even when he describes their pseudo-relationship, Mounir says he followed her home from school every day for two years and once kissed her hair. Conspicuously absent in his description is any mention of the two of them actually talking or sharing. He once again makes himself the central character and the active hunter while his female companion is the passive recipient of his advances. In contrast, Marie-Rose's description of their time together reveals much more about the level of their emotional intimacy. She recounts, "Il avait peur d'être pris pour un faible. Il avait la hantise de faillir....Pourtant sa sensibilité était merveilleuse. Il aimait la musique. Il était plein de manies charmantes" ("He was afraid of being taken for a weakling. He had an obsessive fear of failure....He was, however, extremely sensitive. He loved music, and had all sorts of charming quirks"; 54; Kleege 46). Marie-Rose describes

Mounir as a human being with fears and loves and depth while he cannot go deeper than her physical beauty. Based on Marie-Rose's recollection, their relationship was deep and meaningful, but Mounir as a wealthy, Christian male in this divided society cannot acknowledge a mutual relationship. Even if his experience of their relationship was as rich as hers, he must move himself into the active position and attempt to hold Marie-Rose in the position of an object, of passive participant.

Marie-Rose, however, refuses to remain in this position; she has moved beyond the love-struck teenager she was in the past to become a present, public, political actor. One of her greatest transgressions in this regard, according to the novel's Christian militiamen, the Chabab, is her work with and for the Palestinian refugees and the undocumented Syrian workers. She refuses the Chabab's model of community based on exclusion and an objectifying gaze. One way the text highlights this fact is by describing Marie-Rose, the opening narrator, and the Palestinian refugees with similar metaphors. Thus, the unnamed female narrator of the first part compares her spine to a tree: "Ma colonne vertébrale est comme tordue et se perdant dans le soleil, arbre tronqué et abattu" ("My spine is like a twisted, stunted, fallen tree, disappearing in the sun"; 24; Kleege 18). The French word translated to English as "fallen" is the past participle of the verb "abattre," which in reference to trees means to fell or bring down. In the French, then, the tree of the woman's spine has not just fallen but someone or something has caused it to fall. The verb is not neutral; it implicates a human actor in the fall of the tree. The unnamed narrator in the second half describes Marie-Rose's rebellion using the same fallen tree metaphor: "Mais une femme qui se tient debout et les regarde dans les yeux est un arbre à abattre et ils l'abattent" ("A woman who stands up to them and looks them in the eye is a tree to be cut down, and they cut it down"; 75; Kleege 67). This passage uses the same verb, "abattre," for cutting down a tree as the first narrator used. These

trees are not damaged by accident but by the intentional actions of the war's participants. These women, the unnamed narrator and Marie-Rose, are not victims of random fate but victims of a war predicated on clear divisions of the national community based on gender, race, and religion.

The novel reinforces the metaphorical connections between these two women and other marginalized communities by also comparing the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon with trees. Thus, the Palestinian refugees are compared to “quelques pins chétifs” (“some stunted pines”; 81; Kleege 72) and to “arbres rachitiques” (“spindly trees”; 81; Kleege 72). The choice of adjectives in these phrases is interesting. “Chétif” literally means weak or feeble, and it specifically refers to something that is weaker than it should be; it implies sickness or disability, something gone awry. “Rachitique” is the adjective form of the French word for rickets, so it again implies disease. These trees and these marginalized people are not naturally weak and “spindly,” but they have been made so by the violence of war and by social circumstances that limit their full participation in Lebanese public life. They themselves have not caused their own weakness and deformities, but they are victims of a diseased social order. They do not belong in the national community as constructed by the novel's Christian militiamen, so they live at the margins of the community. However, they are living proof that the idealized national community posited by the warring factions is nothing more than a fiction. As such, they pose a serious threat to the construction of national identity for the Chabab, so they and their supporters must be eliminated, erased, blotted out of the nation's history. Even Lebanese Christian women like Marie-Rose and the first narrator must be eliminated because of their public action and their similarities to and alignment with marginalized communities. All of these people are outside of the exclusive, male communities of militarized and divided Beirut and complicate notions of an imagined national community that is stable and rigidly divided by gender and religion.

Marie-Rose is not only linked to the so-called enemies (the Palestinians and the Muslims) metaphorically but also physically. She lives and works in a Palestinian refugee camp, has taken a Palestinian doctor as her lover, and rejects the kind of insular community put forth by her Christian captors. They cannot even conceive of a community that includes the factions opposing them. One of the narrators, Tony, puts this idea in stark terms: “Elle est chrétienne, elle a passé au camp musulman. Elle est libanaise, elle a passé au camp palestinien...Nous devons la supprimer comme tout autre ennemi” (“She’s a Christian and she went over to the Moslem camp. She’s Lebanese and she went over to the Palestinian camp...We must do away with her like with every other enemy”; 44; Kleege 36). Tony and the other militiamen draw clear lines between communities and are ready to violently eradicate anyone who attempts to cross them. He wants to delete or eliminate Marie-Rose according to his word choice of “supprimer” because he sees clear borders between racial and religious groups in Lebanon, and anyone who refuses to live within his fixed borders must be completely removed. Marie-Rose is doubly implicated in violating his borders because she both defies his constructed borders of race and religion, and she is a woman thinking and moving for herself unlike his idealized and chaste sister.

While Tony views the different communities in Lebanon as clearly divided and qualitatively different, Mounir, maybe because of his prior relationship with Marie-Rose, struggles more with the complexities of the war’s factions. Yet, his struggles do not change his mind at all about his vision of an exclusive national community. In fact, they do just the opposite; they frustrate him so much that he longs to “construire un pays pour que ce genre de problème ne se pose plus” (“to construct a country where this sort of problem could not exist”; 83; Kleege 75). He wants to create a country where the boundaries between communities are fixed and permanent, where it is not necessary to “se battre contre les chrétiens dissidents pour sauver les Chrétiens”

(“fight the dissident Christians to save the real Christians”; 84; Kleege 75). In the original French, the difference between the two types of Christians is not marked by the adjective “real” but by a capital “c” for the Christians on Mounir’s side. The difference between the two groups is not just an adjectival difference but also a qualitative difference that marks one group as true and the other as false. Mounir and the Christian Chabab want a quick war that will be “propre et définitif. Il y aura un vainqueur, et un vaincu” (“clean and definitive. There will be a victor and a vanquished”; 41; Kleege 33). They want a clear beginning and end to the war as well as clear sides; they want a simple and straightforward definition of the national community. Yet, their vision rests on an idea of the opposing sides as distinct and homogenous, an idea that Marie-Rose renders problematic in her work with Palestinian refugees, her teaching in a deaf-mute school, and her imagined community of a nation based on radical inclusion. Their vision conflicts with the complex reality of their national community, and Marie-Rose is a bodily reminder of that complexity.

Unlike Mounir, Tony, and the other Chabab, Marie-Rose does not see the lines between communities in clear Manichaean terms. The Chabab’s politicized narrative about homogenous factions in the civil war is undermined by Marie-Rose’s position between multiple communities and by her actions across boundaries of race, gender, and religion. She tries to point out to the Chabab that their vision of clear borders and homogenous groups is false. Mounir explains that he and his friends represent “la volonté du peuple” (“the will of the people”; 67; Kleege 59). Marie-Rose responds to his assertion by clarifying, “D’une partie du peuple. L’autre partie, qui est grande, est pour les Palestiniens, elle se bat avec eux” (“Of part of the people. The other part—which is large—is for the Palestinians. They’re fighting with them”; 67; Kleege 59). There are many other Lebanese people who, like Marie-Rose, work with and for the marginalized groups in the country. They prove over and over again that the Chabab’s desire for two clear sides in this war is

an impossibility and that the borders between the warring sides are incredibly porous. The Lebanese Christian group represented by Mounir and his friends believes that they and only they know how to define the national community. They believe they are working in the best interests of the entire country despite the fact that so many Lebanese support the Palestinians and the Muslim factions.

Marie-Rose exposes the problems of constructing enclosed, insular communities through her physical movement between the Christian quarters of Beirut and the Palestinian camps. Each day she violates with her body both the imaginary and the real borders the Chabab and other militias in the conflict have erected. She even goes so far as to refer repeatedly to the Palestinians as brothers. In response to questioning by Mounir, Marie-Rose responds, “Je ne considère pas le Palestinien comme un ennemi. Il appartient à la même mémoire ancestrale que le parti des Chrétiens. Nous sommes vraiment frères” (“I don’t consider the Palestinians an enemy. They belong to the same ancestral heritage the Christian party does. They’re really our brothers”; 62; Kleege 54). She blatantly disavows the attitude espoused by Mounir and his companions who can only love their co-religionists. In her last conversation with her captors, she asserts, “Moi je sais qu’il n’y a d’amour vrai que pour celui qui est Etranger” (“I know that the only true love is the love of the Stranger”; 105; Kleege 95). Marie-Rose’s form of community is based not on division but on love across difference, and she physically enacts this border-crossing love in her own life. The passage is even more poignant in the French where “étranger” not only means stranger in the sense of an unknown person but also refers to foreigners and outsiders similar to the Arabic word for stranger (غريب) in Salih’s text. Marie-Rose thus simultaneously advocates loving the stranger, the foreigners like the Palestinians and Syrians, and the outsiders like the opposing religious factions in the war.

The Chabab who kidnap Marie Rose try to form an insular, exclusive group while she works for a more inclusive idea of community, a definition based on shared acknowledgment of the other and on mutual care. In fact, Marie-Rose's vision of community and the language in which she articulates it echo the Christian New Testament vision of community that moves beyond the religious sect into which one is born. The Chabab believe themselves to be acting for the good of Lebanese Christians, but Marie-Rose better enacts the openness of the New Testament Christian community. Marie-Rose's open vision of community also evokes the Virgin Mary. As the priest Bouna Lias points out, her name is the French version of Mary, and since the Middle Ages, Christian iconography has linked Mary with roses. Bouna Lias sees Marie-Rose as an affront to his religious ideology that demands women be both mothers and sexually pure. Yet, Marie-Rose also represents a more expansive and universal form of motherhood and community as embodied in the Virgin Mary, a kind of universal mother according to Roman Catholicism. Marie-Rose envisions a community that moves beyond biological attachments and religious affiliations at birth to love even the strange and the stranger.

Because the Chabab define community in insular, exclusive ways, anyone like Marie-Rose who shows the constructedness of their boundaries is a threat to their order and must be violently removed. In "Qu'est-ce que c'est qu'une nation?," Ernst Renan describes violence as a necessary part of nation formation. He describes "les faits de violence qui se sont passés à l'origine de toutes les formations politiques, même de celles dont les conséquences ont été le plus bienfaisantes. L'unité se fait toujours brutalement" ("the violent acts which have taken place at the origin of every political formation, even those which have had the most beneficial consequences. Unity is always established brutally"; 10).²⁰ Establishing a unified vision of national identity, according to Renan,

²⁰ Translation mine.

takes violence to achieve. Marie-Rose's death, then, is just one more founding act of violence that the nation as the Chabab envision it would go on to forget and erase from memory. They reject Marie-Rose's vision of a more universal community in favor of a violent establishment of patriarchal order and choose to reinforce the boundaries between male and female, us and them.

Because the Chabab view violence as the only way to contain the threat that people like Marie-Rose pose to their power structure, they not only kill her, but they also mutilate her body. The unnamed seventh narrator describes their desecration of Marie-Rose's body: "*Et si au-delà de la mort ils s'acharnent à mutiler les cadavres c'est pour amenuiser encore plus le corps de l'ennemi et effacer si possible le fait même qu'il ait pu exister, l'existence de l'ennemi étant une sorte de sacrilège qui exige une purification également monstrueuse*" ("And if after death they persist in mutilating the corpse, it's to diminish the enemy's body still more, and erase if possible the fact that he ever existed, the existence of the enemy being a kind of sacrilege which exacts a purification equally as monstrous"; 74; Kleege 66). The factions in this war do not just kill; they wish to obliterate the enemy. As in Renan's theorizing about the nation, they must erase the memory of the enemy; they must forget that divisions existed and forget the founding acts of violence in order to establish a nation. However, the Chabab's violent murder and mutilation of Marie-Rose highlight the very weakness and porousness of rigid community divisions. After all, the Chabab fear a woman who teaches deaf-mute children for a living while they carry around big guns and organize military attacks. A single woman who defies the Chabab's borders threatens the entire system. Sociologist Cynthia Cockburn explains that in ideological battles, the "movements are themselves clear evidence that the boundaries they defend are none too stable" (28). Thus, in the case of Marie-Rose, the attempt to physically annihilate her even after death serves less to strengthen the system than it does to show the fragility of the Chabab's constructed gender,

cultural, and religious divisions that must be defended with such incredible violence against an unarmed civilian. In her violent death, Marie-Rose becomes not only a symbol of the Virgin Mary but also a female Christ-figure. She is an innocent killed brutally before an audience for minor transgressions that have angered religious establishments. While the novel enacts a radically open community in its structure, the content here condemns the violence and blindness of Marie-Rose's murderers. While they want women to remain quietly at home, Marie-Rose instead acts so powerfully that she, a woman, is linked to two of the Chabab's greatest religious figures.

Although the Chabab try to contain Marie-Rose and her opening up of the national community by brutally murdering her, her story and her influence escape their attempts even if her body is destroyed and mutilated. They draw and quarter her, dividing her body the way they divide the Lebanese people, because they refuse to recognize that the borders are self-constructed and impossible to maintain in the face of real complexity. Since death cannot be made a work, the Chabab's attempts to turn Marie-Rose into an example of what happens when one mixes with the enemy backfire. The ending of the novel indicates that the Chabab do not comprehend (nor can they literally catch hold of) Marie-Rose and her expansive redefinition of the national community that allows room for heretofore marginalized groups such as women, the Palestinian refugees and the undocumented Syrian workers. While Marie-Rose's violent death is gruesome and tragic, the novel hints that her expanded ideas of community cannot be controlled and fixed through violence, even the violence of her own death.

In fact, Marie-Rose advocates a new kind of violence when she exhorts, "*L'amour est la violence suprême cachée dans la nuit de nos atomes*" ("Love is a supreme violence, hidden deep in the darkness of our atoms"; 63; Kleege 55). Loving across the divisions of gender, race, and religion in wartime Lebanon is a violent rejection and transgression of conventional community

divisions just as the structure of the novel itself is an almost unthinkable vision of inclusive community. Marie-Rose dies a horrific death at the hands of the Chabab, yet she claims that her message of transgressive love exists in our atoms, the very matter of our bodies. Murdering her is therefore only killing the messenger, not destroying the message. In fact, killing her brings with it the possibility of turning her into a martyr and spreading her message even more effectively because brutally killing an unarmed woman who teaches deaf-mute children can only serve to demonize the killers. Instead, Marie-Rose becomes both a female Christ-figure as well as a Madonna.

