

From *What the Village Gave Me: Conceptualizations of Womanhood*

Denise Davis-Maye, Annice Dale Yarber. Tonya E. Perry, eds.

University of America Press, 2014

Section 4: Speaking Change, Writing Wrongs

What *Mami* Taught Me about Empire

At the age of seven, I started coming home in the afternoons, my arms and legs bruised and scratched, something my mother questioned and I shrugged off for as long as possible. When the bruises and scratches became too regular, my mother's questions turned into an eyeball to eyeball interrogation, and I confessed, blurting out the words as if the sin were mortal and exclusively mine: I was being bullied. Soon after, my mother dragged me to a shoe store and introduced me to the biggest, ugliest shoes I had ever seen. They were made of leather, black and white, with black shoe laces and a heavily crimped, sown edge that ran their perimeter. Those were the shoes my mother started putting on my feet every morning before school, firmly pulling the laces into a tight bow. "If you hit a boy here," she said, dropping one hand down to her lap, "it hurts very, very much. Are you listening?"

I wasn't. I was wondering why it would hurt more than if someone kicked me there. "The next time he tries to hit you," she insisted, "grab his hair and kick him. Right here." I complained that the shoes were heavy and ugly, and she took me by the shoulders, her eyes on fire: "I'm going to be waiting at the fence with the other mothers. When I see you kick him, I'm going to start shouting to you to stop. Don't stop. Not until he stops." So I trudged to school that day with those iron armadillos on my feet, praying and hoping to avoid the bully, but when

the final bell rang, there he was, fists clenched. He lunged at me. I grabbed him by the hair and kicked him in just the spot my mother told me. She was right; one kick and he collapsed, coiled in pain. “*Lee-see, eh-stop! Eh-stop!*” my mother called out to me. I could hear her in the distance, her voice cleaving through the fog of my fear and adrenaline.

Clearly, what *mami* taught me that day was to stand my ground and fight my own battles. However, as the decades passed, my sense of the complexity of that moment deepened. As an adult, it became clear to me that the story was as much about my mother as it was about myself, a story she knew viscerally long before I was able to piece it together. That little boy had recognized me as “Spanish.” This was the difference that propelled his fists and fueled the taunts, prelude to every assault: “Hey, spic!” So in that long-ago moment, standing on the perimeter of the school-yard fence and the perimeter of an alien culture and language, my Cuban immigrant mother, left exhausted and bereft by US colonialism, had conveyed to her immigrant daughter an unwavering sense of how the world worked. It wasn’t simply a lesson in self-reliance, as I had thought for so long, but part of a larger story about the difference between how others saw me and how I saw myself.

“*Lee-see, eh-stop! Eh-stop!*” she had called out to me in heavily accented English. And I remembered my mother that day, neatly dressed in matching hat and gloves and handbag, her head held high, studiously ignoring the bully’s mother, who was standing nearby—fuming, enraged at what I had done to her angelic little man. My mother stood her ground, her voice, her use of my family nickname forming a life-line that encircled and drew me to safety, reassuring me that, though appearance and reality all too often diverge and sweet little boys can also be terrifying bullies, in fact skinny, soft-spoken little beige girls can hit back. She had given me shoes, instructions, support; most important, she had given me the gift of a very different story

about myself than the one I had learned and come to believe in the school-yard. There was a clear line between defense and offense, and I was smart enough to know the difference. I wasn't a victim, but someone who was rooted, certain, capable.

Born in 1930, my mother had lived through (one phase of) the political and social convulsions of US colonialism. The era of Machado, a U.S.-backed dictator, began in 1925 and ended in 1933, after FDR had dispatched Sumner Welles, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, to fix things, which meant letting Machado flee to the US in fear of his life and Welles (the White House) giving their nod of approval to the provisional presidency of Céspedes. It didn't matter to them that so many Cubans were opposed to this rather undemocratic, self-serving intervention or that this intervention would soon lead to revolt and the establishment of the *Pentarquía*, a junta of five rebels whose "communistic" tendencies did not appeal to the extraordinary and plenipotent ambassador. FDR, too, was displeased. Though he had been diligently marketing his "Good Neighbor Policy" to Latin America, he listened to Welles, then sent some 30 warships to surround Cuba. In the teeth of US opposition, Ramón Grau San Martín, one of the five members of the *Pentarquía* was appointed president, but soon overthrown (with US backing) by Fulgencio Batista, whose brutality and repression would eventually lead to Fidel, the Revolution of 1959, and more than 50 years of exile.

So for the first 29 years of her life, my mother had experienced more insurrection, torture, killing, and economic and social instability than the average citizen of the US does in a lifetime. Yet how many US citizens, well-educated and well-fed, know this "cultural script," this history of imperial intervention that finds its quotidian parallel in a school-yard bully? Who can tell this story above the roar of the narrative of American exceptionalism? My mother told it from the margin, standing on the other side of a chain-link fence. She refused the third-person narrative

she had lived repeatedly in her homeland and had now encountered in exile. She pitched her “counterstory” across the open space of that school-yard to me that day, “a story that resists an oppressive identity and attempts to replace it with one that commands respect” (Nelson, 2001, 6).

My mother had repudiated the bully’s misrepresentation of me as a passive victim, and done everything she could to help me form a different story, one that did not include accepting either fear or helplessness. As feminist philosopher Hilde Lindemann Nelson explains in *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*, “[t]he counterstory positions itself against a number of master narratives: the stories found lying about in our culture that serve as summaries of socially shared understandings” (6). For Nelson “[b]oth others’ recognition that I am a morally responsible person and my own sense of myself as a morally responsible person, then, are required for the free exercise of moral agency” (22). Thus moral agency is composed not of one but two narrative lines: one that emerges from family or community as a “counterstory,” a first-person narrative that has been internalized and become integral to how she sees herself; and the broader “master narrative” of the culture, a third-person narrative that, as Nelson points out, does not have to be destructive or pejorative, though it often is and can even lead to “infiltrated consciousness,” drastically circumscribing how the subject sees herself and her ability to act in the world (22).

The presence and weight of this third-person narrative is a difficult concept for most Americans to grasp fully since it contradicts perhaps the central tenet of the master narrative of American exceptionalism: that any individual can rise from the meanest circumstances if only he (and it is usually a “he”) works hard and follows (some of) the rules that apply to (some) men here in the land of the free and the home of the brave. (No one else in the world is free or brave, of course.) We understand ourselves, our ability to act, in relation to a social and cultural nexus,

despite the frequent insistence that there is no such nexus, no fine ideological web that engirths and enmeshes us all. Our decisions, and the way we imagine the depth and scope of our actions, are also caught within and contained by that nexus. The destructive master narrative that “infiltrates consciousness” teaches us (silently and invisibly) that men are stronger, white is prettier, English more expressive, and then with a sleight of hand and tongue renders invisible the next and most dangerous of inferences: that those who are culturally, racially, and linguistically “superior” have a tacit, often God-given right, to bully everyone else into submission.

“A person’s identity,” writes Nelson, “is twice damaged by oppression when she internalizes as a self-understanding the hateful or dismissive views that other people have of her” (21). A “damaged identity,” then, occurs in the traumatic intersection between those two lines of narrative--self and other, first- and third-person, when “the master narratives used by a dominant group to justify the oppression of a less powerful group distort and falsify the group’s identity by depicting the group—and therefore also its members—as morally subnormal” (106).

Interestingly, master narratives draw from the elements of fiction: “stock plots and readily recognizable character types of master narratives characterize *groups* of people in certain ways, thereby cultivating and maintaining norms for the behavior of the people who belong to these groups, and weighting the ways others will or won’t tend to see them” (106, italics original).

Though Nelson clearly stipulates that “[i]dentities can be damaged and made incoherent or painful in all kinds of ways that have nothing to do with unjust social group relations” (106), her argument about how “oppressive master narratives cause *doxastic* damage—the damage of distorting and poisoning people’s self-conceptions and their beliefs about who other people are” (106, italics original), is of special relevance to the push by “minority” writers to tell that

traumatic intersection between first-person experience and a third-person “master narrative” that either distorts or renders their experience invisible.

Nelson describes “three levels of resistance” that bear on the drive to reconceptualize narrative form: refusal, which is basically a simple denial of the master narrative; repudiation, which uses a fragmented or disjointed counterstory to resist the master narrative; and contestation, which uses a fully and coherently developed counterstory to “oppose [the master narrative] ... both publicly and systematically” (169). Certainly, the transit through that traumatic intersection aestheticizes their experiences, though their full resistance and contestation of the master narrative is most evident in their re-conceptualization of narrative form. These fractured and often hybrid counterstories work less to aestheticize than to draw our attention to “pernicious cultural scripts and personae, rightly emphasizing the power that these narratives have over our imaginations” (85).