Marie-Rose's violent death does little to change the Christian militiamen's vision of an insular national community because they refuse to listen to her proposition. While her death does not help them see new possibilities of community, there is yet hope in the novel. After all, the men who make up the Chabab were already unable to listen to others—particularly women—in the first section of the novel. At one point, Mounir tells the female narrator that she should see the beauty of the Syrian Desert. When she replies that she spent summers there as a child, Mounir continues speaking as if she had said nothing. He is too wrapped up in his own narrative to even hear the words of his companion; as a woman, she is really supposed to be listening anyway. In the same way, the Chabab cannot hear Marie-Rose at the end of the novel—except for the unnamed seventh narrator who might be one of them. If the unnamed narrator is indeed Pierre, then the novel is incredibly hopeful about the power of one life and violent death to change those who witness and narrate it. If the seventh narrator is not Pierre, then the hope in the novel is just a small glimmer coming not from the closed-minded militarized men but from Marie-Rose's deaf-mute students. Ironically, the deaf-mute children are the only ones who can metaphorically hear Marie-Rose's message because they are able to pay attention to detail. They have experienced firsthand Marie-

Rose's transgressive love. They have been sent away to this school by their families because they are an embarrassment and a nuisance, and they write that "*seule Sitt Marie-Rose nous aime*" ("only Sitt Marie Rose loves us"; 52; Kleege 44). Their very status as marginalized in the community is what allows them to "hear" Marie-Rose's message. Her love for the deaf-mute children and her patience with them speaks louder than anything else could.

The deaf-mute children have also been trained to pay attention to detail. They can read lips and facial expressions, and they make an effort to pay attention to things that others often ignore. Because they cannot hear, they have learned to listen in other ways such as pressing their hands against radios to hear the vibrations of music. These children observe the world around them with care, and they dance to music despite their physical limitations. This kind of close listening on the part of the deaf-mute children is incomprehensible to the militiamen, and it leads to a strange and complex novel ending. The final sentence of the novel describes the deaf-mute children after witnessing Marie-Rose's violent death: "*Les sourds-muets se lèvent et, soutenus par les rythmes transmis à leurs corps par la terre martelée à nouveau par les bombes, ils se mettent à danser*" ("The deaf-mutes rise, and moved by the rhythm of the falling bombs their bodies receive from the trembling earth, they begin to dance"; 115; Kleege 105). In response to their encounter with an unimaginably violent death, the deaf-mute students dance. This dancing is an ambiguous gesture since they are dancing to the rhythm of falling bombs. These young boys are still part of the masculine, militarized city, and they have earlier repeatedly referred to the Chabab's "*belles armes*" ("beautiful guns"; 38; Kleege 30). Despite their youth and their marginalized status, these boys are drawn to the guns and violence of the war. However, even in this context, the deaf-mute's response to the falling bombs is inappropriate. Falling bombs would make most people run for shelter, flee to the basement, cower in a corner, but the children instead rise up and dance.

The transgressive nature of this act is clearer if we remember the deaf-mutes' final chapter in which they are horrified at Marie-Rose's violent death. They end that chapter wishing they could speak the horrors they have witnessed, "Mais ce n'est pas sûr. Il y a des maladies incurables" ("But it's not certain. Some sicknesses are incurable"; 92; Kleege 82). They want a way to narrate their encounter with violent death, but they cannot do so in language. In this light, their final dance can be read as an expression of their horror outside of language. They cannot express their powerful emotions in words, so they do so with their entire bodies. The Chabab want the children to witness their violent act to show them what happens to those who defy their community divisions of gender, race, and religion; the appropriate response to their incredible violence is fear and submission. Instead, the deaf-mutes stand up before them and dance; they speak in a language the Chabab cannot understand. They speak neither the language of guns and violence nor do they convey their passive submission. Instead, they act, they move, they dance—all things that women and the marginalized are not supposed to do. Their material encounter with death and their attempt to narrate it give them courage to defy the Chabab in one small way rather than show them how to submit.

The deaf-mutes' dancing can further be read as subversive in light of the unnamed narrator's description of death: "Une mise à mort est toujours une célébration. C'est la danse des Signes et leur stabilisation dans la Mort" (115) ("Whether you like it or not, an execution is always a celebration. It is the dance of signs and their stabilization in Death"; 115; Kleege 105). Marie-Rose's death becomes a strange, macabre celebration beyond the grasp of the Chabab's simplistic thinking. Even the etymology of the word "celebration" suggests the opposite of the Chabab's intentions. "Celebration" comes from the Latin *celebrare*, which means honored or renowned. Their execution of Marie-Rose does not serve to eradicate her or her vision of community;

instead, it honors her and may lead to more renown for her and her radical ideas than if they had left her alone. The novel's title itself implies this since "sitt" is an honorific term for women in Arabic. For example, female Christian saints are often referred to in Arabic with "sitt" preceding their name. The final reference to Marie-Rose's death leads back to the title, and both imply that she is an honored and respected woman rather than a transgressor to be erased from the community's memory.

The closing page of Adnan's novel not only highlights Marie-Rose as honored, but it also refers to her death, to all executions as a "contre-fête" or "anti-feast" (115). This language even more than the word "celebration" highlights the way that Marie-Rose's death brings the community together. A feast is a shared meal, a celebration among community members to honor an important event. A celebration also often implies a gathering of people, but a feast gathers people together to share something tangible. This final paragraph of the novel explicitly describes Marie-Rose's death as being a coming together of community. It is not a typical coming together; it is literally a counter-feast. It is a coming together in the face of incredible violence and over Marie-Rose's brutalized body, but it is not the militarized and masculine Chabab rejoicing over their kill. Instead, this feast is the coming together of all of the marginalized and othered groups in wartime Lebanon to mourn and remember Marie-Rose. This feast is a sign of the possibility for new iterations of community opened up by Marie-Rose's violent death.

Adnan's novel, more overtly than Salih's, proposes a vision of community that is complex, interconnected, and open. Yet, both novels center on encounters with violent death, with gruesome scenes of bodies torn open and apart. And all of the violence centers on women who somehow defy or transgress traditional gender orders. Marie-Rose, Hosna, and Jean Morris are different in many ways, but their deaths show the sometimes horrific results of proposing

definitions of community without fixed borders between groups like men and women, Christian and Muslim, colonizer and colonized, foreign and local. Perhaps these bloody consequences are the very reason the narrators of both novels remain unnamed. Proposing such open forms of community, such an erasure of borders, is dangerous and even deadly. Even now, with conflicts raging around the world, proposing any sort of shared humanity between warring factions can lead to death. Both texts are dense and complex on a story level, and they work to open a space for reflection on the many ways we humans divide the world and the violence that can result when we take these constructed divisions as natural. Both works also demonstrate at a structural level what an open and inclusive community could look like. Salih brings together various texts and genres from both English and Arabic literary traditions that exist in an uneasy synthesis or at least proximity. They work together to create a moving and startling piece of fiction despite any internal tension. *Sitt Marie Rose*'s multiple narrators all share the pages as well and manage to make room for all voices, even the ones that the novel argues against. Renan points out that violence is often necessary in order to achieve some sense of national unity, but these novels both shine a critique on those founding acts of violence. They seem to propose that unity may not be the most appropriate goal for any community.

The novels foreground the importance of not only encountering violent death but also attempting to narrate that encounter. The encounter with death is an exposure to limits of the human and the limits of narration, and it is precisely this exposure that is foundational in rethinking community configurations. To narrate such an experience involves trying to make sense of it as well as deep reflection on one's own position on the landscape of the community—both locally and in larger scale communities. In *Mawsim al-Hijra ilā ash-Shamāl*, the entire novel is an attempt by the narrator to tell the story of his two encounters with incredibly horrific deaths linked

to Mustafa Sa'eed. His narration highlights his own ability to rethink community in light of the violence while the other community members in the Sudan refuse to narrate and thus refuse to reflect on their own relationships to the violence and to each other. The novel's narrator opens a space for rethinking closed community configurations in the Sudan and in England, and the novel as a whole invites the real reader to do the same. The many different narrators in *Sitt Marie-Rose* all narrate their encounters with her brutal death. Most of them cannot recognize Marie-Rose as a full human being and therefore do not manage to rethink community at all in the process of their narrations. Their utter lack of reflection is evident even in the text as many of the chapters narrated by the Christian militia members are just one or two pages. They do not believe Marie-Rose deserves their respect or the mental and emotional energy necessary to reflect deeply on her violent death. Yet, the one mysterious narrator who witnesses and narrates Marie-Rose's death describes it all in long and lyrical chapters. This narrator (perhaps Pierre) shows the possibility of new iterations of community that can come from the encounter with and narration of violent death.

Neither work definitively shows a reconfiguration of community within the story, nor should they. An open and dynamic community—especially in the context of postcolonial nation-states—cannot yet be fully imagined. The novels, therefore, open up the possibility and hold it out as a yet unfinished and almost unimaginable project. Encountering violent death and its subsequent narration can (but does not necessarily) open up a space for re-envisioning community, but the process itself does not end with one, simple reconfiguration. The project is an ongoing one that needs to always keep open the possibility of further reworking. This vision of open, inclusive, and fluid community would be one that could help nation-states better learn to live with multiplicity and diversity. Perhaps, a concept of community that goes beyond traditional divisions

of gender, culture, race, and religion would allow national communities to be open to difference and complexity rather than violently eradicating all signs of difference or dissension from within their midst.

Chapter Three

Narrative Healing and Expansive Community

Community divisions of gender, race, class, and religion can and often do lead to great violence, and the violence is often more pronounced in the context of large-scale communities like the nation. The battle to define the national community in exclusive ways often leads to violent eradication of difference to bolster or solidify a fictional coherence. Both Salih's and Adnan's novels explore these attempts to define national communities as stable, fixed, coherent entities. The novels end ambiguously, but they also gesture toward a vision of national community that is more fluid and open, that allows for difference without being divisive. These two texts hold out hope for change even though they end with gruesome deaths that destabilize their communities. The narration of this disruption is what seems to open the possibility of community reconfiguration, specifically in the context of postcolonial national communities. Whereas the rural communities of chapter one highlight the way that unnatural death impacts isolated landscapes, chapter two examines the impact of a violent death and its narration in larger scale communities like the nation as well as in smaller, local communities. There is, however, an even larger context to think—community that is dispersed and diffuse at a global or transnational level.

This final chapter will turn to two novels that—similar to the others—enact a vision of inclusive community in both content and form, but they do so with an even more expansive community in mind. There are smaller, local locations that shape the communities, but the novels toggle back and forth between local communities and a more global or transnational community. The narration is always grounded in a specific geography. The place from which one narrates necessarily changes the perspective, so the local landscapes shape the encounter with death and

with its narration. Thus, in Silko's novel, it is the land itself at the feet of the main character during the encounter with death that help propel a reconfiguration of community. Yet, while the novels have specific geographical and historical settings, they also propose that narrating an encounter with violent death can open up the possibility of rethinking community beyond local and national affiliations to a global or transnational community. The sites of narration may be vastly different in these two novels, but they both gesture in the same direction from different points of origin.

Both novels also characterize narratives of the encounter with death as not only catalyzing a rethinking of current community configurations but also capable of healing community divisions. Witnessing an unnatural death and narrating, specifically testifying, about that experience become a path to not just individual but communal healing. American writer Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony* (1977) confronts divisions of race, class, and gender on the Laguna Pueblo Reservation in New Mexico shortly after the end of WWII. The main character, Tayo, is half Laguna Pueblo and half white, and his mixed-race status is a mark of shame for many in his family and for fellow tribe members. Like the mixed-race characters in *The Potbellied Virgin*, Tayo's very existence forces the surrounding community to rethink their notions of racial purity. Tayo returns from the war along with fellow Indian veterans, and their return reveals the deep wounds and divisions in the community—both the community of the reservation and the larger human community. It is only Tayo's final witnessing of the other veterans' horrific violence and his subsequent testimony about it to tribal elders that bring about some kind of healing for him, his community, and even the land. On a textual level, the novel interweaves the ongoing narrative with traditional Laguna Pueblo chants, stories, and ceremonies. The Laguna chants are set apart from the text, but they also inform the more traditional narrative portions. The pieces work together to build what the title terms a ceremony—a ceremony to help Tayo come to terms with the violent deaths he has

witnessed. All narratives are a co-creation that involve both a sender and receiver to use Seymour Chatman's terms, and the complex structure of *Ceremony* foregrounds this dialogic nature of stories. The traditional ceremonial chants are in dialogue with the twentieth century story of Tayo, and both of these pieces demand careful and critical reading on the part of the real reader to piece together the story. Like in Salih's novel, the narration is also fragmented and disjointed, jumping quickly from past to present and back. The entire, complex novel as ceremony enables a radical healing in Tayo and his community, and it encourages the real reader to follow Tayo's expansive ideas of community and connection.

British author John Berger's novel *To the Wedding* (1995) does not deal in the intentional graphic violence that Silko's novel does; instead, it focuses on the violence done to the body in the struggle with AIDS and the violence done to a community through the suspicion and ostracizing of AIDS victims. The main character, Ninon, is a young French woman infected by the AIDS virus whose story is narrated by multiple members of her surrounding community. Her estranged family and friends come together for her wedding just before her death, and this communal celebration along with the coming together of multiple narrative voices help heal Ninon's feelings of isolation and ostracism. Berger's text, like Silko's, proposes that witnessing violent, unnatural death and the subsequent testimony can be a path to healing community rifts. *To the Wedding* also shows structurally how a more inclusive, global community might be configured by bringing together disparate narrative voices that include characters from different countries and backgrounds. Even a poor garbage collector is included in the community of voices narrating Ninon's story. Berger's novel highlights the necessity of co-creation in bringing to life the story of Ninon's death, and it posits close reading and careful listening as the most effective means of achieving that end. This careful listening ultimately allows all of the narrators to speak and brings the reader along with

them as they celebrate Ninon's wedding. The community comes together in the face of unnatural death and finds a temporary healing to the pain of marginalization and ostracization.

Both novels draw attention to the importance of listening to and telling the stories of encounters with unnatural death. The preoccupation with narrative and stories is evident from the very opening of *Ceremony*, which begins with multiple traditional stories from the Keresan people, of which the Laguna are a part. The first of these written and translated versions of oral stories deals with Thought-Woman who "is sitting in her room / thinking of a story now / I'm telling you the story / she is thinking" (1). Stories in this passage transcend individual thought and become a co-creation between the thinker and the narrator, who in essence translates directly from Thought-Woman's mind. Stories are collective efforts that serve to unite people and bring them together. The second of these opening passages references not only the unitive power of stories but also their healing power and their great importance in the community:

They are all we have, you see
all we have to fight off
illness and death.

You don't have anything
if you don't have the stories. (2)

These traditional chants and stories are woven into the more conventional narrative of the novel. In this case, the very opening of the novel draws attention to the important and necessary signposts on the landscape of the novel. These repeated references to stories, to seeing the patterns and finding one's place in the stories emphasize that in the world of the novel and the worldview of the

Laguna Pueblo, telling and retelling stories is key to finding healing for the individual and the community.

Narrative in the sense of sharing and telling stories is fundamental in Silko's text and in many ways fundamental to human experience. Scholar H. Porter Abbott asserts that "We make narratives many times a day, every day of our lives" (1). Narrative is central to being human and being social creatures. We often attempt to share and make meaning out of the world we encounter by telling each other stories about it. *Ceremony* makes this trait central to being human on the level of story and discourse. Many scholars in the field of narratology define narrative in ways that are helpful in thinking through the role of stories in *Ceremony*. Seymour Chatman asserts that "a narrative is a communication; hence it presupposes two parties, a sender and a receiver" (28). James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz similarly define narrative as "a multidimensional purposive communication from a teller to an audience" (3). Both of these definitions draw attention to the way that narrative does not exist in isolation. Narratives are told by someone and to someone; they cannot exist without both parties. While this definition can be applied to all narratives, the landscape of Silko's novel makes this idea of co-creation particularly relevant. It also takes the definitions of Chatman, Phelan, and Rabinowitz one step farther and argues that narrative communications are already dialogic, and this dialogue takes place on an occupied landscape. The narratives and stories that people tell are already situated in a web of older stories and histories, in a web of current and past human relationships. Narrative, by these definitions, needs a sender/teller and a receiver/audience to fully come into being as Thought-Woman needs the unnamed speaker to help tell the story she is thinking.

Silko's and Berger's novels, however, make an argument about a specific kind of narrative: the narration of an encounter with violent death. This form of narration is telling a story in

response to a form of trauma, which is more akin to what has come to be known as testimony. Testimony in the European and American intellectual context often refers to attempts to narrate “extreme human pain...massive psychic trauma” after the horrific events of the Holocaust according to psychiatrist Dori Laub (57). Most writing about testimony deals with Holocaust survivors, or it looks at the Spanish testimonios of survivors of Latin American dictatorships. Both of these instances are a far cry from the Laguna Pueblo reservation in *Ceremony* or the AIDS crisis in Western Europe, but the concepts can still be fruitful in these contexts. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Laub explains that “massive trauma precludes its registration” because the human mind cannot process it; instead of psychologically integrating the experience, the mind malfunctions (57). In Laub’s formulation of testimony, massive trauma cannot be processed by the individual, so the witness who tries to tell his or her story only comes to know the traumatic experience through narrating it to an understanding listener. He further describes, “The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer” (57). This idea that testimony needs both the speaker and a listener is interesting to think through in the context of these two novels. The understanding and processing of a traumatic event are, therefore, co-created through both the telling of and the listening to the story of the event. It is not enough that narrative presupposes at least two parties. Here, the two parties can only create the narrative together. In *Ceremony*, Tayo is haunted by flashbacks and nightmares of his wartime experiences that never quite make sense to him. To fully process these traumas and open a space for healing, he needs to give testimony to a gathering of tribal elders about the trauma of war and the trauma of a friend’s violent death. His testimony needs both the person testifying and the listeners to fully come into being. While the trauma in *Ceremony* is very different from the trauma

of Holocaust survivors, Silko's novel still seems to follow Laub's formulation of testimony as a process of co-creation that has the potential to bring healing and some kind of resolution.

Another important distinction to make about Laub's definition of testimony as opposed to the stories in *Ceremony* is that Laub's work is not literary but instead is situated in the fields of psychoanalysis, law, and historiography. Both for Laub and for those who use the term testimony to describe other testimonies involving human pain and trauma, the term seems to have a close relationship to an external, historical reality. Literary testimonies of pain and trauma like Silko's and Berger's complicate notions of testimony as related to historical reality. A literary text may be able to give testimony about trauma on a general level, but its relationship to any external, historical reality is problematic. Yet, even testimony based on lived experiences is more about the subjective experience of trauma than about reality or historicity. According to Laub, for example, one Auschwitz survivor recounted for him the Auschwitz uprising by describing four chimneys exploding while in reality only one chimney was blown up, and the uprising failed miserably. Historians discount testimony such as this survivor's because it is factually inaccurate, but Laub disagrees with this judgment: "The woman was testifying not to the number of chimneys blown up, but to something else, more radical, more crucial: the reality of an unimaginable occurrence" (60). The woman's narrative was testifying to something beyond historical accuracy; it was testifying to the awesome hope and power that the uprising inspired in Auschwitz prisoners. In a similar way, literature can testify to things beyond itself even if the content is fictional. In both texts here, the testimonies highlight the power of narrative retellings of the encounter with violent death to offer a space for coming together. Laub's formulation of testimony makes close and sympathetic listening an integral part of processing a trauma, and *Ceremony* argues that such listening needs to take

place not just between two individuals but across historical time periods and national and cultural lines.

Silko's novel as a fictional narrative foregrounds the way that all narrative—and testimony to an even greater degree—needs multiple actors to come into being. Structurally, as the earlier examples of the novel's opening passages show, the text places past stories and the novel's 20th century narrative in dialogue as the formal narrative portions of the novel are continually interrupted by traditional Laguna chants that visually read like poetry in the midst of so much prose. On a textual level, *Ceremony* is already dialogic, and it strongly argues that telling, retelling, and sharing stories is the most important path to healing. These stories can be individual stories of pain and trauma, but the novel argues that even the stories of individuals are part of a larger web of stories. Thought-Woman from the opening passage is described as a spider; she tells and weaves her stories, and those stories are all connected and dependent on each other like the strands of a spider's web. The novel repeatedly references this metaphor of a web of connections and entanglements as part of both the problem of divided human communities and its solution. In the narrative portion of the novel, the story of Tayo and his ceremonial healing is deeply connected to the stories of the war, of the past, of the land, and all of these stories are connected to the older traditional stories. Thus, the traditional stories, which come from Laguna oral tradition, often foreshadow and mirror the plot of the novel; the stories of Tayo and his contemporaries become modified retellings of the traditional stories, later echoes of long ago tales. Robert M. Nelson describes the relationship between the plot of the novel and the traditional chants as homological, coming from the same source, which makes Tayo's journey "a ceremonial event by virtue of being a *re-happening* of that 'long story of the people' of which he is, and is constantly becoming, a part" (5). Tayo's journey is not less than the older story, and it is not just a derivative story. Both stories

come out of the same mythical ground and are connected to each other on equal terms.

Testimonial narratives in the context of this novel, then, are a dialogue between not only the teller and the audience but also between the present individuals and the stories of past tradition. The testimony is a communal not an individual product that is simultaneously new and old. Only through the weaving together of all of the strands—teller, audience, modern stories, and traditional stories—can the community open any possibility for healing, however temporary.

In *Ceremony*, this healing involves both Tayo's personal psychological and emotional healing after the trauma of war as well as the larger project of rethinking the configuration of community on multiple levels. The local community on the Laguna Pueblo reservation in New Mexico shortly after WWII is already fractured along lines of gender and race. The racial distinctions are the most prominent since reservations are the result of attempts to isolate and contain Native American tribal groups to make room for white settlers and development. Race is thus always already present everywhere in reservation life. Because of the ever-present nature of this concern with race, many of the community members seem to view race as reified, stable, and easily defined. These same people also divide the world into a clear racial us versus a clear racial other. The novel's main character, Tayo, is mixed-race—half white and half Laguna Pueblo, and his liminal status means he is often marginalized. Tayo has experienced neglect most of his life at the hands of his aunt because of his racial hybridity, and Emo, the novel's antagonist, has "hated him since the time they had been in grade school together, and the only reason for this hate was that Tayo was part white" (52). Race is one of the main reasons that Tayo does not fully belong in the community of the reservation; he is a racial hybrid who reminds the reservation of all of the traditions, people, and land lost since the arrival of the white European Americans. Many people on the reservation also do not think Tayo should be able to fully participate in tribal life because of

his mixed-race status. His aunt does not want him to visit a medicine man because tribal members might frown on it: “Someone will say it’s not right. They’ll say, ‘Don’t do it. He’s not full blood anyway’” (33). Even Tayo’s aunt sees his mixed blood status and questions whether he is entitled to fully participate in tribal rituals and tribal medicine. His racial background is a mark of shame and a reason to ostracize Tayo because it reminds local people of the hierarchies that allow Indian women to sleep with white men but not vice versa. He reminds people of the current gender and race divisions and their historical roots.

The current racial divisions are the result of centuries of injustices and oppression by the white settlers, and the resulting anger and resentment eats away at the fabric of the reservation community. One of Tayo’s formal ceremonies, the beginning of his longer informal ceremony of healing, repeatedly comes back to these racial injustices, and Tayo and the other veterans struggle with feelings of inadequacy in the face of white technology, wealth, and power. While they sometimes resent the many past crimes and the stolen land, at other times they turn their rage inward and blame themselves and the rest of the tribe. They have internalized the racial hierarchy and cannot see beyond it. Even Tayo in his search for his family’s stolen cattle has trouble believing that a white man took them: “Why did he hesitate to accuse a white man of stealing but not a Mexican or an Indian?...He knew then that he had learned the lie by heart—the lie which they had wanted him to learn: only brown-skinned people were thieves; white people didn’t steal, because they always had the money to buy whatever they wanted” (191). Here, Tayo recognizes his own complicity in the oppressive racial power system that hurts him and the rest of the tribe alike. Unlike Tayo, however, the other Indian veterans continue to judge themselves and their lives by the materialistic values of the broader white society. Because they do not have “the bright city lights and loud music, the soft sweet food and the cars” that the white people in faraway cities do, they

view themselves as failures (204). The weight of the racial history on the reservation bears down on all of the characters, but unlike the others, Tayo manages to think more critically about race and rethink the racial hierarchy. His encounter with death and his narration of it open up the possibility of rethinking community beyond these racial divisions as well as beyond divisions of culture and nationality.

The racial hierarchy in the novel often coincides with issues of gender and sex. The characters pay particular attention to the racial aspect of sexual relationships, and sex becomes a primary marker for the power relationships in the community. When a Laguna woman sleeps with a white man like Tayo's mother did, it shames the whole family because sex here boosts male power and reduces that of women. There is no recognition of mutual desire and pleasure, just a view of sex as male power over women. Women and women's bodies in the world of the novel are reduced to symbols of power and status; Tayo's mother sleeping with a white man is only another reminder of the power whites have over Indians. Tayo's uncle, Josiah, also crosses racial lines and angers his family with "the scandal of his Mexican girlfriend" (29). An Indian man sleeping with a Mexican woman may not be as bad as an Indian woman with a white man, but it is still shameful enough that Tayo's aunt and grandmother scold Josiah. While both of these instances are viewed negatively, Tayo and the other returned Indian war veterans brag about their white sexual conquests. An Indian woman sleeping with a non-Indian man is shameful, but an Indian man sleeping with a white woman is admirable and gives the man bragging rights. The women's bodies repeatedly become a kind of booty in the conflicts between the Indians and whites in the novel; they are used as a stand-in for all that the whites have taken. Emo, the war veteran who hates Tayo, exclaims, "They took our land, they took everything! So let's get our hands on white women" (51). Emo and the others want to sleep with white women to assert their power in the face of the

Indians' continuing poverty, loss of land, and loss of culture. The sexual relations between men and women from different racial communities in the novel revolve around this sense of power and control over not just the women but over whole communities.

The novel foregrounds the importance of these racialized sexual relations by including a story of Emo's sexual conquest of two white women among the traditional stories (57). All of the other traditional stories refer to older stories or appear to be parts of traditional chants except for Emo's drunken bragging. Including Emo's story of sexual domination over white women in the same format as the traditional stories places Emo's story in the larger web or pattern of stories. This placement makes the radical claim that even the detestable Emo, even the villain of the novel, deserves a place in the traditional stories. Emo and his stories are not excluded or tossed out; instead, Emo's boasts about sleeping with white women are part of the novel's larger story about the negative effects of racial hierarchies and divided communities. Emo's own racial self-hatred and subsequent thirst for violence are only exaggerated forms of the feelings many of the residents on or near the reservation experience.

Ceremony points out the way that gender issues are bound up with the racial divisions on the Laguna Pueblo reservation in the 1940s, and it also, as Kristin Herzog points out, pushes the boundaries of gender portrayal by showing an Indian man as a feeling human being susceptible to psychological and emotional trauma. While contemporary stereotypes focus on the stoic Native American man or the drunk and violent one, Tayo is a fleshed out human being who does not conform to any of the stereotypes or to more traditional gender roles.²¹ The novel as a whole also

²¹ The documentary *Reel Injun* gives a concise and thoughtful history of the changing portrayals of Native Americans in film. While the documentary focuses only on visual representations, it can still help situate many of the modern stereotypes of Native Americans in a larger history of representation, of which literature is a part.

bends gender starting with the opening traditional narratives, which describe the stories as growing in the belly of a man:

He rubbed his belly.

I keep them here

[he said]

Here, put your hand on it

See, it is moving.

There is life here

for the people. (2)

The male speaker is clearly pregnant with the stories, an interesting image in terms of gender. The description can be read as blurring traditional gender divisions, as making life-giving stories the province of men as well as women. None of the main male characters are portrayed as completely aligning with contemporary Western norms of masculinity, so Tayo's uncles Josiah and Robert are both portrayed as more caring than his aunt. The opening traditional Laguna text about Thought-Woman also challenges Western ideas of gender since Thought-Woman creates through her thoughts and stories. As Herzog points out, this is a powerful feminine image with which to open the novel: "This ongoing flow of creation is here attributed to feminine deities, but not of the primitivistic, earth-bearing, child-bearing kind. Instead, Spider-Woman represents the creative power of thought" (30). Thought-Woman the spider creates with her mind rather than her body. Thus, we have an image of a female giving birth creatively juxtaposed with the subsequent text in which a male is pregnant with life-giving stories. These two images turn the traditional Western gender dichotomies of male/mind versus female/body on their heads. Furthermore, Thought-Woman also has the power to name, another process of creation: Thought-Woman "named things

and / as she named them / they appeared” (1). The creator and namer in this creation myth is feminine as opposed to the patriarchal and masculine creation stories of Judeo-Christian tradition. It is not Adam naming creation, but a female spider who names and brings into being the world. The implication at the end of this story is that Thought-Woman is also the creator of Tayo’s story. The entire novel is coming out of Thought-Woman and narrated by an unknown narrator. In one sense, then, the text calls into question traditional Western gender roles. The story may revolve around a man, but that man is one who feels deeply and who needs help to heal after the trauma of war, and his story is one of many spun by Thought-Woman, the creator and weaver of all stories.

Yet, Silko’s novel does not completely re-envision the community in terms of gender; the gender bending that takes place is actually more ambiguous than a first glance might suggest. Most of the stories of Indian sexual conquest over white women come out of the mouth of Emo, the cruel, alcoholic returned vet. This placement subtly critiques the conception of women’s bodies as a form of property and power, but the novel never makes women a significant part of the local community. Even portraying the men as more thoughtful and emotional than traditional Western masculinity can be read as acceptable since, historically, non-white men have frequently been feminized in literature and culture as a way of differentiating them from white men and justifying their oppression. Most of the primary women in the novel are either portrayed negatively or are stops along the way of Tayo’s journey of ceremonial healing. Tayo’s aunt is nasty and hypocritical; his grandmother is old and blind. The only other important women in his life are women he has sexual encounters with who help him find direction. His uncle’s girlfriend Night Swan is one of the most powerful women in the novel. She helps Tayo expand his thinking about race and gender, and while marginalized as a sexually promiscuous woman and dancer, she exerts a lot of sexual

and spiritual power in her communities. Yet, she is a minor character who plays a larger role in Josiah's life than Tayo's. Tayo gains wisdom from her, but she is a fleeting figure in his life.