Refusal, repudiation, contestation—there is a narrative arc tacit in this cluster of responses to what Diana Tietjens Meyers terms in *Subjection and Subjectivity: Psychoanalytic Feminism and Moral Philosophy* “culturally normative prejudice” (cited in Nelson 85), a plot that drives the oscillation between first- and third-person narrative. And I think of my mother that day, standing on the perimeter of that school-yard, and realize with the fullness that only time can render, that the confrontation with the bully was as much hers as it was mine; that what she had repudiated was not only the story of her daughter as a victim, but the story that we, recent Cuban immigrants, would be subsumed in the master narrative of empire. My mother, who had never had the opportunity to finish high-school, did not need anyone to explain to her who Caliban was or why he cursed Prospero.

Responses to “culturally normative prejudice” (Meyers’ phrase) abound. The question is, who is willing to hear those responses and be shaken to the very foundations? And who, having heard the story, is willing to relinquish the white-knuckle grip on power? If we want to hear, the praxis of feminism becomes clear, constituted as it is through counter-narrative--the stories our mothers tell in the spaces between the normative and the monstrous. Once heard, the illusion that men and women share the same moment of history shatters as the “relational” reading of social developments reveal how institutions promote one sex and hobble the other (Kelly-Gadol, 1976, 432-3). The idea finds its analogue in the desire of the imperial north to annex the south. We share the same moment of time, as García Marquez contests, carefully reframing the bloody and barbaric history of Europe, but we do not share the same moment of history: “The interpretation of our [Latin American] reality through patterns not our own, serves only to make us ever more unknown, ever less free, ever more solitary. Venerable Europe would perhaps be more perceptive if it tried to see us in its own past” (1982). Less known, less free, less connected to our common humanity: historical narrative has the power to tether us to unquestioned assumptions about the imperial projects of the moment and to rationalize every cultural difference as indicative of a lower order of being, an alignment that makes conquest morally worthy and “natural.”

Sir Leslie Stephen’s biographical essay on the life of Mary Wolstonecraft in the 22nd volume of the *Dictionary of National Biography* and the response of his daughter, Virginia Woolf, reveals the insidiousness of master narratives and their use of “stock plots and readily recognizable character types” (Nelson, 2001, 106); of how we can learn to contest historical narrative. Stephen, the editor of the *DNB* from 1882 to 1891, describes Wollstonecraft as the wife of Godwin and a “miscellaneous writer” (60). Given Wollstonecraft’s racial and ethnic

lineage, Stephen seems to ask, how could she ever have amounted to much? She was, after all, the “granddaughter of a rich Spitalfields manufacturer of Irish extraction,” and “[h]er father, Edward John Wollstonecraft, spent the fortune which he had inherited, tried farming, took to drinking, bullied his wife, and rambled to various places, sinking lower at each move” (60) The selected details of Wollstonecraft’s life are fitted into the stock plot of the fallen woman, the one who “scandalized her sisters” (61) with the publication of *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*; fell in love with Fuseli, a married man; tried to please Fuseli by getting “rid of her previously slovenly habits of dress” (61); left for Paris, where she fell in love with Gilbert Imlay, an American soldier, and “agreed to live with him as his wife—a legal marriage for an Englishwoman being probably difficult at the time, and not a matter of importance according to her views” (61).

She then gave birth out of wedlock to a child, Fanny; followed Imlay across Europe even after he had abandoned her and Fanny; tried to commit suicide by drowning herself; met Godwin; got pregnant; married Godwin because she was pregnant, (despite the fact that neither of them entirely approved of marriage); and died a few days after giving birth. Reading the story of Wollstonecraft’s life, as Stephen tells it, we recognize both the stereotypical whore and the moral lesson—the stern warning of what happens to women who refuse the patriarchal master narrative that describes and delimits their role in the world. Stephen cannot seem to understand Wollstonecraft as anything other than what the master narrative renders her. From his third-person perspective, she is an Irish mongrel who “had much talent, though little education” (60) and a harlot. Her “slovenly habits of dress” (61), which derived from her refusal to wear a corset, served as an unequivocal indicator of her moral laxity, the loose habit(s) of a harlot.

In Virginia Woolf's essay on Mary Wollstonecraft in *The Second Common Reader*, published in 1932, Woolf responds to her father, countering his master narrative of the fallen woman. Of interest is not only the heartfelt identification that Woolf seems to have with Wollstonecraft, a woman whose intellect and iconoclastic posture toward the manners and morals of her time Woolf appreciates and shares, but the way Woolf's essay moves from first- to third-person, her identification with Wollstonecraft so clear despite time and social class, as she pitches it out across the open space between herself and a future she can only imagine. Woolf begins her essay on Mary Wollstonecraft by taking on the project of a third-person biographical narrative. Read side by side with her father's essay, however, the differences are striking. It isn't Wollstonecraft's ethnicity or social class but rather the broader historical context of her life that interests Woolf.