The other important woman in Tayo's life, Ts'eh, serves as a sort of spiritual guide on Tayo's ceremonial healing, but she mysteriously disappears multiple times after sleeping with him and giving him directions. She is important only inasmuch as she is useful to Tayo on his quest. When Tayo is giving his testimony to the tribal elders, they ask repeated questions about this woman, and then the text is interrupted by a passage about A'moo'ooh, the spirit of the she-elk:

They started crying
the old men started crying
“A'moo'ooh! A'moo'ooh!”

You have seen her

We will be blessed

again. (257)

The woman Tayo has seen is in actuality not a woman at all but a spirit figure. The most significant woman in Tayo's and the community's journey of healing is not a flesh and blood woman. While the text may critique the treatment of women as racialized sexual objects and include the creation story by a female divinity, it never allows actual women to be full members of the reservation community. After all, all of the listeners to Tayo's testimony are men. The communal healing that takes place does not address divisions of gender to the same extent that it addresses other divisions. Despite the fact that these men tell stories of female spiritual figures such as Thought-Woman the spider and A'moo'ooh the she-elk, real-life women are not involved in Tayo's co-created testimony and healing. The community continues to ostracize women like Tayo's mother

who dare to cross racial lines, and the novel ultimately leaves many of the community's gendered divisions unexamined.

While gender remains a problematic issue even at the end of the novel, Tayo's witnessing of and testimony about a violent death seem to have an impact on his own and the community's ideas of racial divisions in the community. Tayo and the tribal leaders come to a broader understanding of community and race than the self-destructive group of returned veterans, and the novel as a whole argues for a large-scale view of human community as interrelated and interdependent. Tayo already physically problematizes the racial purity of the reservation community, so it is entirely appropriate that he is one of the few characters in the novel who can think beyond simplified categories of race. As a US soldier in the jungles of Southeast Asia, he is ordered to kill a group of captured Japanese soldiers. He is ultimately unable to pull the trigger because he sees his uncle Josiah in the faces of the Japanese men: "So Tayo stood there, stiff with nausea, while they fired at the soldiers, and he watched his uncle fall, and he knew it was Josiah" (7). Tayo comes to understand that the Japanese and the white people and the Indians—the whole human community—are connected. He sees his uncle's face in the face of a Japanese soldier because the two are not that different. With Judith Butler's proposition of a political community based on grief and violence in mind, Tayo's close relationship with his uncle is precisely what reveals to him the "fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility" of all human beings (*Precarious Life* 22). He sees the violence done to the Japanese soldiers and recognizes that it is wrong to kill these men based solely on their race or nationality because they, like him, are vulnerable and dependent human bodies. He recognizes his own relationality and begins to recognize the relationality of all human beings that makes us vulnerable and that makes us responsible for others. While he is responsible to his own troops and his own country, that does

not absolve him of a responsibility to these Japanese soldiers as fellow human beings even in the midst of a war.

Not only does his relationship with Josiah help him to see past racial lines to recognize the basic humanity of all people, but his relationship to his community's stories reinforces this expansive view of humanity. Tayo has grown up hearing the Laguna stories about times when "the people shared a single clan name and they told each other who they were" (62). The coming of the Europeans and the racial and cultural mixing that came with them drastically diminished the cohesiveness of the community, but it did not destroy the stories. While the influence of white culture made the individual more important than the community, the deep feelings of interconnectedness and interdependence of the traditional Laguna Pueblo stories remained even if they were partially hidden. The remnants of these feelings of community connectedness come out mostly when the tribe loses someone to the world and belief systems of the whites. Tayo's mother is a prime example. She may have acted as an individual, but the entire community felt the loss: "What happened to the girl did not happen to her alone, it happened to all of them" (63). The feeling of community still exists but most prominently in feelings of loss. Tayo's encounter with violent death and his narration to the community elders help him to experience community in contexts beyond loss. He also opens up the possibility of thinking of community in the context of the entire human community rather than just that of his tribe. Tayo begins to rethink community in line with the old stories when people were not divided; he begins to think beyond the simple categories of race to see the connections between communities all over the world. By the end, Tayo takes to heart the old medicine man Betonie's words that "Nothing is that simple...you don't write off all the white people just like you don't trust all the Indians" (118). Judging an entire group of people based solely on their skin color is too simplistic; the world is too complex for such easy

categories of race and morality. The traditional stories help Tayo to re-envision community on the basis of an underlying relationality that is a defining part of being human.

While Tayo's relationship with Josiah and the traditional Laguna stories give him a foundation for rethinking community, the catalyst that impels him to continue the process is his encounters with violent death and their subsequent narration. He begins to rethink racialized community first due to the horrific violence he encounters in the South Pacific during WWII and later after witnessing the gruesome torture and death of his old friend at the hands of the other returned war veterans. When Tayo returns from the war, he is so traumatized that he is institutionalized for months in a mental health facility. He is haunted by the violent deaths he witnessed in the Philippines both as a soldier and as a POW on the Bataan Death March. When his unit kills the Japanese soldiers, he sees his uncle in their faces with "eyes shrinking back into the skull and all their shining black light glazed over by death" (8). Tayo witnesses this wartime violence, and he sees it in all of its gruesome reality. The other soldiers, including his cousin, explain that those dead bodies were just "Japs," as if their foreignness makes them less human. They are the enemy with a different language and different facial features, so their deaths need not be mourned as fully human. Yet for Tayo, the deaths of the Japanese soldiers are real and ugly. Their blood mingling with the jungle mud provokes a visceral reaction of horror and disgust in Tayo because he recognizes their humanity as equal to his own or his beloved uncle's.

Even during the Bataan Death March when the Japanese soldiers have become the aggressors rather than the victims, Tayo does not turn them into dehumanized racial Others: "They don't know that he doesn't hate the Japanese, not even the Japanese soldiers who were grim-faced watching Tayo and the corporal stumble with the stretcher" (43). Tayo is desperately carrying his dying cousin without food, water, or medical attention through the jungles of the

Philippines, but he still does not blame the Japanese soldiers. In fact, even when a Japanese soldier kills Rocky and forces Tayo to continue moving, Tayo actually sees the resemblance between the soldier and a Navajo man he knew at school. He also sees the fatigue and resignation of the Japanese soldiers. This moment is a profound act of empathy on Tayo's part. While he is screaming at the death of his cousin and being pried away from the body, he is still able to see how tired the Japanese soldiers are as well. He does not blame them for Rocky's death, and he in fact sees them as similar to people he knew back home. Despite the great trauma he has endured, Tayo does not let the violence divide the world into a clear us and them. Even with this incredible empathy for the Japanese soldiers, witnessing these violent deaths damages Tayo enough to give him constant nightmares and fevers upon his return. In the heat of the moment, Tayo experiences the violence of war and unconsciously rethinks community on a global scale. Yet, he cannot fully process his own reimagining of community until he narrates the story to a sympathetic audience. Instead, he returns home in need of serious psychological and emotional support.

While Tayo seems to see beyond race to some degree even at the beginning of the novel, his thoughts on community are half-formed, tangled and confused. He sees the Japanese soldiers as human and does not hate them, but he has not yet managed to see the larger pattern of which he and the Japanese and the rest of humanity are a part. He believes that he "could get no rest as long as the memories were tangled with the present, tangled up like colored threads from old Grandma's wicker sewing basket" (6). What he comes to realize through his long ceremony and through witnessing and narrating the final act of violence is that the present and the past and the Indians and the Japanese are all bound up together; they cannot be completely pulled apart and isolated. He realizes that rather than trying to untangle each individual thread, he needs to recognize the pattern and the organization. It takes Tayo months and months of being

institutionalized, of living with his family and sleeping with his nightmares, of drinking away his feelings and thoughts before he can finally recognize any kind of pattern in all of the violence and despair.

Tayo finally sees the pattern when he witnesses Emo—the most violent of the returned vets—kill his friend Harley. As in many of the other previously discussed novels, the pivotal act of violence is described in gory detail; the human body is put on display in all of its material weakness and vulnerability. Even Tayo's earlier encounters with death in the jungles of the Philippines are described in vivid detail: the bright red blood soaking into the brown mud, the buzzing flies around an oozing, open wound, the crunch of a human skull being battered with a rifle butt. Harley's death is similarly described as a horrific moment in which the human body is exposed in violent and unnatural ways. As witnessed by Tayo, Harley is first forcibly undressed and then strung up on a barbed wire fence. The scene of torture and murder echoes the Christian crucifixion scene with a naked vulnerable body hung upright as an example for others, in this case an example for Tayo who has escaped Emo's violence. But Harley is no Christ figure; he does not willingly sacrifice himself nor does he experience any form of resurrection. His death does, however, mark an epiphanic moment in Tayo's healing ceremony. His murder is described in bloody detail as Tayo watches from nearby: the three other returned vets slowly cut chunks of flesh from his body beginning with "the whorl from the bottom of his big toe" (251). They continue their slow, gruesome work and Emo collects "the bleeding chunks of human skin" in a brown paper bag as souvenirs of the murder (252). Tayo witnesses the entire process of Harley's torture and death; he watches Harley's naked body as it is torn apart piece by piece. He thinks about intervening multiple times but stops himself when he realizes that is exactly what Emo and the others want. They want to draw Tayo out and either kill him as well or have him committed to a mental

hospital for any act of violence he might perpetrate. The vivid description of this violence marks the climax of the novel's plot, and Tayo's encounter with this specific death acts as the final catalyst for his rethinking of community.

Whereas Emo and his companions want to destroy Tayo in any way they can, their violent and bloody murder actually serves as a turning point in Tayo's healing process. Instead of joining in their violence or being trapped by it, Tayo begins to see the connections between their violence and the violence of the war from which they have all returned. He watches his friend's body as it is maimed and torn apart, and he now consciously confirms the connection between Harley and the Japanese soldiers and people all over the world. Harley, the Japanese, his cousin Rocky, all of them are physically weak and dependent human bodies. They can be incredibly harmed by the actions of other human beings, which means that all of them are deserving of sympathy, respect, and care. Humanity in all of its weakness calls out for a shared ethical responsibility, a community built on vulnerability.

It is not only watching Harley die but considering the place of his death that helps Tayo to envision community as including all of humanity. As Tayo is perched on the rocky hill watching Harley's torture, he sees the waste left over from recent uranium mining: "He knelt and found an ore rock. The gray stone was streaked with powdery yellow uranium, bright and alive as pollen...But they had taken these beautiful rocks from deep within the earth and they had laid them in a monstrous design, realizing destruction on a scale only *they* could have dreamed" (246). Beautiful rocks like these with veins of uranium unleashed incredible destruction and death in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Tayo's earlier insight that he was connected to the Japanese soldiers is true on a very material level and not just in some abstract sense. While the Laguna Pueblo reservation is thousands of miles from the jungles of the Philippines and all of the other fields of

battle in WWII, some of the uranium used for testing nuclear weapons before the atom bombs were dropped on Japan was mined right where he is crouched. The first atom bomb ever detonated was at White Sands, New Mexico, close enough to Tayo's family home that even his almost-blind grandmother notices the flash of the explosion. The destruction wrought by the beautiful uranium ore is not just isolated to the bombs dropped on Japan, it is also part of life on the reservations of the American Southwest where miners and residents suffered from radiation-related diseases for decades.²² Tayo sees the abandoned mine at the site of Harley's death, and the significance of the place gives him insight into Harley's death and its relationship to community on a global scale.

In his pivotal encounter with violent death, Tayo realizes that no matter how much people want to isolate themselves into distinct racial and cultural groupings, there is no escaping the interconnectedness of the modern world. He reflects, "Human beings were one clan again, united by the fate the destroyers planned for all of them, for all living things; united by a circle of death that devoured people in cities twelve thousand miles away, victims who had never known these mesas, who had never seen the delicate colors of the rocks which boiled up their slaughter" (228). Tayo recognizes that the web of connections he sees between Laguna Pueblo and Japan also continues to branch out to the rest of the human community. Human beings are all united by the machinery of modern technology and modern warfare, united by their vulnerability to violent death. Even the drunk and violent vets below Tayo are connected to the larger world. They have killed and been attacked in distant places, and their own racial hatred has been exacerbated by their experiences of war travel and return. Much as anyone may want to think of the world as a

²² The Environmental Protection Agency put out a concise brochure detailing some of the effects of past uranium mining in the Grants Mineral Belt of New Mexico, which includes the Laguna Pueblo Reservation. See that brochure for more specific information about the continuing effects on local residents.

simple place with clear divisions of race and class, these very real connections between the Laguna Pueblo reservation and the wider world argue for an intimate and complex interconnectedness. Harley's unnatural death is horrific to witness, but it is also horrific that beautiful rocks like those mined on the local reservations killed well over a hundred thousand Japanese people, whose lives ended just as gruesomely as Harley's life. The vulnerability of the human body in the face of modern warfare does not allow for distinctions of race, class, or gender. Modern bombs, machine guns, etc. destroy the bodies of all alike, and Tayo recognizes this negative connection as a new way of conceiving community: a community of vulnerable human bodies who must come together to tell our stories, to find the patterns, to heal the divisions between us.

The novel follows this pivotal scene of Harley's murder and Tayo's epiphany with one of the traditional Laguna stories that sheds more light on Tayo's healing through witnessing a violent death. This particular story is one piece of the key traditional story in the novel. Ten out of the twenty-nine traditional Laguna chants are all pieces of this same story, the story of the people being tricked by a Ck'o'yo medicine man and consequently suffering from a prolonged drought. As Tayo searches for meaning and healing after the traumas of war, the people in the story search for healing for the parched land. The two stories mirror each other in many ways and highlight the way that Tayo's own story is not just an individual story. His story of trauma, testimony, and healing is in dialogue with older cultural stories, and the stories mutually deepen and enrich one another. The traditional story just after Tayo witnesses Harley's death is the final part of the longer Laguna story in which Buzzard purifies the town, and the rains finally return. The people have finally found ceremonial healing, so the land can once again be productive and life-giving. The figure of the buzzard is key in this final installment of the story because it reinforces the connection between death and some form of communal healing for both the people and Tayo. Buzzards are

scavenging birds who eat carrion. They pick the flesh off of dead animals the way that Emo and company picked the flesh off of Harley, but buzzards do not usually subject living bodies to such mortification. While Emo and the other vets may be similar to buzzards, they act out of unnatural cruelty while buzzards act out of a need to survive. Buzzards are not cruel like Emo, but they do still have a strong relationship with death. They clean up death by removing the rotting flesh and leaving only white bone. Even the English word for a group of buzzards, a wake, has implications of death. A wake of buzzards figuratively keep watch over dead bodies even if their watching includes feeding on the body. The fact that in the Laguna story Buzzard must purify the town to bring back the rain implies that the purification happens in close proximity to death just as Tayo's healing must happen in close proximity to death. Watching Emo and his wake of buzzards mutilate Harley's body begins to clear up the confusion and entanglement of Tayo's mind. He is finally able to make the connections between the seemingly disparate parts of his life and between racial and cultural groups. Witnessing a violent death as an exposure to limits provides a moment of clarity or insight, which impels Tayo to see the underlying connections that tie people together to form the human community.