"Great wars are strangely intermittent in their effects," Woolf begins, explaining how "[t]he French Revolution took some people and tore them asunder; others it passed over without disturbing a hair of their heads" (156). Jane Austen, Charles Lamb, Beau Brummell—for these figures, the Revolution was of no importance (156). "But to Wordsworth and to Godwin it was the dawn; unmistakably they saw 'France standing on the top of golden hours, / And human nature seeming born again'" (156). Unlike her father, Woolf situates Wollstonecraft within an intellectual and historical frame, drawing our attention to the parallel between "a picturesque historian" and the frivolous Beau Brummel, both of whom are interested in what is fashionable and superficial, and the young, badly dressed, middle-class men (and woman) who were engaged in the highest principles of the French Revolution—liberty, fraternity, equality:

Thus it would be easy for a picturesque historian to lay side by side the most glaring contrasts—here in Chesterfield Street was Beau Brummell letting his

chin fall carefully upon his cravat and discussing in a tone studiously free from vulgar emphasis the proper cut of the lapel of a coat; and here in Somers Town was a party of ill-dressed, excited young men, one with a head too big for his body and a nose too long for his face, holding forth day by day over the tea-cups upon human perfectibility, ideal unity, and the rights of man. There was also a woman present with very bright eyes and a very eager tongue, and the young men, who had middle-class names, like Barlow and Holcroft and Godwin, called her simply ‘Wollstonecraft’, as if it did not matter whether she were married or unmarried, as if she were a young man like themselves. (156-7)

Which will you choose? Woolf demands. The fop or the philosopher? What will you stand for, the monarchy or the rights of man? “Such glaring discords among intelligent people—for Charles Lamb and Godwin, Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft were all highly intelligent—suggest how much influence circumstances have upon opinions.” (157)

Woolf points to the social and cultural nexus, that fine ideological web of “circumstances” that engirth and enmesh, that “infiltrates consciousness,” even the consciousness of “highly intelligent” people. Put differently, our opinions are contingent on our circumstances; change the circumstance, and the opinion and the narrative that sustains that opinion will change:

If Godwin had been brought up in the precincts of the Temple and had drunk deep of antiquity and old letters at Christ’s Hospital, he might never have cared a straw for the future of man and his rights in general. If Jane Austen had lain as a child on the landing to prevent her father from thrashing her mother, her soul might

have burnt with such a passion against tyranny that all her novels might have been consumed in one cry for justice. (157)

Woolf's third-person narrative shifts, becoming less about the life of Wollstonecraft and more an expression of empathy that teeters on becoming a first-person narrative. Woolf, a woman of privilege, identifies with Wollstonecraft instead of her own class; sees herself on the same social and moral perimeter as Wollstonecraft, trying like Wollstonecraft to transit the space between "Women and Fiction" at a time when the drive to write made her a manx cat, the image she uses in *A Room of One's Own* (2005, 11); made her as monstrous as Wollstonecraft, the "hyena in petticoats" as Horace Walpole called her, a creature whose gender was believed to change with every new moon.

Like her father, Woolf proceeds to tell the same tragic arc of Wollstonecraft's story, but she substitutes the stock plot of the fallen woman with specific, pivotal ideas that develop as a result of Wollstonecraft's experiences. Wollstonecraft's experiences are not the cause of her fall; instead, every pivotal experience is yoked to a revelation, the deepening of a moral philosophy:

The staple of [Wollstonecraft's] doctrine was that nothing mattered save independence. 'Every obligation we receive from our fellow-creatures is a new shackle, takes from our native freedom, and debases the mind.' Independence was the first necessity for a woman; not grace or charm, but energy and courage and the power to put her will into effect, were her necessary qualities. It was her highest boast to be able to say, 'I never yet resolved to do anything of consequence that I did not adhere readily to it'. Certainly Mary could say this with truth. When she was a little more than thirty she could look back upon a series of actions which she had carried out in the teeth of opposition. (157-8)

What follows is a recitation of the same events that Stephen had noted, only in this counterstory Wollstonecraft appears as Delacroix's bare-breasted Liberty, standing at a barricade and leading her people, an early nineteenth-century Joan of Arc. And as for the contradictions and inconsistencies of Wollstonecraft's life that troubled Stephen, these are for Woolf an integral part of Wollstonecraft's intellectual quest: "Every day she made theories by which life should be lived; and every day she came smack against the rock of other people's prejudices. Every day too—for she was no pedant, no cold-blooded theorist—something was born in her that thrust aside her theories and forced her to model them afresh" (159).

As Woolf explains, even such a deeply personal decision as marrying Godwin "was an experiment, as Mary's life had been an experiment from the start, an attempt to make human conventions conform more closely to human needs" (163). The master narrative of the fallen woman ends in shame, death and historical oblivion, but in the counter-story Wollstonecraft "has her revenge," (163) and so does Woolf, who turns Wollstonecraft's early demise at the age of thirty-six into a victory. Wollstonecraft's life, consciously led and recorded, render her immortal:

Many millions have died and been forgotten in the hundred and thirty years that have passed since she was buried; and yet as we read her letters and listen to her arguments and consider her experiments, above all, that most fruitful experiment, her relation with Godwin, and realise the high-handed and hot-blooded manner in which she cut her way to the quick of life, one form of immortality is hers undoubtedly: she is alive and active, she argues and experiments, we hear her voice and trace her influence even now among the living. (163)

Woolf tells the metamorphosis of Wollstonecraft, mythologizing her for a larger community of women across the centuries in a manner that (to use Nelson's term) serves as a repudiation—an ancient story of revolt and rebellion, a Promethean story by which Wollstonecraft defines herself; and a story her daughter, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, would tell in the pages of *Frankenstein; Or, the Modern Prometheus*. History matters—and Woolf knows that. To her father's dismissive summary of Wollstonecraft's life and work, she responds, positioning Wollstonecraft with a circle of free-thinking intellectuals, and later giving Wollstonecraft “one form of immortality [that] is hers undoubtedly: she is alive and active, she argues and experiments, we hear her voice and trace her influence even now among the living” (163). Stephen's narrative of Wollstonecraft's life has been transformed into a counterstory extrapolated, serving to heal (to use Nelson's term) “damaged identities,” providing Woolf with a narrative of her own, one that stages again that same transformative oscillation between third- and first-person.

In 1928, Woolf had recorded the intimate process of building the connective, transformative arc between “Women and Fiction,” the topic of two lectures that would become *A Room of One's Own*. Here, however, idea and story are complicated by the absence of the tacit plot in her essay on Wollstonecraft—the chronology of Wollstonecraft's birth, life and death. In *A Room of One's Own*, the seemingly straightforward topic of “Women and Fiction” became “inextricably mixed” (3). Does the topic refer to “women and what they are like,” “women and the fiction that they write,” or “women and the fiction that is written about them” (3)? She decides to pursue a mix of all three, despite the “fatal drawback” of that approach; namely, that “I should never be able to come to a conclusion. I should never be able to fulfill what is, I understand, the first duty of a lecturer—to hand you after an hour's discourse a nugget of pure

truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks and keep on the mantel-piece for ever” (3-4). The degree of certainty you are used to, Woolf tells us, is an illusion, as is the possibility of eliminating the hybridity of the topic. Put differently, to say anything about “Women and Fiction,” we have to recognize the distance between fop and philosopher, “how much influence circumstances have upon opinions,” and the need of a woman writer to see herself and to be seen by others as a moral agent.

What she can do, and the offer seems coy indeed, is present us with this solitary opinion: “a woman must have money and a room of one’s own if she is to write fiction” (4). The master narrative about women and fiction is rooted in a denial of material circumstance: change that circumstance and the “unsolved problems” (4) of women and fiction will not need resolution. They won’t even need articulation because “in a hundred years,” when “women will have ceased to be the protected sex.... All assumptions founded on the facts observed when women were the protected sex will have disappeared...” (40). The “damaged identity” situated between those two lines of narrative--self and other, first- and third-person, will no longer be distorted and misrepresented. “Imaginatively [woman] is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history” (43).

This “odd monster,” “a worm winged like an eagle; the spirit of life and beauty in a kitchen chopping up suet” (44) represents the same discrepancy Woolf observed and responded to in her essay on Wollstonecraft. The imaginative or fanciful rendering of woman by poets and historians as either ideally spiritual or grossly material finds its parallel in the persistent illusion about “realism” as a literary trope. It, too, is an “odd monster,” as Woolf and her intellectual circle understood, as aestheticized and fetishized as the Victorian obsession with the image of

Shakespeare's Ophelia floating under the water's surface, at some elusive point after her last breath but before her physical decay. What we represent to ourselves as the linearity of history is an illusion, a highly selected and aestheticized narrative that serves to support certain configurations of power and privilege. What we represent to ourselves as "realism" is a series of historically bound narrative or painterly conventions. Unable to see the contingency of "realism" as a trope, we might also find "magical realism" problematic or puerile.