Witnessing Harley's violent death at the hands of human buzzards marks a significant turning point in Tayo's ceremonial healing like the healing Buzzard brings to the land in the traditional story, yet it does not mark the final end of Tayo's healing process. Encountering violent death is only the first part of the equation. Tayo must also tell his story—give his testimony—to an audience of sympathetic listeners to complete the ceremony and to find any healing. Only with the speaker and listener(s) together can Tayo make meaning out of his encounters with violent death. In the final pages of the novel, Tayo sits in a kiva, the underground room for Laguna religious rituals, and he tells his stories to the medicine man and the other male tribal elders. His healing

and the healing of the community are a result of a co-created story involving witnessing, giving testimony, and listening. Tayo's narrative is what helps him and the community come to terms with the violence and to open a space for reconfiguring community on a more global level. Coming to know and understand Tayo's experiences is not an individual act but a shared process that involves himself, the tribal elders, and the weight of traditional stories. He does ultimately manage to explore and reconcile what seem to be different worlds: the world of his isolated reservation and the Pacific theater of WWII, the world of both his dead Laguna mother and his unknown white father, the world of the present and the world of the past in the form of the traditional stories. Tayo's healing is only possible through a dialogue with his community and his traditions.

Part of what Tayo's narration to the tribal elders accomplishes is helping them all come to terms with or mourn the losses of current and past violence. Laub argues that this is one of the primary aspects of testimony: "[it] is inherently a process of facing loss" (91). In Tayo's case, this characteristic of testimony is true for him as well as for the rest of his tribal community. While loss is often viewed as a negative experience, it need not always be so. Loss can also be productive because with loss comes the possibility of transformation and change just as all of the lost lives Tayo mourns evoke new and broader conceptions of community formations for him. This possibility of change brought about by loss is another important tension in the tribal community. The community on the reservation in the novel has a difficult time accepting any form of change, and they frequently mourn the loss of past traditions, language, and culture, which makes it difficult for them to accept and respond to the many changes of modernity. Tayo's own marginalization as a racial hybrid comes about because his very flesh and blood are evidence that the community is changing. Uncle Josiah's girlfriend Night Swan explains to Tayo: "Indians or Mexicans or whites—most people are afraid of change. They think that if their children have the same color of skin, the

same color of eyes, that nothing is changing” (100). Tayo’s mixed-race status is a visual reminder that the world is changing, that the time when racial and tribal groups lived in some semblance of isolation and independence is long past. The entire community must come to terms with this loss along with the loss of some cultural traditions and the loss of land. Accepting these losses is hard for the entire community, so many people continue as before without acknowledging that these losses, like loss through death, might also open a space of possibility.

The losses must be acknowledged and processed through the telling and hearing of the stories, but the community must then move forward rather than getting stuck in mourning the past. The same is true for the tribal traditions: they must change with the changing times. The medicine man Ku’oosh verbally recognizes that the old ceremonies do not work like they used to, but he continues to use them rather than change them. Ku’oosh and most of the rest of the community cannot see the change and loss as an opportunity as well as a challenge, so they do not attempt any kind of transformation of the rituals and ceremonies. The medicine man who does change the ceremonies, Betonie, lives above a garbage dump, and most people think he is crazy. Yet his modified ceremonies are what lead to Tayo’s healing. Betonie recognizes that “things which don’t shift and grow are dead things” (126). Even the idea that things were once stable and fixed is a myth because living things, living communities have always shifted and changed. The pace of modernity may have sped up the shifting and changing, but the world has always been and continues to be a place of movement and change. In the end of the novel, Tayo recognizes that the losses he has suffered and the violent deaths he has witnessed are a part of his life, a piece of his story. Tayo not only accepts loss, he also allows the losses to bring about change. He himself witnesses the violent and unnatural destruction of many human bodies, and these impel him to rethink his ideas on community: “He cried the relief he felt at finally seeing the pattern, the way all

the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told. He was not crazy; he had never been crazy. He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time” (246). Tayo’s process of witnessing, testimony, and accepting loss lead him to revise (literally re-see) his understanding of the world around him and to rethink the way that his local community is connected to past communities and to larger communities around the world. He begins to see a community with “no boundaries,” a community that is inclusive and open regardless of divisions of gender, race, and nationality.

Tayo’s ceremonial healing occurs through witnessing violent death and testifying about his experiences to a gathering of male tribal elders, yet this experience changes more than just his individual attitudes about community. His testimony changes the hearers as well as the land itself, which acts as a sort of silent witness to all of the destruction and loss throughout the novel. If testimony is a dialogic process as Laub asserts, then change and growth must be possible on all sides. A process of co-creation means that speaker and listener are both involved and must be open to the transformative power of the experience. In the case of *Ceremony*, Tayo experiences some healing, and the tribal elders begin to understand the need for change in the ceremonies and in the community. Besides Tayo’s emotional and psychological healing, the most important result of the novel-long ceremony is the healing of the local land. The reservation has been experiencing a drought since the beginning of the war, and the drought continues even after the return of the Laguna war veterans. The land functions in the novel as a silent witness to all of the human trauma. In the jungles of the Philippines, Tayo “blame[s] the rain” as much as the Japanese soldiers for Rocky’s “oozing wounds...torn flesh and broken bones” (11). The hot, dense, humid jungle witnesses Rocky’s death along with the earlier deaths of the captured Japanese soldiers, and Tayo

shifts blame from the war and soldiers to the land itself. While Tayo prays for an end to the rain on the Bataan Death March, he returns to the Laguna Pueblo reservation and prays for the exact opposite. The landscape figures as a central part of his encounters with death abroad, and the land itself on the reservation is suffering from prolonged drought.

Only when Tayo realizes the physical connections between his people's land and the distant war does he begin to recognize the interconnectedness of human beings as well. It is also at this point, just after Harley's death, that he sees rain clouds on the horizon at sunrise. His realization and his subsequent testimony about all of his experiences have brought at least temporary healing to the land as well as himself. He has learned the truth of his Uncle Josiah's words that "Nothing was all good or all bad either; it just depended" (11). The unceasing rain in the Philippines was too much just as the six years of drought in New Mexico was too much, but rain itself was neither good nor bad. Even his own tribal lands were not necessarily good or bad, but parts of the land could be turned to great evil through the uranium used in atomic weapons while other areas could continue to sustain Tayo and his family through sheep and cattle ranching.

While Tayo, the land, and the community experience some form of healing as a result of his transformative encounters with and telling of violent death, the healing is not the end of the story. Tayo has come to see the interdependence of the human community that is a result of the vulnerability and fragility of the human body. The body can be horribly violated and mutilated, which makes all people dependent on one another for protection and safety. Tayo's community too has recognized the importance of transformation in the face of loss and change rather than a fearful immobilization and dependence on the past. The novel supports this positive reading of Tayo's ceremonial healing since it both begins and ends with a chant to the sunrise, a time of hope and renewal. Tayo describes the moment of sunrise as a beautiful but liminal moment: "Yet at that

moment in the sunrise, it was all so beautiful, everything, from all directions, evenly, perfectly, balancing day with night, summer months with winter...like the mind holding all thoughts together in a single moment” (237). Sunrise is a time of promise, but just as the description of dawn that frames Condé’s novel, it is also a liminal moment between day and night. In this case, the dawn is also the dawn of the autumnal equinox, so it is doubly liminal. Like the moment of death in which being and not being hang in the balance, sunrise too balances day and night. These liminal moments open a space for transformation and in Tayo’s case healing and revision of community boundaries. However, this sign of hope is not an eternal one, nor should it be. Were the novel to espouse some permanent and final solution, it would contradict much of the message of Tayo’s healing, which is based on a living, changing, fluid world. The second to last traditional Laguna chant of the novel therefore describes witchery as “dead for now” (261). Tayo, the community, and the land have found healing *for now*, and this healing is a positive and hopeful event. As a result of encountering and narrating violent deaths, Tayo has rethought the boundaries of community and shared his rethinking with his local community, and the land has been healed from drought. But, just as these stories are continuations and retellings of the traditional Laguna stories, the future will continue to rework, revise and rethink the stories. The stories, after all, are “all we have to fight off illness and death” (2). The transformative power of narrative brings healing, and the stories continue long after our own bodily deaths.

The novel reinforces this focus on communal stories and transformative narrative in its very structure. The witnessing, testimony, and healing in the novel all occur to some degree on a structural level as well as on the story level. Since the narrative is not linear and includes all of the traditional Laguna stories that visually appear in poetry form, the real reader must create the narrative and find the patterns. The text’s flashbacks, dreams, visions, and the traditional oral

stories make mindless reading an impossibility. The real reader must work carefully and thoughtfully to put all of the pieces in their place and to find the important patterns along the way just as Tayo must work to untangle the threads and see their web-like design. Therefore, the co-creation of Tayo's narrative includes not only Tayo and the tribal elders; it also gestures outside of the text itself to include the real audience. If, as the plot suggests, the stories are never finished and the human community is deeply interconnected, then the real reader is part of the stories and part of that community. The text thus seemingly draws the reader in and encourages her to rethink and expand formulations of community similar to Tayo's vision of a large-scale community that is connected through so many stories of life, death, and healing. The novel thus argues for the fundamental connective and healing power of stories within the world of the novel and beyond.

The power of stories here to bring people, ideas, cultures, and time periods into dialogue and to heal community divisions makes sense even outside of the Laguna Pueblo reservation. It is too easy to read the novel from the perspective of an outsider and think of the focus on storytelling and tradition as antiquated and quaint. Yet, as pointed out in the introduction, even in English, the etymology of the word "narrate" points to the incredible power of story in Western European tradition as a way of knowing. It is not just Tayo and the community on his reservation who come to knowledge and healing through telling and listening to stories. To narrate in English is also to make known. Silko's novel highlights the power of telling, retelling, and listening to stories, which can lead to a co-creation of new knowledge and understanding. The novel attempts to make clear that this transformative power of stories to bring together vulnerable and embodied human beings is bigger than 800 square miles of reservation land. Stories connect distant times and places, and bring insight into the deep and complex interconnectedness that is a fundamental part of the human community.

Silko's novel of Laguna Pueblo life argues for the power of stories to heal communities. On a surface level, Silko's text has little to do with English writer John Berger's novel *To the Wedding*, which is set in France and Italy half a century after *Ceremony*. Yet, Berger's novel similarly engages with issues of narrative, death, and community. In Berger's case, the unnatural death is that of a young woman from the violence of AIDS rather than the violence of war and murder. Nonetheless, Berger's novel, like Silko's, proposes that witnessing unnatural death and narrating the experience can bring healing to a community. The novel's complex structure with multiple narrators and no chapter numbers already foregrounds the importance of communal storytelling, and Berger himself directly identifies storytelling with being a witness: "Storytellers lose their identity and are open to the lives of other people...This is perhaps why I use the term 'being a witness'" (qtd in Dyer 128). Storytelling and being a witness are here again intimately related. Storytelling involves an incredible openness to other people that entails a recognition of connection and close listening. Berger's statement is also interesting to think alongside Laub's formulation of testimony as being a co-creation of knowledge. In this definition, storytelling is at its heart a co-creation in the same way that testimony is. Telling or narrating a story is a form of witnessing and testifying that needs multiple actors—narrators, subjects, listeners, readers, etc.—to take form. However, more important than Berger's own assertion that witnessing and storytelling are related is the way witnessing and narrative play out in his novel. While Silko's novel focuses on the healing power of stories, Berger's novel is predicated upon an openness to others that demands careful listening and paying attention to signposts. This close listening helps to bring the pieces of testimony together and ultimately paves the way for the community to find a temporary sense of healing.

As in all of the previous novels, the community in Berger's novel is already divided, but the most prominent division here is that between infected and healthy rather than between racial or religious groups. This distinction between infected and healthy is also frequently described in gendered terms that link HIV/AIDS with promiscuous women and gay men. The novel is set in Europe in the early 1990s, barely a decade after the discovery of the HIV virus, a time when fears and misconceptions were often more prevalent than scientific information about the disease and its transmission. As a result, the main character Ninon's HIV positive status marks her as an outsider. Even her boyfriend's father, Federico, argues with his son to leave her because of the disease: "If she's infected with this abomination, she's condemned. Worse, she's dangerous" (87). He cannot even refer to AIDS by name or call it an infection or a disease. Instead, he refers to it as an abomination, an object of disgust and horror, a thing to be shunned and thrown out of the community. He also describes small, sick Ninon as dangerous when in reality she is a tiny body in a lot of pain. If Ninon had been diagnosed with hepatitis or another infection that can be transmitted outside of sexual contact, most likely Federico would not refer to Ninon or the disease with such strong, negative terms. But Ninon has contracted AIDS, and she is a woman, which means she is subject to all of the gender double standards about sex that still exist in most of the world. Ninon is subject to similar scorn even while at the hospital where caregivers are supposed to do just that: give care. Instead, as she leaves an elevator in a wheel chair, a male medical student mutters "Puttana" or "whore" under his breath (87). As a woman with AIDS, Ninon is automatically branded using offensive sexual language. She is not viewed as a victim but as the cause of her own disease in much the same way that contemporary rape culture often blames the victim for wearing the wrong clothes or being in the wrong place. Ninon is thus put in her place at

the fringes of society by the male medical student. As a sexually active woman, she deserves her death at the hand of AIDS according to much of the surrounding society.

Ninon's gendered marginalization occurs not only at the hands of a middle class medical student but also at the hands of a low-class man. On a trip to Milan to try to get access to AZT, Ninon is accosted by a sexually aggressive local man. In order to free herself from his grip, she tells him she has AIDS, and he throws her down so hard that she loses consciousness. The man then yells, "She's a slut with SIDA and she wants to spread it, contaminate, infect, that's what she wants to do" (117). Her diseased status is again linked to her gender and sexuality as a way of excluding her from healthy society, which does not apparently include women who act on their sexual desires. If she has AIDS (or SIDA in Italian and other romance languages), it must be because she is a "slut." The earliest definition of "slut" in the Oxford English Dictionary refers to "a woman of dirty, slovenly, or untidy habits or appearance" ("slut, n."). As the etymology of slut implies, Ninon is not just sick, she is dirty and has overstepped her bounds as a woman. Despite the fact that the man was trying to force Ninon into a bar with him to have a drink and eventually to have sex, Ninon's sexuality is the threatening and dangerous one. The would-be-rapist becomes the accuser and never stops to consider the irony of his own denunciations. In the case of AIDS in the 1990s, the division between diseased and healthy is more important than any other distinctions.