"Call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael" (5), Woolf insists. Her transit from Oxbridge to river's edge to Fernham to British Museum to window—this is the transit of an allegorical figure, one and many simultaneously, struggling to understand two categories, Women and Fiction, that have been purposely situated outside her immediate grasp: "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (35). The representation of a woman's agency as a flat, reflective surface is an illusion. Or, to quote Diana Tietjens Meyers in *Gender in the Mirror: Cultural Imagery and Women's Agency*, "[t]he mirrors that give women their self-images lie" (2002, Preface). Cultures, as Meyers argues, "promote" or "suppress" agency depending on the social roles they want certain groups of people to play (2002, 24). Woolf is clear about the role of women being promoted within the culture that surrounds her: "Whatever may be their use in civilized societies, mirrors are essential to all violent and heroic actions. That is why Napoleon and Mussilini both insist so emphatically on the inferiority of women, for if they were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge" (35-36).

She is clear, too, that this misrepresentation of women's moral agency is a way of tethering them to the patriarchal project, which is all too often also the project of empire. "It is one of the great advantages of being a woman," she comments later in her essay, "that one can

pass even a very fine negress without wishing to make an Englishwoman of her” (50). By eschewing the desire to subordinate others, women set aside the easy path to self-confidence, that “imponderable” and “so invaluable” quality (35), which we derive “[b]y thinking that other people are inferior to oneself. By feeling that one has some innate superiority ... over other people” (35). The mirror that stands for the monumentalism, the fanatical monological narrative of fascism is a symbol of an easy and ultimately false self-confidence, one fueled by the barely disguised and inexplicable rage against women that Woolf cites throughout her essay. Sitting at the cross-roads of a seemingly interminable historical trauma, positioned between those two lines of narrative--self and other, first- and third-person, the difficult process of healing lies in transiting across and through that wound that has so distorted and limited women’s moral agency.

Woolf understands this, which is why she argues somewhat clumsily for the “androgynous mind,” its incandescence signifying not simply great intellect but a sense of the contingent. Which will you choose? Woolf demands. The fop or the philosopher? What will you stand for, the monarchy or the rights of man? She is drawing our attention after the fact to “how much influence circumstances have upon opinions.” Opinions and the narratives that sustain those opinions will change under the influence of time and circumstance, of history. “With the eye of the imagination,” Woolf explains, “I saw a very ancient lady crossing the street on the arm of a middle-aged woman, her daughter, perhaps” (87):

The elder is close on eighty, but if one asked her what her life has meant to her, she would say that she remembered the streets lit for the battle of Balaclava, or had heard the guns fire in Hyde Park for the birth of King Edward the Seventh. And if one asked her, longing to pin down the moment with date and season, but

what were you doing on the fifth of April 1868, or the second of November 1875, she would look vague and say that she could remember nothing. For all the dinners are cooked; the plates and cups washed; the children sent to school and gone out into the world. Nothing remains of it all. All has vanished. No biography or history has a word to say about it. And the novels, without meaning to, inevitably lie. (87-88)

Neither biography nor history can capture the quotidian reality of this elderly woman's life—of any life that is relegated to the unimportant, to that outside of the economy of images and roles that matter within a patriarchy. And novels, which aestheticize the subject, “inevitably lie.”

Here is the same problem Woolf articulated earlier: “is the charwoman who has brought up eight children of less value to the world than the barrister who has made a hundred thousand pounds” (39)? The question is pointless, she concludes, because “[n]ot only do the comparative values of charwomen and lawyers rise and fall from decade to decade, but we have no rods with which to measure them even as they are at the moment” (39-40). Here the equation between the second-class status of woman and native, of the project of misogyny and empire, is echoed in the words of García Marquez as he contests a compensatory reading of Latin American history, political and aesthetic:

[I]t is understandable that the rational talents on this [European] side of the world, exalted in the contemplation of their own cultures, should have found themselves without valid means to interpret us. It is only natural that they insist on measuring us with the yardstick that they use for themselves, forgetting that the ravages of life are not the same for all, and that the quest of our own identity is just as arduous and bloody for us as it was for them. (1982)

For Woolf, the “comparative values” are not only contingent, but there is no institutional interest in representing the consciousness of that elderly woman. The allegorical figure of Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael has transited from one space to another, and within each space there is some resolution, some revelation that moves toward understanding. Her transit pushes the formal edges of this essay, making it hybrid: she is not only “essaying” or “testing” an idea, she is also telling a short story about Everywoman. Yet she returns to this problem of transiting from domestic to public sphere, from reflective surface to moral agent without resolution.