The community divisions of diseased and healthy cut across other divisions like gender, age, and class. Just after the aggressive man pushes and mocks Ninon, a passing middle-aged couple joins in to humiliate her as she is lying on the ground: "The couple started saying other words. The woman slipped her heavy handbag from her shoulder and raised it to strike me. Her husband restrained her. It's not for us, he said. The worst wasn't their words. The worst was how they hated. They hated everything about me" (117). Ninon is ostracized not only by the low-class

sexual aggressor but by the middle-class married couple. Her disease is the only thing they can see, and a complicated human being is reduced to a viral infection. Her gender contributes to the harsh judgment she receives, and Ninon is thus completely excluded from the broader community by people of all classes and backgrounds regardless of her own pain and horror at impending death. Her future death will not be a mournable death for much of society because they cannot recognize her diseased body as fully human.

Intersecting with these gendered and classed divisions between diseased and healthy in the novel are issues of nationality since so many characters focus on foreignness as an interruption to local community. Ninon grew up in France but is now living in Italy, and other characters frequently refer to her by her foreign status. For instance, even when Gino's father accepts that his son wants to marry Ninon, he still refers to her as "this Frenchwoman" (100). He does not refer to her by name or as Gino's girlfriend or fiancée; his language marks her as not Italian, as foreign, as if that is her defining feature beyond her HIV positive status. The sexual aggressor in Milan also views her as an outsider and targets her because of her foreignness. Her accent is what propels him to take advantage of her and try to force her to go with him. As a foreign woman, Ninon is regarded as easy prey, an outsider without the aid and support of the local community. Ninon's father, Jean, is also frequently identified by his foreignness despite the fact that his parents emigrated from Italy to France, and his surname is Ferrero, an Italian name. As he rides his motorcycle from the Alps to the southern Italian coast for Ninon's wedding, he stops along the way and each time is reminded of his status as an outsider. One perfume seller describes him as "this black frog in leather who speaks like a foreigner and uses such odd phrases" (155). While the woman helps Jean buy perfume, she cannot help but highlight his foreignness and refers to him using the derogatory term for a Frenchman: frog. Each stop for a meal or gas or a rest brings

encounters with locals who stare and watch Jean as the foreign oddity or entertainment for the day. Ninon's mother, too, is identified on her trip south from Bratislava as a foreigner, and a ferry captain repeatedly attempts to engage her in conversation because she is exotic. Even the rural small town setting for Ninon and Gino's wedding turns all of the wedding events into a spectacle for locals who watch the foreigners arrive and celebrate with incredible fascination. Ninon and her parents' foreignness is a constant reminder that they do not quite belong to the larger community in Italy. Ninon's accent and fair complexion already mark her as different, as an outsider, and this marginalization is only further compounded by her diseased status.

While Ninon has no hope of finding a physical cure to her disease, the novel does propose that the complex process of witnessing and giving testimony about Ninon's impending unnatural death might open the possibility of reconfiguring community in ways that heal some of the many divisions. While this encounter with material death does not involve intentional violence, it does involve violence of another sort—the violence of a body attacked by bacteria and viruses against which it can no longer defend itself, the violence of a young body destroyed by disease. This unnatural death from AIDS is no less traumatic than the graphic deaths described in the previous novels. Ninon's friends and family recognize the horrors of a death from AIDS. Her father describes, "This illness, the illness of Ninon, is the job of being slowly abandoned by life. It's the job of life letting you down, one part after another failing" (89). Jean recognizes that Ninon's death will be painful, slow, and agonizing, and he desperately wants to find a miracle cure even though he knows no cure is possible. Ninon's mother describes in even more graphic detail what Ninon's disease and death will entail under a diary entry entitled "Pain": "The infections and parasites which the body cannot resist when SIDA has declared itself provoke hellish itchings, nausea, cramps of the stomach, open sores in the mouth, migraines following radiotherapies, shooting

pains along the legs” (163). Ninon’s unnatural death from AIDS will be horrible; it will reveal the dramatic weakness and vulnerability of the human body. When she dies, she will weigh only seventeen kilos according to the novel, or thirty-seven and a half pounds (199). Her death does not involve as much blood as the torture of Harley, but it is nonetheless a gruesome death to witness, a similar reminder that vulnerable human bodies are dependent on each other. Ninon can no longer speak at her death, and Gino has to give her water through a syringe. “She will not have the strength to move anything, except her eyes, which will question him, and the tip of her tongue to touch the drops of water,” describes the frame narrator, Tsobanakos (200). She is completely physically dependent on others to care for her, to relieve her pain, to sit beside her. The prospect of this death frightens those around her, but this future death is also what brings them together to celebrate her wedding. The unnatural death that she and her friends and family will face reminds them all of the frailty of the body and the unpredictability of life. It exposes them to the limits of life, narration, and language as her body slowly fails. It thus brings together people from very different walks of life for one day for a wedding in a similar way to *Traversée*’s coming together of community at a wake. Ninon’s family and friends come together to celebrate but also to mourn since they know that the wedding is a celebration in the face of imminent death.

The novel draws particular attention to Ninon’s physical suffering and death by subtly comparing her diseased body to that of the crucified Christ. Tsobanakos narrates, “There appeared before my blind eyes something which was part of the story, yet I could not say how” (103). He goes on to describe the crucifix he sees in his mind that “[shows] forever the cruelty of men. This cruelty can use anything. This is why the Christ has a body. His body is also loved. He was betrayed, abandoned, forsaken and he was loved. His body—pallid, fragile, doomed—shows this love. Don’t ask me how. Ask the criminals, ask children, ask the Magdalen, ask mothers”

(103). Similar to the crucifixion imagery in *Ceremony*, Berger's text explicitly links Ninon's suffering body to the foundational Christian image of physical suffering: the crucified body. The novel is also divided into thirty-three chapters, the same number as the age at which Jesus was crucified according to Christian tradition. Ninon's disease will leave her body "pallid, fragile, doomed" just like the body on the crucifix Tsobanakos describes. Yet, Tsobanakos counterintuitively links the image of the tortured Christ's body not only with cruelty or hatred but also with love. The pained and tortured body is a mark of the vulnerability of the human body; it is weak and open to the world, open to material suffering. This vulnerability, as Judith Butler reminds us, can also be a call to mutual respect and caring. Ninon's drawn-out death full of suffering and social isolation is cruel, but it also serves to bring her family and friends together for her wedding. Instead of running away and abandoning Ninon, her boyfriend Gino proposes to her when he hears her diagnosis. Gino sees her impending death and her vulnerable body and continues to love her. Ninon's mother and father also do not reject her because of her AIDS diagnosis; they love her body even as her body is displayed in all of its frailty and weakness. If in Christianity, Christ's crucifixion serves a redemptive purpose, Ninon's physical suffering and death bring together her community of family and friends and impel them to love even a diseased body similar to Sitt Marie-Rose's mutilated body, which becomes the site of celebration and anti-feasts, a coming together of community in the face of violence and death. The physical violence of Ninon's future death serves to bring her surrounding community together despite her marginalization from broader society.

The processes of witnessing and giving testimony about Ninon's horrific death open a space for rethinking community, yet the novel's structure dramatically complicates this witnessing. The primary storyteller and witness in *To the Wedding* is a blind Greek street merchant in Plaka,

a historical Athens neighborhood near the Acropolis. The blind merchant introduces himself by explaining that in this neighborhood, he is “called Tsobanakos” (4). Tsobanakos or “a man who herds sheep” is a name others have given him, but the wording implies that the narrator may have other names depending on the context (4). This multiplicity fits well with the narrative structure of the text in which Tsobanakos (for that is what I too shall call him) hears and sees (despite his physical blindness) distant events narrated by a diverse group of people who are geographically and temporally removed from his home in Athens. These multiple narrators are mostly part of the community surrounding Ninon as she faces her AIDS diagnosis. Yet, Tsobanakos’ name and distant listening also render problematic simple definitions of witnessing and testimony.

Tsobanakos is a blind witness—already an oxymoron in many ways—to the unintentional testimony of Ninon, who is diagnosed with AIDS at twenty-four. He qualifies as a witness in Berger’s sense of a storyteller who opens himself up to the lives of others, who hears and records their voices from far away. In Laub’s formulation, he could also be considered a witness or hearer of Ninon’s testimony because he is a necessary component of that testimony. Without Tsobanakos’ careful listening and subsequent narration, Ninon’s story of the trauma and marginalization of AIDS is incomplete, an unregistered trauma in her psyche and that of her surrounding community.

Tsobanakos’ blind witnessing helps to create and disseminate her narrative.

While Tsobanakos could be considered a witness to Ninon’s death based on his position as storyteller, there are problems with this reading since he is not a listener who is physically present while Ninon tells her story. Neither is Tsobanakos actually present for any of the events surrounding Ninon’s AIDS diagnosis, wedding, or death. He thus cannot testify to its occurrence in the same way that a participant would. And yet, if we think back to Laub’s example of the Holocaust survivor who inaccurately testifies about the Auschwitz uprising, testimony is concerned

with the subjective experience of trauma as much as with historical accuracy. Tsobanakos' testimony may be similar in that it is testifying to the emotional and relational difficulties and possibilities brought about by Ninon's impending unnatural death rather than to the exact truth quality of any of the events or conversations. Even if he could be present in Italy for any of the novel's events, his position would be different from that of a conventional witness because he is blind; he cannot see what is happening around him. Somehow, however, Tsobanakos almost sees the characters he is listening to. Despite his blindness, his narration describes scenes with incredible visual detail. In the first passage after Tsobanakos begins to hear the distant voices from Ninon's life, he describes her father's house as if he could see it: "The kitchen is not big and seems smaller because of a large motorbike on its stand behind the front door which gives onto the street. The way the saucepans have been left on the stove shows that the cooking is done by a man" (11). This passage does not include any words or sounds that a blind man could hear; instead, it describes the size and appearance of Jean's kitchen. The blind narrator describes in detail the position of the motorcycle and the scattered pots on the stove. Similar passages occur on almost every page. As Jean travels south on his motorcycle to reach Ninon's wedding, Tsobanakos describes the scenery: "The sky is an early morning blue and there are white clouds near the tops of the trees. The road is straight. And the signalman is doing 200 kilometres an hour" (45). Again, a blind man would have a hard time describing Ninon's father, the signalman, and his journey in such vivid detail including the color of the sky. How could Tsobanakos know these things if he is in Athens, miles away from the Alps, and if he is blind? This mysterious "listening" renders problematic simplistic formulations of witnessing and testimony. Tsobanakos hears, sees, and translates Ninon's testimony about the trauma of AIDS, and his testimony ultimately brings together Ninon's close friends and family despite past rifts and divisions. His testimony is only

tenuously related to personal experience and to lived events. As a storyteller and translator, he may not personally experience the events he describes, but instead, he opens himself completely to the lives of others through careful listening.

Even if we allow that Tsobanakos could be some kind of witness to Ninon's testimony, it is not clear that Ninon is intentionally giving testimony. Ninon's fragments are most often narrated in the first person, which brings it closer to some kind of testimony. She recounts events from her own life such as childhood memories, the sexual encounter in which she contracted HIV, and her own attempts to cope with her diagnosis. This first-person perspective lends itself better to testimony since Tsobanakos and the implied reader hear Ninon's experience of trauma first-hand. If she is giving testimony to anyone, the novel seems to name her father as the recipient. After she first learns of her HIV-positive status from the doctor, Ninon narrates, "Papa, can you hear me? I'm twenty-four and I'm going to die" (75). Ninon directly addresses her words to her father here and at other points in the text. She may not be directly testifying to Tsobanakos, but she is offering her account of facing her unnatural death to her father. It might be an indirect form of testimony, but in its collected form, it still comes closer to testimony about trauma than to a normal conversation. Tsobanakos, in this context, overhears Ninon's internal testimony to her father about facing her impending physical death as a result of AIDS, and he brings it together to make meaning out of her story. Her narrative needs the close and sympathetic listening of Tsobanakos to fully come into being.

Looking at the other narrative perspectives in the novel reinforces the idea that Ninon more than most other characters is testifying to her trauma and her marginalization. She is one of the few characters (besides the narrator Tsobanakos) who narrate directly in the first person. Ninon's parents' stories are all narrated in the third person with Tsobanakos explicitly beginning

each fragment or interjecting himself somewhere in the middle. He is thus telling their stories for them. Ninon, on the other hand, narrates solely in the first person, which makes her narration appear less mediated by Tsobanakos. Only the very first fragment of her more than fifty fragments is prefaced by Tsobanakos. All of the rest are narrated directly by Ninon with none of Tsobanakos' interruptions or interjections. Ninon's first-person narration lends credence to the idea of her giving some kind of testimony about the trauma of coping with AIDS and the attendant painful death that comes with it.

Thinking of Ninon as testifying based on her first-person narration becomes more complicated by the fact that four other characters narrate in first person as well. Gino's father, Federico, narrates all five of his brief fragments in first person. However, his fragments are always prefaced by Tsobanakos with phrases such as "Federico interrupts" unlike Ninon's less mediated passages (98). Gino too narrates his one and only fragment in the first person, but like his father, it is prefaced by Tsobanakos. In this case, Tsobanakos gives a lengthy commentary about Gino's manner of speaking before he allows Gino to speak for himself. The third character who narrates in first person is an unnamed man in the parking lot of the Bratislava train station where Ninon's mother is boarding a train. The man is not an official employee but a poor man desperately trying to make money by reserving parking spots that customers can just as easily find by themselves. Finally, there is a strange passage narrated in the first person by a drunk voice that begins, "Get it straight, pain is what you give, not receive. They're dirt, the ones that get it. They can't defend themselves, this shows they're dirt" (136). This passage could be talking about AIDS victims as "the ones that get it," the ones who contract the disease. It continues with a reflection on power and inflicting pain, yet the passage never definitively clarifies who the speaker or the subjects are. Regardless of the exact identity of this mysterious narrator, all four of these speakers narrate in the

first person. In terms of page numbers, their narratives are pretty insignificant set beside the pages and pages of narration by Ninon, but their voices are still included in the novel. On a very material level in the novel, Ninon's story cannot be told without others.

The one thing all of these characters and Ninon have in common is their position at the very margins of the community. Ninon, as discussed previously, is marginalized by her diseased status, her gender, and her foreignness. The disease also marginalizes her physically since she can no longer have unprotected sex; she must always put physical barriers between her body and those of her intimate partners. Her horrific death also isolates her to an incredible degree. She cannot speak or move anything but her eyes, which isolates her alone in her own failing body. The other first-person narrators are also marginalized. Federico owns a dump, and his son, Gino, works as a street merchant at local markets. Both work, but their work places them outside of conventional, middle-class society. The parking lot attendant is also on the fringes of conventional society since his work is closer to begging than to official employment. Even the strange, drunk narrator works so hard to describe how to be "Master" that it makes his own position questionable. People in real positions of power do not need as much instruction about getting themselves to the top as this narrator does. All of these minor characters, then, are situated on the periphery of society just like Ninon and her fellow AIDS patients. They function almost like a chorus of sorts with narratives that deepen Ninon's own story. They are an unintentional chorus of voices reinforcing Ninon's marginalized position, and they serve to highlight some of the important themes in her story. They come together from their positions on the margins, like the community in Condé's novel, to help tell the story of Ninon's AIDS diagnosis and impending painful death.