Everywoman does not seem to find the traction necessary to contest the master narrative about women, “[f]or we think back through our mothers if we are women” (75), and history, which could serve in the creation of a counterstory, instead silences, contributing to the literary narratives that aestheticize or, as Woolf puts it, “inevitably lie.” Woolf wrote in the teeth of that institutionalized silence, tossing her counterstory out across an open space she could only imagine, a time when women would be equal to men.

Seen from the distance of years, Emerson writes, the journey of a thousand tacks is actually one straight line. “Your genuine action” in the world, he continues, “will explain itself and will explain your other genuine actions. Your conformity explains nothing” (“Self-Reliance,” 1926, 42). Emerson’s words console me in a way that people who have never felt the blunt force of history’s dislocations perhaps might not understand—for exile is a deeply internalized dislocation, the result of an interminable chain of causes and effects that lie far out of any one individual’s grasp or reach. Fidel descends from the *Sierra Maestra*, symbol and agent of a counter-revolution that itself springs from a nexus of social injustice and foreign colonization; and like so many others I lost my homeland, the trajectory of my life, and the lives of my family, inflected permanently.

I grew up listening to my mother's stories about Cuba. Telling and listening became the sole redeeming qualities of being exiled. And within the context of so great a loss, story had less to do with entertainment than transformation, the ability to create a space within ourselves in which the very things that had become impossible and inaccessible were real again, if only in the space of the imagination. The brittle, yellowed birthday telegrams; the voices distorted by static on the telephone line; the few creased black-and-white photographs: my mother's stories changed what was flat, brittle, and broken and made my family real to me. Her stories populated the emptiness of exile. More important, her will to tell stories forced open a space that exile had occluded, and it was in that space that I learned about grit, the will to *sobrevivir* the blunt force of history's dislocations.

“Who cares?” In the idiom of American English, what happened yesterday—well, “that’s history,” the phrase suggesting a habit of mind, how history is preferably forgotten, set aside in favor of the ever brightly approaching and limitless future. Yet it is history that has given me my “double perspective.” Edward Said uses the term in *Representations of the Intellectual* to describe how the exile never sees anything in isolation, but rather always in counterpoint to what has been lost (1994, 60). For Said one of the advantages of exile is that it helps us “[l]ook at situations as contingent, not inevitable, [to] look at them as the result of a series of historical choices made by men and women, as facts of society made by human beings, and not as natural or god-given, therefore unchangeable, permanent, irreversible” (60-61). Thus every situation is contingent and made—capable of shattering, but capable also of being gathered, reconstituted, actively shaped again. Seeing all social systems as contingent, the exile serves not the interests of the most elite sectors of a given society, but chooses instead to

question what is represented as orthodoxy, and to represent, as Said insists, “all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug” (11).

The “double perspective” situates the exile especially well, providing the traction necessary to transit that space between first- and third-person narrative, reinforcing the counterstory’s ability to contest the master narrative “publicly and systematically,” to use Nelson’s words. The idea of the “double perspective” echoes the point made by Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* between how one reads the world and how one reads the word; between the actual cultural, social and political practices in which we all engage and the language we use to describe those practices; between what we actually do and how we insist on representing those actions to ourselves. That same distinction can be used to define the educator as one who retains a sense of contingency, who refuses to be co-opted. It is a distinction shaped by conscious choice, though certainly the blunt force of historical events can often catalyze this type of seeing, which seems to come more readily, though not exclusively, from someone who experiences political exile or whose *mestizaje* (and Gloria Anzaldúa immediately comes to mind) literally embodies the clash of empires, rather than from someone comfortably ensconced within an elite class. This ability to “read the world” is described by Freire and Macedo as a “critical comprehension of reality,” a process that involves not just seeing distinct objects, but the web of “complex relations among objects,” “the memories, beliefs, values, meanings,” those nuanced semantic fields that can be so easily rendered invisible or turned into propaganda.