Tsobanakos like all of these other first-person narrators also narrates from the margins, and his own positioning seems to make him more attentive, more open, to the stories of others.

His compelling narrative about Ninon's struggle with AIDS is based on the act of incredibly close listening, the kind of listening Laub would probably advocate in psychoanalytic processing of trauma. Silko's novel explores the importance of sharing, telling, and retelling stories, but Berger's novel examines the other side of storytelling and witnessing: that of the listener. In *To the Wedding*, listening is as important as or even more important than giving testimony. Listening here is not a simple act of oral to aural transmission; it involves work and interpretation on the part of the listener. Like the foregrounding of storytelling in the opening pages of *Ceremony*, the opening pages of Berger's novel already highlight the important and complicated act of listening.

Tsobanakos asserts, "I remember most of what I hear, and I listen all day but sometimes I do not know how to fit everything together" (3). Tsobanakos' statement prefigures what he will be narrating for the rest of the novel: his distant listening and his attempt to fit the sounds together into a narrative. This act of listening thus takes effort on the part of the listener; the stories are not abstract and complete entities that come to Tsobanakos fully formed. They are incomplete and tangled. Tsobanakos like Tayo must untangle the threads, find the patterns, to form a coherent narrative. In this sense, the novel clearly advocates a process of witnessing and testifying that is co-created. Ninon's story needs the testimony of multiple individuals in her community along with the close listening of Tsobanakos to become complete, to make meaning.

The novel continues to foreground the necessity of close listening and paying attention in the narration of many of its most important characters. Ninon's father, Jean, has worked as a signalman for the French railway his entire life. His work thus involves paying close attention to signs; he listens to body language, physics, weather, in an attempt to help the trains run smoothly and safely. He uses this skill of close reading even when off the job. As he drives his motorcycle to Ninon's wedding, Tsobanakos describes, "All the time he's reading. He reads the signs concerning

what another driver is going to do during the next five seconds. He watches how drivers hold their heads, how their arm rests on an open window, how their fingers tap on the bodywork. Then he accelerates or brakes, stays behind or pulls away. He's been a signalman all his life" (55). Jean like Tsobanakos has learned to pay attention to small details and to fit those details into a larger pattern. Ninon's fiancé, Gino, is also experienced in his own form of close listening. His passion is fishing and spending time on the river, and he explains the need to pay attention, to listen closely in order to catch fish: "To know where the big fish are, you have to know the river, you have to feel the river's instincts. The fish are doing exactly the same thing in their way" (167). Gino has spent his life studying the river, getting to know its habits and its inhabitants. He uses this knowledge to listen closely, to know where the fish will be and the best way to catch them. Both Jean and Gino know how to pay attention to detail and how to fit those details into larger patterns. This kind of close listening also seems to give them more sympathy for Ninon than many of the surrounding community members. They can read Ninon's pain, and they also know her capacity for joy and beauty better than those who see her only as a walking disease. Gino, after all, asks Ninon to marry him *after* she is diagnosed with AIDS, and he persists in pursuing her despite the objections of most of his friends and family. Jean and Gino, like Tsobanakos, have learned to open themselves to others through the process of close listening. They can love and support Ninon in spite of and maybe even because of her diseased and weakening body.

Gino's father, Federico, who originally objects to the wedding, also practices a kind of close listening or paying attention to detail that ultimately helps him support his son and Ninon. Federico owns a scrap yard, and he describes listening to the scrap heaps: "In some of the stacks, the metals are talking. I'm not hard of hearing yet. They zing in the cold, icy air. If I stop walking and listen, they zing out whole sentences. In below-zero temperatures, metals sometimes do this.

Just as on stifling summer nights the thinner metals chirp with the accumulated heat, like cicadas” (98). Federico has learned to listen to the objects around him; he knows the pieces of scrap in his dump and knows their reactions to temperature and weather changes. He knows the sounds that inanimate objects make in response to the world around them. Despite this ability to listen even to discarded objects in a dump, Federico is at first horrified by his son’s relationship with Ninon. He even contemplates killing her to save his son from the risk of infection and from the pain of caring for a terminally ill AIDS patient. And yet, Federico changes his mind soon after planning to murder Ninon. His ability to listen and to find patterns in his garbage dump gives him deeper insight than the hateful medical student and the sexually aggressive man in Milan. Like *Betonie* in *Ceremony*, Federico sees meaning, order, and importance where others only see trash. Federico explains, “Everything has to be sorted out. Putting the same things together, separating like from unlike. It’s what I’ve done all my life. People mix up everything. They throw everything away in the same place. That’s how they make trash. There’s no such thing as trash. Trash is the confusion we make throwing things out” (100). Federico is able to see meaning and patterns in the garbage at his dump. He makes order out of the piles of trash, and this process of close reading also impels him to sympathize with his son and Ninon. He concludes, “You’ll be marrying a woman, not a virus. Scrap isn’t trash, Gino. Marry her” (100). Federico’s close listening enables him to see Ninon’s pain and to understand his son’s love for her. Like Jean and Gino, he is able to look beyond Ninon’s diseased body to see that she is a woman, a vulnerable and dependent human body in need of love and support.

These acts of close listening and paying attention to detail are fundamental in the novel to the processes of witnessing and giving testimony. Close listening, argues the novel, leads to opening oneself to the stories of others, including their pain and sorrow. This form of testimony with

sympathetic, close listening bring people together and open a space to heal divisions in the community just as Federico's close listening helped him to overcome his fear and disgust about Ninon's HIV-positive status. In the case of this novel, the close listening often involves reflections on Ninon's impending death with all of its bodily horrors as described earlier. Similar to the healing power of stories in *Silko*, the act of listening carefully and thoughtfully to Ninon's experiences of pain, disease, and death bring many of her surrounding friends and family together and evoke sympathy for Ninon and other AIDS victims despite their marginalization by the broader society. Both telling stories and careful listening highlight the interconnectedness that is part of being human and might then open a space of possibility for reconfiguring community.

While it makes sense in the novel that Ninon's closest family and friends listen closely to her experiences and offer testimony about their encounters with her material illness and death, Tsobanakos' journey of listening is more problematic. The novel seems to justify Tsobanako's mysterious listening and complicated act of witnessing by linking Tsobanakos with prophet figures and ancient poets. Tsobanakos' two most prominent features—his blindness and his home in Athens at the foot of the Acropolis—link him with two important figures from Classical Greek literature and myth: the blind poet Homer and the blind seer Tiresias. His similarities to Homer and Tiresias imply that Tsobanakos, too, may be a poet or a prophet. The link between Tsobanakos and Homer is strengthened by the fact that Tsobanakos claims his name originated “on account of a song” similar to the original oral nature of the poems attributed to Homer (4). Furthermore, the opening sentence of the novel points back to Classical Greek literature and thus strengthens the association between Tsobanakos and Classical Greek poetry. “I like quoting ancient verses when the occasion is apt,” narrates Tsobanakos after an epigraph by the poet Sikelidas (3). The opening of the novel clearly associates Tsobanakos with Classical Greek poetry

and the figure of Homer. This association might clarify Tsobanakos' entire project of piecing together Ninon's narrative if we think of Heidegger's associations with Greek poetry and the act of *poiesis*. *Poiesis* for Heidegger involves a fashioning or making that reveals just as Tsobanakos with his link to Greek poetry fashions a narrative that could be said to reveal something about witnessing, testimony, and listening and to reveal new and more inclusive community formations. Tsobanakos' constructed narrative reveals the gendered rifts between healthy and diseased in 1990s Western Europe, and it reveals a possible path to healing through witnessing and testifying about an encounter with unnatural death.

In addition to his links with Greek poetry, Tsobanakos also bears striking similarities to the prophet figure Tiresias that may serve to justify his mystical close listening. Tiresias was also blind, and like Tsobanakos, his blindness came about later in life. In some iterations of the story, Tiresias is blinded by Athena who gives him the gift of understanding birdsong when his mother pleads for him. Both men are therefore able to listen closely, to hear things that others cannot hear. Both men are also in some ways associated with the divine since Tiresias is given the gift of prophecy by the gods, and Tsobanakos sells tamata, votive offerings in the Greek Orthodox Church that are engraved with body parts in need of healing. Believers buy a tama, and "then they tie it to the rail by the ikons in the church. Like this they hope God will not forget their prayer" (4). As a seller of tamata, Tsobanakos is not an official part of the religious institution but closely affiliated with it in the same way that Tiresias was a sometimes-reviled seer but not an official priest. Tsobanakos' job therefore reinforces his links with the divine and the miraculous as does his home near the Acropolis, the center of Athenian religion in Classical Greece. Furthermore, both Sophocles' Tiresias and Tsobanakos are marginal figures; Tiresias is thrown out of the palace by Oedipus, and Tsobanakos is shunned by his local priest. As marginal or liminal figures, they both straddle the

divides between human and divine, the present and the future. Tiresias' prophecies often involve predictions about the future, and Tsobanakos narrates the entire last section of the novel as a future event. He even references Sophocles in his explanation: "The wedding in Gorino hasn't taken place yet. But the future of a story, as Sophocles knew, is always present" (172). Tsobanakos thus becomes a sort of prophet telling Ninon's story. This link is one justification for his intimate knowledge of Ninon's story and the testimonies of her surrounding community. He can hear and translate distant voices just as Tiresias could hear and translate birdsong. The novel clearly associates Tsobanakos with both Classical Greek poetry and prophecy, which helps to explain Tsobanakos' distant listening and the power of this constructed and co-created testimony to bring together Ninon's community despite Ninon's marginalization as a foreign, female, AIDS victim.

While both *Ceremony* and *To the Wedding* affirm that literary testimony about trauma is necessarily co-created at the level of story, Berger's novel asserts this even more blatantly than Silko's at the structural level. Berger's text seems to explicitly argue that the real reader helps to co-create the testimony along with the characters. It is not only Tsobanakos who must piece together the story and untangle the narrative threads, but the real reader must navigate the complicated text to make meaning out of Ninon and her community's testimony about her impending death from AIDS. Tsobanakos describes the beginning of his distant listening to Ninon's story as hearing "a completely silent voice [speak]" (11). The impossible task of listening to a silent voice is Tsobanakos' challenge, and on a broader level the task of the reader as well. The real reader of Berger's text must attempt, like the narrator to listen (or literally to read) carefully in the absence of other signals. The entire novel is a collection of fragments of overheard conversations and visions at least partially narrated by Tsobanakos. These fragments move from third person to first person and back again quickly and frequently with little direct indication of who is speaking. The real

reader must then pay close attention to textual cues to piece together any sense of a coherent narrative. The structure of the narrative thus places the reader in a position similar to that of Tsobanakos who must listen to a silent voice. Real readers must do the same, but the task is even harder since they can neither hear the differences in voices nor see who is speaking. Like Gino, Federico, and Jean, they must pay close attention to the signposts in the text to bring the community together and to witness Ninon's wedding in the face of impending death.

Piecing together the fragments is made more difficult by the strange chapter structure of the novel. There is a subtle organization, but it demands diligent effort and attention to find it. For instance, after the first three chapters of the novel, the fragments mostly oscillate between Ninon speaking in first person and other characters' actions and feelings narrated in third person by Tsobanakos. The chapters themselves also display a form of organization that deepens the meaning of the text and of Ninon's unintentional testimony. Each chapter is titled not with a number or with a word but with the image of a *tama*. The images of specific body parts reoccur in a semi-regular fashion in cycles of five or six chapters. The first cycle of *tama* images has six chapters, the next five, and the rest continue the six and then five pattern. However, this regularity is slightly disrupted as the cycles of images have subtle differences. For instance, the last cycle of *tama* images has five chapters, but the final *tama* is different from the final *tama* in every other cycle. Instead of an image of the mouth and neck, the final, brief chapter is titled with the image of a heart. This change in the pattern highlights the importance of the final chapter and makes its plea that the entire novel is a *tama* for Ninon even more poignant. Just after the beautiful and wrenching images of Ninon's wedding juxtaposed with her horrific death, the reader comes to an image of the heart. The heart is part of what needs healing after this encounter with unnatural death—the hearts of Ninon, her family and friends, Tsobanakos, and perhaps even the reader. The

hope is that the hearts of all involved can learn to be fully open to each other and to recognize the bodily vulnerability that ties human beings together beyond any divisions of gender, nationality, or disease.

Another way in which the structure demands close attention from the reader in order to fully create the narrative is in the chapter and fragment lengths. At first glance, the chapters and fragments seem disorganized and jumbled with little pattern to them. However, just as the tama images are subtly organized, the chapters and fragments display a kind of pattern as well. The chapter with the greatest number of fragments is the one in which Ninon discovers she has AIDS. It has thirty-nine fragments, which is four times the number of fragments in any other chapter. Many of the fragments are one line exclamations like, “I have nothing. All, all, all, all, all I had has been taken” (79). Ninon’s traumatic discovery is incredibly fragmented like her world that is falling apart around her, which makes sense in the context of testimony since Laub describes trauma as “[returning] in disjointed fragments” (71). Ninon’s deep trauma and her fragile emotional state are expressed in short, staccato fragments with little description but a lot of pain. The chapter about Ninon’s diagnosis is also titled with a tama image of a baby, which is precisely what the novel continuously reminds the reader that Ninon will never have. The visual image of a baby becomes not a sign of new life and rebirth in this context but a marker of the many losses Ninon will experience because of her disease. In fact, her body will slowly lose its independence and become more and more dependent on caregivers around her like an infant. The structure of this chapter and its title draw attention to Ninon’s pain and to her painfully short future in ways that mark her as fully human and her death as mournable despite the prevailing opinions of the surrounding society that AIDS victims deserved their fates. The novel structurally models an openness to

others, particularly the marginalized, and encourages real readers to listen carefully to their testimonies of pain and trauma.

Whereas the chapter about Ninon's AIDS diagnosis is impossibly fragmented and painful, the chapter about her future wedding is just the opposite. The wedding chapter is the longest chapter in the novel in terms of actual page numbers; it has thirty pages divided into only six fragments. All of the other chapters in the text have ten pages or less besides the chapter with Ninon's diagnosis, which has twenty-two pages. The bittersweet yet joyful climax of Ninon's wedding to Gino is a long, continuous narration with descriptive details and a coherent plotline. Both of these chapters are evidence of a form of organization in which the two most significant events in the novel are given the most textual weight and meaning, but this form of organization demands incredibly close reading to make sense of. The real reader, like Tsobanakos, must fit together the pieces to decipher the story and make meaning out of Ninon's testimony. As Raymond Mazurek describes, the montage effect of all of the chapters' narrative fragments remind "the reader of his/her own entrance" (138). The reader must consciously enter into the text and become a co-creator of Ninon's testimony. The reader is absolutely necessary to the creation of this testimony because without this close listening on the part of the reader as well as the characters, Ninon's testimony would never be complete. Neither she nor her community would find any sense of healing or be able to fully process her approaching death. But with the close listening of Tsobanakos and the real reader, this community of diverse and sometimes marginalized people gather together over a diseased and dying body. They know and understand Ninon's bodily vulnerability, and they come together in spite of differences of gender, class, nationality, and disease status to celebrate her in the etymological sense of honoring her. At least

temporarily, they become an open community that is capable of close listening to the suffering of others.

This focus on close listening and careful reading is evident even from the opening page of the novel. The novel's first page begins with an epigraph by the Classical Greek poet Sikelidas. Tsobanakos finally mentions the name of the poet almost two hundred pages into the novel, but the epigraph appears at the beginning with no clear attribution. That the text opens with an epigraph is also already a gesture outside of the text itself. The implied reader must be able to read closely and must have access to information about Classical Greek poetry to fully grasp the significance of the poetic passage. The epigraph is not attributed to any source, and its final two lines focus the reader's attention on lovers: "And more wonderful still the single sheet / over two lovers on a bed" (3). These lines and the entire epigraph seem rather positive on first reading. The images in the epigraph all praise things that bring relief and offer hope such as spring winds for mariners. By the end of the novel, however, the final lines of the epigraph about lovers become much more poignant as Ninon and Gino navigate an intimate relationship in the light of AIDS. The single sheet over two lovers is no longer quite so wonderful when one of their bodies is covered in sores and can no longer move and when unprotected sex could mean a death sentence for Gino as well. However, a reader with more knowledge of Sikelidas might already get inklings of this darker ending from the opening passage. While much of his extant poetry is focused on the erotic, Sikelidas was known as an epigrammist. According to Alexander Sens, the function of Hellenistic epigrams "ranged from state-sponsored commemoration of war dead to recording personal acts such as a gift of pottery, but the vast majority were private epitaphs for individuals or dedications to the gods" (xxxiv). If we think of Sikelidas (whose real name was Asclepiades of Samos) as writing many epitaphs for the deceased and the war dead, the opening passage could

hint at the sad ending of the novel. The poem can be read as more than just in praise of two lovers; it can also function as an epitaph for Ninon, a commemoration of her life, love, and community after her unnatural death.

With knowledge of Sikelidas and his writings, the epigraph that opens the novel can also highlight the importance of community and relationships. Sens' analysis of that particular poem argues that it is primarily about reciprocity: "Whereas the longings whose fulfillment is described in the first two clauses are felt only by a particular group and are satisfied by an impersonal means...the satisfaction of amatory desire is reciprocal, each party being both recipient and agent of pleasure" (2). The third clause of the epigraph that describes lovers foregrounds the importance of reciprocity, of close human relationships that are mutually enriching, as the greatest source of pleasure. The other sources of pleasure described move from the object (snow or wind) to the subject in a one-way direction. In the case of lovers and in the case of human relationships in general, the subject and object of pleasure can and do switch roles. The lovers' desire and pleasure is reciprocal and therefore of a higher order than changes in weather. The epigraph both points to Ninon and Gino's love as a sign of the reciprocity of human community and foreshadows her death. In the novel, it is precisely Ninon's impending unnatural death that brings the community together, that helps the characters recognize their mutual responsibility to care for one another's vulnerable bodies. Once contextualized, then, this opening poem already points the astute reader to the novel's most prominent themes: Ninon's impending death and the vital importance of human relationships and community in the face of bodily frailty.

These acts of close listening to the novel, of putting together the epigraph and all of the narrative fragments make the real reader a co-creator in this testimony about unnatural death. The reader follows Tsobanakos through this journey of attentive listening and like Gino, Jean, and

Federico must also learn to pay close attention to all of the voices and textual cues to make meaning out of the narrative. The novel is thus a co-creation by Tsobanakos, Ninon, all the other characters, and the real readers. The reader learns on a material level the importance of community in making meaning of narratives of trauma and unnatural death since the reader is also a participant in creating Ninon's testimony. The real reader also learns to pay attention to the signposts, to listen to disparate voices, and to open herself to the stories of others just as Berger described the role of storyteller and witness. *To the Wedding* enacts the very kind of inclusive community it proposes by bringing together the community of narrators and the real reader in Ninon's testimony of trauma.

The novel is a co-creation of knowledge about Ninon's struggle with AIDS and her impending painful death, and it leads to some sense of healing, however transitory and partial, for Ninon and her community. Gino even describes the wedding as an act of healing for Ninon after her diagnosis: "Her second life...will begin on our wedding day" (182). Ninon cannot be physically cured of AIDS, but the wedding brings her emotional and psychological healing as she becomes part of a community of two who pledge to mutually care for one another, even to care for each other's bodies "in sickness and in health." The simple act of coming together for Ninon and Gino's wedding creates a sense of community not present before for the wedding guests as well. Ninon's parents have been separated since she was a young child, but they come together and reconcile for her wedding by the sea. The description of the wedding party highlights the sense of community experienced by the guests as they share a meal and celebrate Ninon and Gino:

The wedding guests are becoming a single animal who has fed well. A strange creature to find in a widow's orchard...Probably as old as man's discovery of fire, this creature never lives more than a day or two and is only reborn when there's

something more to celebrate. Which is why feasts are rare. For those who become the creature, it's important to find a name to which it answers whilst alive, for only then can they recall, in their memory afterwards, how, for a while, they lost themselves in its happiness. (186)

The wedding guests from different countries and cities have become a single animal, a single unit. Despite any marginalization they experience outside of this time and place, they are now part of a community. No one ostracizes Federico for owning a scrap yard or Jean for being foreign. All of them are accepted and welcomed and join the community just as all of their voices come together to tell Ninon's story. The novel argues that healing takes place on both of these levels: at the story level through the wedding feast and at the structural level through the multiple narrative testimonies joining together to co-create the testimony of Ninon's illness and death. Thus, on the final page of the novel, Tsobanakos explains that the tama Ninon's father bought on their trip to Athens was not enough: "Another tama was needed, made this time not in tin but with voices. Here it is. Place it by the candle when you pray" (202). The entire text thus becomes a tama, a sign of remembrance in prayer, a supplication for healing. The co-created testimony of Ninon's struggle with AIDS becomes a hope of healing even if the healing is only temporary. The novel does not specify the object of healing, but it implies the healing takes place at a larger level than the individual bodily healing of Ninon. The community of witnesses to Ninon's trauma and the community of real readers might find a temporary healing. Like the ephemeral nature of the communal healing in *Ceremony*, the healing here is not permanent and eternal. Yet, it is still a redefinition of community that is open enough to allow those marginalized by disease, class, gender, and foreignness to participate.

Considered together, *Ceremony* and *To the Wedding* begin to enact the large-scale communities that they propose. They both show an encounter with death in a specific, local community, but within their stories and structures, they propose that the testimony about violent death can open a space to rethink community on a global level. In *Ceremony*, the global community is connected by the expansive violence of twentieth-century warfare that knows no geographical bounds. The global community is also connected by the mechanisms of modern capitalism that mean that African hands in a Belgian colony mined uranium that was processed in the United States and then used in the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan (“Shinkolobwe”). Silko’s novel takes this interconnectedness as a departure point for rethinking community since all of our bodies are vulnerable to these transnational forces of violence, influence, and money. Tayo’s testimony helps him to understand the fundamental vulnerability of being human that leaves us all exposed to these forces regardless of nationality, race, gender, or class. In *To the Wedding*, the community of narrators already models a more global kind of community. Unlike Condé’s novel which began this study, the narrators come from different places and different backgrounds, and their narration is compiled by a blind man in Greece. Their joint testimony about Ninon’s dying body offers a vision of community based on a love in spite of or even because of our shared bodily vulnerability to the violence of judgment and ostracization as well as the violence of disease.

Silko’s novel foregrounds the importance of telling stories, narrating, and giving testimony in bringing together the community and healing community divisions. The site of storytelling or testimony is a literal coming together, and it also reveals the way that stories need both a teller and an audience. This idea of narrative as co-created is even more true in the context of testimony about trauma. Because trauma can be difficult to process for the one who experienced it, the

witness often needs another person, a sympathetic listener, to make sense of the experience. In both novels, the encounter with unnatural death cannot be fully processed on an individual level. Tayo needs to tell his story to the tribal elders, and Ninon needs to give her testimony to her father and to Tsobanakos. *Ceremony* focuses on the first part of this process: the telling. It suggests that the telling of stories and the giving of testimony take place on an occupied landscape. Contemporary stories of trauma and violence are always in dialogue with past stories and cultural traditions. Yet, we must continue to tell our stories. The current stories might rewrite and rethink some of the older stories, but the stories are all people have to bring us together and bridge our differences. Narrative in the form of telling stories of violent death is the only way we have to make meaning from the experiences and to open the possibility of open and expansive iterations of community.

To the Wedding shifts the focus from the process of telling to the process of listening. It is important to tell the stories of trauma and unnatural death, but it is just as important to have a sympathetic listener. If trauma cannot be processed on an individual level, then the person who hears the testimony plays a pivotal role in helping to make meaning out of the trauma. The novel argues that close listening to the stories of others is effective only if the listener opens himself completely to others' lives. Close reading and careful listening are the most important way of helping one another make meaning of encounters with unnatural death. Put together, these novels form a cohesive picture of how narrating an encounter with death can help open a possibility of new, expansive community configurations. Through both thoughtful telling and careful listening, we can help each other make meaning out of such encounters. They can impel us to think deeply about our own embodiedness and our shared vulnerability to others' physical and emotional violence. While some people may respond to such recognitions of vulnerability by fortifying their

own positions and erecting walls between themselves and others, both Silko's and Berger's novels articulate an alternate path. Only by coming together as a community to share stories and to listen to one another can we hope to care for all of our bodies as equally vulnerable and beautifully human.

Conclusion

This study began with a wake and ended with a wedding, both events that involve a coming together of community to celebrate and to mourn—to celebrate a life well-lived and to mourn its passing, to celebrate a coming together of two people and to mourn a body on its way to death. The events may mark very different points in human life, but they are both cause for celebration and sadness. They are also both moments focused on the body. A wake is a gathering over a dead body—living bodies in the material presence of a dead body. In biblical language, a wedding is a coming together of two bodies in which the two “become one body” (*New American Bible (Revised Edition)*, Genesis 2.24). The wake is a display of the body at its endpoint, the future endpoint of all bodies and lives. The wedding is a display of two bodies that are joining together and that may have the potential to make new bodies, or in *To the Wedding*, the joining of two bodies to support each other in the face of death. Both of these moments are ideal focal points for thinking through the relationships of our bodies to the bodies around us. Wakes and weddings temporarily bring a community together to mourn and rejoice over others’ bodies and thus remind us of our own embodiedness and our interconnection.

I have argued in this dissertation that while modern community may be problematic in many ways, one starting point for configuring community at local and global levels in ethical and humane ways lies with the bodies we all inhabit. The body is open to both the loving touch of caresses and kisses at a wedding but also open to physical violence that can quickly put an end to all touch. Death is the extreme limit of the body, and violent death in particular can impel witnesses to think of their own bodily limits. It interrupts the clean and sterile landscapes of modern life and can impel those who witness it to reimagine their current communities in light of

our shared human vulnerability and responsibility. For, it is not enough to just acknowledge our physical dependence on one another. What I hope this dissertation has finally arrived at is a recognition that our shared bodily vulnerability to violence and death calls out for a shared responsibility for one another. We need each other on deep levels, and we are also needed by others. *To the Wedding* ends this dissertation because it models this shared responsibility. While the wake that opens this study is a gathering of people, the witnesses to Francis Sancher's death spend most of their time reflecting in isolation, gossiping, or drinking. While many of them reflect on the community's current configuration and some of them even vow to leave the village, none of them seem inclined to care for one another beyond familial lines and divisions of race and class. They do not leave the wake more likely to care for all of the bodies that surround them, just perhaps more likely to care for their own bodies and those of their loved ones. The witnesses to Francis Sancher's death may recognize his death as a limit and move to make life changes as a result, but they do not take any responsibility for the others gathered around his body.

The wedding that closes this study, however, models such shared responsibility towards the bodies around us. In the face of Ninon's death from a stigmatized disease, her family and friends draw closer. The witnesses to her impending death are able to see in her a sign of their own bodily vulnerability, and they respond by supporting the neediest among them. Gino, in fact, legally and spiritually binds his body to Ninon's as a show of love and support. That act is a gesture not only of love but also of responsibility. In the face of Ninon's disease and coming death, Gino chooses to accept the interconnectedness that makes us human. He chooses to care for Ninon in her moment of vulnerability, and all those who gather at the wedding essentially do the same. They witness Ninon's impending death, and they choose to give of themselves and be responsible to another human body. Perhaps their recognition of mutual responsibility arises because death, according to

Terry Eagleton, also requires self-giving. Eagleton describes death as an echo of the structure of all social relationships: “The absolute self-abandonment which death demands of us is only tolerable if we have rehearsed for it somewhat in life. The self-giving of friendship is a kind of *petit mort*, an act with the inner structure of dying...In this sense, death is one of the inner structures of social existence itself” (211). To witness death may then remind those gathered not only of their own embodiedness but also of the human need and capacity to let go of the self. Ninon will soon lose so much of her physical abilities, and she will soon lose all of herself. Eagleton’s argument implies that perhaps those gathered around Ninon at her wedding recognize the self-abandonment that is death and are moved to give of themselves in a similar fashion. In Berger’s novel, thoughtfully witnessing death involves an acknowledgement of our responsibility for one another that includes giving of oneself to care for the vulnerable bodies among us since we too will one day be vulnerable.

This entire project is predicated on narrative as an important vehicle for revealing our interconnectedness and the responsibility we have toward those around us. Narrative is a way to make meaning out of experience, and the novel is the quintessential modern form of narrative. Narrative already foregrounds our need for others since narratives need an audience. We need someone to listen to and engage with our own stories, and others need us to do the same in return. Stories are also a safer and bounded space to think through issues of community and death than the real world often is. The narratives under study here all propose or at least gesture toward a vision of community as inclusive and expansive, as tolerant of difference and division. This vision can be a dangerous proposition outside the realm of fiction where contentious divisions based on race, class, gender, and religion can lead to real life violence. These six novels, however, can offer a space for thinking through community configurations with less risk and more space for reflection.

Written narratives also allow the possibility of revisiting them in order to practice the close listening and careful telling that are so fundamental to any rethinking of community.

These six narrative encounters with specific, material, and violent death all highlight the fragility of the human body and the mutual vulnerability that binds us all. They also argue for our interconnectedness as a basis for expansive and open configurations of community. These open forms of community, however, need more than a recognition that we are all embodied and interconnected. Judith Butler describes the process of recognition of another's humanity and vulnerability as more than a simply recognizing what is. Instead, it is "to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future" (*Precarious Life* 44). It is a process that looks toward the future and has the capacity to transform community. A community that is truly open listens closely to the signs of our shared bodily vulnerability and hears in them a call to be responsible to others, to care for all bodies

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