The idea that there are people who need to be dominated, their very consciousness split open, divided against itself for their own good, for the good of one or another’s economic self-interest, still has the upper hand, even in this new century, and after the bloodiest century in

recorded human history. Within every institution of higher education across the country are the victims of those terrible dislocations, myself included. Yet the historical narratives that would render the reasons for our presence here, in this alien culture and language, are invisible, silent. The installation of Fulgencio Batista's puppet government in Cuba; the removal of Mohammad Mosaddegh in Iran; the trade embargoes against Cuba and Iran; the war in Vietnam; the overthrow of the Bosch government in the Dominican Republic; of Nkrumah in Ghana; of Salvador Allende in Chile; the invasion of Panama; the weapons and training provided illegally to the Contras of El Salvador—sadly, these are just a few of many examples.

Look across every classroom: we are the unrecognized, the invisible “blowback,” and we will remain just that until the complexity of those historical narratives is told and heard. We are not here because we hate our countries, our languages and cultures, or because we consider our homes inferior. We are not here to skulk along the margins, to steal jobs, or to tarnish the pristine racial and ethnic mix of the US. Our presence can be understood only in relation to a series of historically contingent decisions that remain for the most part unspoken by the master narrative of US history. Each of us, with varying degrees of consciousness, through a range of mediums, inhabit this traumatic space, giving testimony to the human cost of residing between cultures, between languages. Within the act of testimony, however, begins the counterstory—the promise and the practice of making ourselves whole again through a collective story that develops from the questions we are willing to ask.

What Woolf accomplished in her retelling of Wollstonecraft's life and in *A Room of One's Own* is an act of testimony that lets us “think back through our mothers” (75) and provides a space from which to begin contesting women's “deprivation of opportunity” and engaging in a process of “narrative repair” (Nelson, 9). Her testimony gives the lie to patriarchal master

narratives about women and natives; and in *A Room of One's Own*, the hybridity of that essay/story, the difficult associational pattern that eschews simple chronology provides insight into the difficulty of shaping a counterstory in the teeth of that illusory void created by the master narrative. At the end, she provides a coda that is logical, succinct, and linear—as if to remind us that we should not dismiss her as an obtuse or flowery writer, but as someone who consciously stages for us that monstrous, hybrid form that is one possible shape for a consciousness that has no history except the compensatory narrative that has been reified as history.

Look at James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" and Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* and see how the first-person narrative pushes the edges of consciousness until the literary form of the short story and the novel is reflective more of each writer's way of seeing than of a standardized aesthetic form, and yet the narrative is not solipsistic. It is a testimony that beckons the world to listen. In "Sonny's Blues" the story jettisons realism at just the point when the music, so purely abstract, touches the invisible well-spring of repressed sorrow in the narrator; yet at the point of greatest individuation, his consciousness becomes historical, the story of the brutality perpetrated against African Americans in this country. In *The House on Mango Street* there are similar moments. When, for example, Esmeralda begins naming the clouds, the game is a demonstration of her intelligence; but when the clouds are given children's names, we begin to understand Esmeralda's game as testimony, as the history of the lives of children who are in relation to majority culture expendable, their lives as evanescent and unimportant as a passing cloud.

In that long-ago moment, standing on the perimeter of the school-yard fence and the perimeter of an alien culture and language, my Cuban immigrant mother, left exhausted and

bereft by US colonialism, conveyed to me an unwavering sense of how the world works, of how power yields ultimately to resistance, and how resistance is an exercise in seeing myself within a context that is completely invisible to most of the people around me. That day, as my mother called out to me from the fence, I had my first glimpse of the two edges that form the first- and third-person narrative; the edge of the devouring “master narrative” about gender, culture and color, (a narrative amplified, extended like tentacles to every ideological horizon), and the edge of a counterstory that my mother extended to me across the space of that school-yard from the well-spring of her own anguish and loss, the best weapon she had at hand. And I am eternally grateful to her.

References

- Emerson, R. W. (1951). Self-Reliance. In R. W. Emerson, *Essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (pp. 31-66). New York: Harper and Row.
- Freire, P. (2001). *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.
- "Gabriel García Márquez - Nobel Lecture: The Solitude of Latin America". Nobelprize.org. 3 Mar 2013 http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1982/marquez-lecture.html
- Meyers, D. T. (2002). *Gender in the Mirror: Cultural Imagery and Women's Agency*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nelson, H. L. (2001). *Damaged identities, Narrative Repair*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Said, E. W. (1994). *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Woolf, V. (1953). Mary Wollstonecraft. In V. Woolf, *The Common Reader, Second Series*. New York: Harvest.
- Woolf, V. (2005). *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt.