

## When Sleeping Dictionaries Awaken: The Re/turn of the Native Woman Informant

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IN JUNE OF 1995, 100,000 lucky winners of a national lottery gathered in New York Central Park for the world premiere of *Pocahontas*. Despite the seven-hour wait in drizzling rain, audience response to the film was overwhelming. Participants and reporters frequently likened the event to Woodstock, while tie-in merchandisers, who had already spent \$125 million dollars pre-marketing Pocahontas paraphernalia, began making gleeful comparisons with Disney's 1994 mega-hit, *The Lion King* (Kim 22). But as enthusiastic as public response to *Pocahontas*-the-movie was, it paled in comparison to the reaction to Pocahontas herself. That summer, a cartoon character became a cultural phenomenon, garnering the type of media attention human actresses would kill for. Movie critics applauded Pocahontas's multi-generational appeal; top fashion designers Isaac Mizrahi, Gianni Versace and Anna Sui created outfits for her shapely figure; feminist scholars of race and culture such as bell hooks and Lisa Jones were called on to analyze her attraction, and her creator, animator Glen Keane, made *Premiere* magazine's "100 Most Powerful People in Hollywood" list.

Much of the fervor surrounding Pocahontas focused on her appearance, which represented a vast departure from that of the conventional Disney heroine: Snow White, Cinderella, and the Little Mermaid were fairy tale characters with talking animals and household objects as companions; Pocahontas was presumably based on a historical figure. Disney heroines tended to be sweet, snub-nosed and girlish, while Pocahontas was strong-willed, well-muscled and "built." Of course, as cultural critic Ilene Rosenzweig wryly noted, the most remarkable and remarked upon difference between Pocahontas and Disney's previous heroines lay in her indeterminate, but undeniable, "ethnicity" (80).

At the beginning of the *Pocahontas* project, Glen Keane

had been charged with creating “the finest creature the human race has to offer,” a perfect tribal Eve, which launched Keane on an aesthetic search that took him from the coast of Jamestown to Mexican diners in east L.A. The image that ultimately emerged from his pen combined convex African facial curves, slanted Asian eyes, and Caucasian (some would say, Barbie doll) body proportions (Rosenzweig 80-7). Pocahontas’s age was similarly adjusted—from the historical estimate of 11 or 12, to the more socially acceptable 19 (81). Hers became a physically mature and delightfully strange beauty.



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Although Disney and Keane modestly accepted praise for their gesture towards aesthetic and cultural diversity, they repeatedly insisted that the real source of Pocahontas’s appeal lay not in her exotic sensuality, but in her spirited intelligence (82). Like her “people,” Pocahontas was depicted as having a knowledge of the natural world and a sense of the communal that were lacking in the greedy Europeans. In addition, she possessed the special, innate ability to interpret and translate the New World for the Old. It was these qualities, Disney claimed, as much as her exotic beauty to which John Smith and audiences were drawn.

Disney’s overt emphasis on Pocahontas’s skills as an “informant,” along with the corporation’s downplaying of her “native” or “womanly” qualities, may well be analyzed as an attempt to create a politically-correct update of the traditional colonial romance narrative: a narrative with-

out which Pocahontas could not exist, and one that has a fairly infamous past. Historically, the European conquests of foreign territories and peoples were often rhetorically figured as the male colonizer's seduction of the native woman. At different times, according to the needs of different colonial regimes, this generic native woman was alternately portrayed as a poor, ignorant heathen brought to the light of civilization and Christianity by her white lover; or as the incarnation of a wild, dangerous sexuality against which the white male needed to be constantly on guard and ultimately control; or she was idealized as possessing an uncorrupted, innocent sexuality which held the promise of spiritual and sexual renewal for her over-civilized, European lover (Spurr 170–83). Within each of these variations, however, the native woman served as both a metaphor and a metonymic extension of her lands, while the events surrounding her possession served as an allegory for that land's military and political overthrow (Cypess 90).

At times, the sexual possession of native women was not merely metaphorical, but constituted a prescribed form of colonial administration. For instance, in colonial Africa, British officers who were required to learn indigenous languages kept African concubines who simultaneously served as interpreters and language instructors for their keepers. The British slang expression for these native women informants was "sleeping dictionaries." David Spurr, author of *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration*, points out that this euphemism contains

an entire series of unstated connections between the sexual and the lexical. It suggests, for example, that the African woman is a text to be opened and closed at will, and whose contents allow entry into the mysteries of African language; that this language, and by extension African culture, is itself both contained within and revealed by the female body; that sexual knowledge of her body is knowledge of Africa itself. (171)

The primary function of discourses that utilized racial and sexual tropes like "sleeping dictionaries" was the deployment and legitimization of colonial power relations. The

<sup>1</sup> Tzvetan Todorov describes the exception to the colonial construction of the Other as inferior, as the construction of the Other as *identical* to the colonial self. Other-as-inferior begins with a perception of difference, which is immediately hierarchized: the Other is viewed as a sub-human, imperfect version of the self, or even as belonging to a lesser species. If the Other is perceived as equal to the self, then s/he is necessarily seen as identical to the self, and therefore, fully comprehensible. A perception of difference/inferiority tended to lead to colonial policies of domination; the less frequent perception of the Other as identical to the self led to policies of assimilation (42). In both paradigms, Todorov maintains, what is being denied is the possibility of a “true” otherness, one that is not a projection of the self, and one that cannot, necessarily, be “known”: “These two elementary figures of the experience of alterity are both grounded in egocentrism, in the identification of our

strategic value of these discourses lay, as Homi Bhabha observes, in their ability to create “a space for a ‘subject peoples’ through the production of knowledges in terms of which surveillance is exercised and a complex form of pleasure/unpleasure is incited.” Subject peoples were simultaneously believed to be “other” and therefore inferior, yet wholly visible and comprehensible and, therefore, ultimately controllable (70-1).<sup>1</sup> In the specific colonial trope of the “sleeping dictionary,” the construction of the native woman and land as “sleeping” or static texts suggests that they can only be brought into legibility through the consciousness of a superior, European reader (Spurr 171). While the native woman might possess knowledge, it is a passive possession of which she herself is unaware. Yet, as the second half of the trope implies, it is presumed to be a knowledge that is fully and easily available to the reader who knows how properly to access it and, subsequently, to utilize it.

While Disney limited Pocahontas and John Smith’s sexual interactions to hand holding and the occasional chaste kiss, her lexical functions, as well as her intrinsic connection with the land, conform to the type of the native woman informant. She remained the gateway to the riches of the New World. The revision Disney made to this twentieth-century Pocahontas’s role as sleeping dictionary was not to break the metonymic chain of native woman/native knowledge/native land, but to eliminate the convention of the white colonist as superior “reader.” In this revised version of colonizer-colonized interactions, Pocahontas must actively teach John Smith how properly to interpret and interact with both herself and the New world. As a product of contemporary political correctness, this movie conveniently transfers the civilizing burden from the shoulders of the “white man” to those of the “brown girl.”

Indeed, the entire movie is rife with multicultural jabs at Smith’s and the other colonists’ Eurocentric ignorance: bumbling shipmen armed to the teeth against “savages” are easily defeated by the forest’s resident spirit guide, Grandmother Willow; a foppish Governor Radcliffe’s greed for gold and John Smith’s lust for adventure are revealed

in three-part harmony to be one and the same sentiment. After a winsomely bigoted Smith lectures Pocahontas about the benefits of European civilization, she sings (in the movie's Academy Award nominated theme song), "You think the only people who are people/Are the people who look and think like you/But if you walk the footsteps of a stranger/You'll learn things you never knew you never knew" (Kuhn). It is only after his initiation into Pocahontas's world view that John Smith, too, becomes able to "sing with all the voices of the mountain and paint with all the colors of the wind."

Nevertheless, despite the production's portrayal of Pocahontas's superior knowledge, and its hiring of Native-American consultants and casting of Native-American activists and actors as the voices of Powhatan tribe members (Kim 24), *Pocahontas*-the-movie stays firmly within the colonial relations of power it attempts to rewrite. It dramatizes a contemporary form of imperialist nostalgia that bell hooks describes as the "reenacting and re-ritualizing in different ways [of] the imperialist, colonizing journey" in order to deny accountability and historical connection. By reenacting, or revisioning colonial contact with the Other "with no apparent will to dominate," the guilt of the past is presumably relieved (25). But, simply reenacting imperialist colonial journeys or conventions, even with apparently humanistic intentions, leaves the ideological contours of those tropes fully intact. For if *Pocahontas*-the-movie recuperates the colonial romance narrative, Pocahontas the heroine remains a sleeping dictionary: uncorrupted, native woman informant who saves overcivilized, white European soul.

own values with values in general, of our *I* with the universe—in the conviction that the world is one" (42-3). In this essay I am primarily interested in those knowledge constructs that enable the equating of alterity and inferiority.

## II

To be fair, it should be noted that Disney's are not the only hallowed halls in which representations of "native women" have come under this kind of politically-corrective scrutiny. An ironically similar reevaluation of the experiences and works of native women, and of other "women of color," has also taken place in American academia. This reevaluation seems to be the consequence of two academic trends: first, rising concerns regarding multicultural cur-

riculums and diversity requirements have led to the increased inclusion and legitimation of works by non-canonical authors, filmmakers, and theorists. The primary intention behind these inclusions is to correct the absent or stereotypical representations that have been suffered by non-dominant groups in the past. Second, there has been a surge of interest in the historical conditions and representational apparatus that promoted such absences and stereotypes in the first place. Racial, cultural, and sexual alterity have become hot commodities in the academy (duCille 591).

Because women of color have historically suffered multiple and intersecting oppressions, their texts—both literary and theoretical—have become privileged as “site[s] of difference” (592), through which subaltern voices are believed to speak. Most of the works selected and privileged by the academy are those seen as most directly addressing and/or deconstructing oppressive representations of “dark women,” including representations specifically associated with native women informants; that is, dark woman as bodily gateway to the simultaneous pleasures of forbidden knowledges and fertile lands.

While an increased interest in texts and films that seem to destabilize hegemonic constructions of difference would appear to be a step in the right direction, the women who produce the texts garnering such interest have consistently observed that their works are treated as if they provided their readers with unmediated access to the experience and knowledge of alterity, while the authors find themselves fetishized as transcendental signifiers of authenticity and oppression (duCille 591). Like Disney, the academy appears to be revaluing the terms “native,” and “woman,” but in the process, leaving intact the informant structures and practices that led to their deployment in the first place. The result is that once again—although this time, in the name of expiation—these “women of color” and their works are being made to fulfill the function of sleeping dictionaries.

Part of the problem, as many feminist, postcolonial, and race critics have observed, is that the expression “women of color” has itself become a trope that obscures distinctions between and within different groups of “non-white” women.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the divergent historical and

cultural experiences of mainland Chinese and Chinese-American women, or of African-American women and Chicanas, or of U.S. minority, and diasporic, postcolonial women become collapsed into an over-homogenized, aggregate “oppression.” Similarly, texts by women belonging to these different groups are consistently understood as being “about” the experience of this homogenous oppression, and hence become treated as if they were interchangeable. A twentieth-century literary survey course is likely to include either Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John*, or Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, or Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*; it is unlikely to include all three. Such homogenization tends to ignore the different material conditions under which individual women produce their works, and fosters an intellectual milieu in which issues of translation, political censorship, and relations to dominant modes of cultural production are both isolated from, and superseded by issues of racial and sexual alterity.

The fact that oppression is a hot topic, or that cultural representations that were once ignored are now receiving an unprecedented amount of attention, or even that *Pocahontas* was an overwhelming success are not, in and of themselves, bad things. Examining and destabilizing oppressive constructs of race, gender, and sexuality are admirable objectives. However, a myopic attention to, or reritualization of these constructs, without an equally rigorous examination of the structures of thought and knowledge production that occasion and deploy them, lead to their mere reversal rather than their destabilization. Fetishizing the works of different women of color is not much better than dismissing those works because they lack universality. Racial and sexual difference cannot be isolated from the structures of their differentiation; one cannot examine and revalue the terms “native” and “woman,” without also attending to the construct “informant,” and all that the word implies—interpretation, transmission, knowledge, access, and power.

<sup>2</sup> While a complete list of these critics and their works is too extensive to catalogue here, see for example: Norma Alarcón; Emily Apter; Kimberle Crenshaw; Ann duCille; Nawal El Saadawi’s “Women’s Resistance”; bell hooks; Malika Mehdi; Fatima Mernissi; Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s “Under Western Eyes”; Cherrie Moraga; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” “French Feminism in an International Frame,” and “French Feminism Revisited”; Jenny Sharpe; Sara Suleri; *Third World Women*, ed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres; *This Bridge Called My Back*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga; Trinh T. Minh-ha’s “Difference” and “Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism”; and Winifred Woodhull.

### III

The most important questions, I have begun to suspect, may not be about the essentialism and

territoriality, the biology, sociology, or even the ideology about which we hear so much, but, rather, about professionalism and disciplinarity; about cultural literacy and intellectual competence; about taking ourselves seriously and insisting that we be taken seriously not as objectified subjects in someone else's histories—as native informants—but as critics and as scholars reading and writing our own literature and history. (duCille 603)

Behind the expectation that an author or a text serve in the role of native informant, or that a text grant access to a subaltern subjectivity, or that it be “about” the experience of oppression, is the belief that the text and its creator have no real existence outside of a relation to a dominant center. One of the ways to begin to interrupt the relegation of texts and authors to the role of sleeping dictionaries is to attempt to approach them as products of artists and writers who are *also* self-reflexive cultural critics and scholars, rather than as portraits of objectified subjects of someone else's histories. Texts that are privileged as sites of difference are often also rigorous examinations and manipulations of the intersection of alterity and knowledge. This seems to be especially true of those texts that engage aspects of the epistemes and stereotypes of colonial romance narratives, particularly those of the native woman informant. Such texts will often formally and thematically frustrate expectations of accessibility, remaining, to varying degrees, illegible to readers immersed in the epistemes they interrogate.

To illustrate these ideas, I will turn to two texts, Tracey Moffatt's film, *Nice Coloured Girls* (1987), and Nawal El Saadawi's novel, *Woman at Point Zero* (1983), texts that have been consistently interpreted in terms of their representation of racial and sexual oppression. Instead, I will focus on the methods each text uses to represent and manipulate the ways of knowing that enable those oppressions. I believe that both works resist the role of native informant by generating self-reflexive knowledges that remain, in part, inaccessible even to the most well-intentioned dominant reader.

The volatile relationship between knowledge, repre-

sentation, and oppression is one with which Australian filmmaker Tracey Moffatt has had much experience. Born to an Aboriginal mother on a mission outside of Brisbane, she and her siblings were placed in foster care with a white woman as part of an Australian governmental policy that tried to regulate Aboriginal culture by assimilating it (Mellencamp 136). As a result, Moffatt grew up with one foot in Aboriginal culture and one in that of white Australia. The uncontrollable “postcolonial hybridization” (133) generated by these types of historically structured cultural intersections comprises both the subject matter and the artistic strategy of much of Moffatt’s film making.<sup>3</sup>

The title of Moffatt’s 1987 film, *Nice Coloured Girls*, is a wry reference to the centuries-old, European tradition of attributing an unrepressed, and therefore pleasingly available, sexuality to Australian Aboriginal women. The film consists of first-person plural narrations by contemporary, Aboriginal women interwoven with excerpts from official journals of European colonists in the late 1700s. The overt subject matter of both types of narration, and of the film itself, focuses on the erotic relationships of dark women and white men, ranging from eighteenth-century Aboriginal women and Irish and British colonial officers, to contemporary Aboriginal women and their Euro-Australian sugar daddies.

As the camera follows its female narrators down city streets and into restaurants and bars, these modern Aboriginal women describe the methods by which they convince white men, or, “captains” as they call them, to pay for their “good times.” The women’s descriptions, translated into English subtitles, accompany their enactment of the events being described on screen. When the women stop speaking, Irish and English male voice-overs read entries from eighteenth-century colonial journals. In one such example, as the women are shown piquing the interest of that evening’s sugar daddy, a voice-over reads a colonial settler’s accounts of his approach by an Aboriginal woman whose countenance, “though marked by some of the characteristics of her native land, was distinguished by a softness and sensibility unequalled in the rest of her country’s women” (Tench, qtd. in *Nice Coloured Girls*). Through

<sup>3</sup> In addition to *Nice Coloured Girls*, which looks at historic and contemporary relations between Aboriginal women and Euro-Australian white men, Moffatt has also produced and directed *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (1990) in which she alludes to the assimilationist policies that separated her own family via a complex depiction of a love-hate relationship between a middle-aged Aboriginal woman and her dying, white, foster mother. Likewise, her first feature-length film, *Bedevil* (1993), consisting of a trilogy of ghost stories drawn from the childhood tales she heard from her Aboriginal and white relatives, uses a mythical Australian landscape is used to make visible the “ghosts” of Australia’s history.

the course of both the evening and the film, it becomes quite apparent how little attitudes towards this “country’s women” have changed in the last two hundred years.

Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, co-authors of *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, describe the effect of the film’s juxtaposition of these official Euro-Australian accounts and the counter-narratives of the Aboriginal women as an ironic “subversion of the ‘positive’ image of ‘nice’ coloured girls as the objects of colonial exoticization”

this densely layered text mocks the prurient “ethnographic” fascination with Aboriginal sexuality. Rather than reversing the dichotomy of sexualized Third World women and virginal European women by proposing an equally virginal image of Aboriginal women, the film rejects the binaristic mode altogether by showing “nastiness” as a creative response to a specific economic and historical conjuncture. (327)

The “nastiness” to which Shohat and Stam refer is the contemporary Aboriginal women’s exploitation of their eroticized and exoticized image to their own material advantage. By juxtaposing and drawing similarities between the situations of eighteenth- and twentieth-century Aboriginal women, the film retroactively restores the agency that colonial accounts denied the eighteenth-century women, while at the same time it contextualizes the “nasty” actions of twentieth-century Aboriginal women within the asymmetrical relations of colonialism, thereby depicting their actions as a “creative” rather than criminal response to political and economic inequality (326-7).

These effects would certainly support the interpretation of *Nice Coloured Girls* as a subversive interrogation of the West’s eroticization and exoticization of Australian Aboriginal women. However, Moffatt’s film is equally, if not more so, an interrogation and exploitation of the epistemic anxieties surrounding those relations. Thematically, the film portrays the ultimate source of Aboriginal women’s true “nastiness” as residing in their ability *to* trick, rather than any tendency on their part to turn them. The film suggests that their potential to wreak what feminist

film scholar Mary Ann Doane has called “epistemological trauma” (1) is much more likely to render Euro-Australian men impotent than any variety of sexual trauma. Formally, Moffatt engages in a filmic version of the same type of “nastiness,” turning specific documentary conventions such as panoptics and “talking heads” against themselves in order to displace and render them ineffective. Together, *Nice Coloured Girls*’s multi-text narrative and formal techniques create an unsettling and biting funny portrayal of the revenge of the native woman informant.

Given the medium within which Moffatt chooses to work, it comes as little surprise that the constructs of knowledge she most thoroughly unsettles are those of visibility and the assumed relations of subject/object that subtend the privilege of the gaze. In the colonial discourses that deploy the trope of the native woman informant, otherness—both sexual and racial—is represented “as a problem of the limits of knowledge and hence of visibility, recognition, differentiation” (Doane 212). Conversely, epistemic reliability and mastery are defined in terms of visibility: seeing guarantees knowing, and knowing is understood in the spatial and visual terms of observation, penetration, surveillance and spectacle. Historically, to know and thereby conquer a “subject people” thus became a function of their being subjected to a constant and penetrating scrutiny. The colonizer could only be master of what he could survey. Colonial administration depended upon surveillance of the colonized, whereby their bodies, as much as their lands, became the objects of examination, classification, and visual penetration.

The construction of the colonized as the objects, and rarely the subjects of the colonizing gaze, rests, in part, on the conflation of the “primitive” and the body. As David Spurr notes, “[u]nder Western eyes, the body is that which is most proper to the primitive, the sign by which the primitive is represented. The body, rather than speech, law, or history, is the essential defining characteristic of primitive peoples” (22). In the case of the native woman, the effects of this primitive corporeality were believed to be intensified exponentially by her femaleness. The native woman’s overdetermined connection with the bodily and the natu-

<sup>4</sup> While Doane's discussion of a necessary "distance" occurs as part of her discussion of Freudian constructions of femininity, I believe it is relevant in a more general discussion of Western constructions of femininity as well.

ral was seen as preventing her from achieving the necessary mental "distance" required for any higher form of self-consciousness such as the colonizer's superior faculties of abstraction and reason (Doane 22-3).<sup>4</sup> The Western conflation of the primitive with the material/physical, added to its psycho-historical association of women with the flesh and the carnal, yields the image of the dark woman as a bodily portal to sexual and geographical frontiers.

Within this regime of visual and corporeal truth, one of the most anxiety-provoking epistemological traumas that could be wreaked upon the colonizing subject would be an imperceptible or "invisible" deception by a self-consciously duplicitous native woman—the very sort of "nastiness" at which *Nice Coloured Girls's* protagonists excel. In the neo-colonial circumstances in which these Aboriginal women live, their most exploitable—and exploitive—asset is the fact that they are still viewed as racialized sex objects. By playing upon this view, and manipulating the white men who still think in terms of "a 'fair' exchange of sex and goods" (Shohat and Stam 327), the women enjoy a night on the town, and usually the contents of the captain's wallet as well.

Moffatt's camera, far from offering any transparent record, or omniscient ethnographic documentation of these women's activities, becomes, instead, their most ready and willing accomplice. Her highly stylized shooting method subverts both the ethnographic tradition of Aboriginal documentaries, and the realist conventions of commercial films<sup>5</sup> by manipulating images and sounds in ways that generate the same type of epistemological anxiety in her viewers as the Aboriginal women generate in their captains. Patricia Mellencamp describes Moffatt's filmmaking strategies as belonging to those of the "empirical avant-garde" (129)—a post-*vérité* style of film making that destabilizes the subject (and object) of history with an emphasis on affect and the construction of subjectivity, rather than verisimilitude and the objective. In empirical avant-garde films, the certainty of the visual, based on the authority of image-as-documentation, is brought into question: images, which are often drawn from the past and from other films and popular culture, are juxtaposed in montages and fused

<sup>5</sup> These objectifying conventions, succinctly described by Laura Mulvey in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," focus attention on the human form and the spectral pleasure of subjecting people to "a controlling and curious gaze" (16). By keeping point-of-view, space, and narrative time on a human scale, Mulvey claims, conventional films

with sound; their representative capacity is destabilized, while the elements of composition and form are brought to the foreground (130-6). These film making methods manipulate historical and cultural images as a means of enacting a generative and self-inscriptive, rather than an empirical approach to historical subjects.<sup>6</sup> *Nice Coloured Girls*'s representation of past and present relations between Aboriginal women and Euro-Australian men is a particularly effective example of this generative and self-inscriptive strategy. Colonial history and the epistemes that facilitate/d it are turned against themselves in order to make room for the very narratives and subjects such constructs deny: "I am not concerned with verisimilitude..." Moffatt asserts, "I am not concerned with capturing reality, I'm concerned with creating it myself" (qtd. in Mellencamp 136).

The "reality" that Moffatt and her camera create is one in which the colonizer/viewer's is no longer the referential gaze: sets are cartoonish; lighting, focus, and camera angles are unstable. Much of *Nice Coloured Girls* is filmed using a hand-held camera, and the shots rarely show the Aboriginal women in their entirety. As viewers, we see parts of their faces and hands. We see their legs, and the flash of their clothing as they move out of camera range; and we see the bars, the streets and the drunken white men from their point of view, along their sight lines. Without the explanation provided by the subtitles, it is often difficult to determine, literally, to see, what exactly is going on. As the film and the women's evening progress, the transparency, or "truth" of those subtitles becomes more and more suspect. The women's rapid and laughter-filled exchanges are translated in English to short, affectless, declarative sentences, increasing the sense of the inaccessibility and incommensurateness of those exchanges. This complexity and confusion, moreover, is increased by the fact that the viewer is reading these reductive subtitles while hearing songs like Aretha Franklin's "Evil Gal Blues" and Vanity 6's "Nasty Girl" in the background. The lyrics of these songs self-reflexively add to the multi-dimensionality and untranslatability of what is happening, eliminating any illusion that these women are conforming to the traditional

maintain the conceit that the viewer is looking into and participating in another world: "The camera becomes the mechanism for producing an illusion of Renaissance space, flowing movements compatible with the human eye, an ideology of representation that revolves around the perception of the subject; the camera's look is disavowed in order to create a convincing world in which the spectator's surrogate can perform with verisimilitude" (26). Rather than disavowing the camera's look, *Nice Coloured Girls* brings it to the foreground and uses it to *limit* spectator access to the scenes. Narrative space and sequencing are organized in a non-linear manner, and often around the Aboriginal women's (rather than the spectator's) physical and subjective points-of-view—thereby severely frustrating, if not making outright impossible, spectator attempts to participate in the narrative via an on-screen surrogate.

<sup>6</sup> For a related discussion of the shift in documentary film making from the goal of objective representation to the project of the "performance of subjectivities" see Michael Renov. Renov analyzes the changing attitudes towards the "incorruptibility of the optic" and the

role of the subjective in documentary film making. Of particular interest is his discussion of the increasing prominence of work by film makers from a wide range of professional and cultural backgrounds for whom the projects of representing the historical world and of inscribing the self are invariably interwoven.

role of the native informant.

Sometimes, the scene lacks even the unstable comfort of subtitles. Interspersed with scenes of the women's night on the town are surreal sequences representing Australia's colonial history. In these sequences Moffatt uses large paintings of colonial ports and blank walls as the sets in front of which unidentified Aboriginal women and their bodies move in and out of frame. In one sequence, a white, male arm extends a bag of money on-screen; a brown, female hand reaches out to grab it; they struggle, while in the background strangely sexual grunts of effort are heard. The female hand finally wrenches the money bag away from the male's grasp and off-screen, while peals of laughter ring out more and more loudly. The man's hand clenches in helpless frustration and then, too, withdraws out of frame. In another such sequence, a brown, female hand strikes a heavy gilt-framed picture of an eighteenth-century seaport with a large rock. As the museum glass in front of the picture shatters, a similar picture immediately replaces it, at which point, the woman's hand knocks down the entire wall, suggesting that while it is impossible to destroy what lies *within* the frame, the entire "framework" itself can be displaced. Moffatt's literal and technical manipulations of framing succeed in creating the impression that what and who occurs out of range of the camera (and hence of the gaze of the viewer) are far more important than the fragments the viewer manages to decipher.

In addition to these stylized and fragmented representations of history, there are also repeated shots of an unidentified beach scene. In some of the shots the beach is empty, with only the sound of waves; in a few of the shots, there appears the head and shoulders of an expressionless and silent Aboriginal woman. The woman remains motionless, staring unwaveringly into the camera; it is impossible to interpret her gaze. The "meaning" of these beach shots—why they occur when they do, what they are intended to represent—remains equally indeterminable. In the last of these shots, the woman moves purposefully out of camera range, and the same laughing voice that mocked the man and his money bag is heard mocking our visual empty-handedness.

Moffatt's manipulation of what does and does not remain visible to the camera's eye, her destabilization of the documentary function of the image, and her exaggeration of the artifice of her medium eliminate any illusion that visibility is a reliable measure of certainty. Moffatt's camera conceals as much as it reveals, leaving the viewer with frustrated epistemic expectations that are uncomfortably reminiscent of the drunken frustration felt by the captain as the Aboriginal women laughingly avoid his clumsy attempts to possess them. Their and Moffatt's are the only points of view that are shown possessing any authority, and are, more often than not, focused on one another, or on something that remains beyond the camera's lens, something far beyond a simple representation of "history" or "alterity." In a neo-colonial context, where mastery and knowledge are still defined in the visual terms of surveillance, examination, and classification, Moffatt and these "native women" succeed in appropriating the objectifying privilege of the gaze, thereby turning it against those who would relegate them, or their texts, to the role of sleeping dictionaries.

#### IV

Tracey Moffatt's work has been supported by both the Australian Film and the Australian Film Finance Commissions, and has been shown at numerous regional festivals. Nawal El Saadawi's work has had a very different reception in her native country of Egypt. Before El Saadawi's 1972 publication of *Woman and Sex*, a book in which, as a psychiatrist and research scientist, she linked Arab social mores regarding female sexuality to a distortion of relations between men and women and the impediment of women's psychological development (Hitchcock 209), El Saadawi had been Egypt's director of public health. Upon *Woman and Sex's* publication, she was fired from this position, and the book itself was banned—a fate befalling several of her subsequent fictional and non-fiction works. In 1981, under Anwar Sadat's "law for the protection of Values from Shame," El Saadawi became a political prisoner and was held at Qanatir, the same prison, ironically, where she had done research for a book on Egyptian women and neuro-

<sup>7</sup> As Peter Hitchcock has noted, outside of Egypt, El Saadawi's reception has been considerably more positive. Several of her works have been translated into English and French, and, despite her outspoken criticism of the "Westernization" and conflation of different Arab feminisms, she has repeatedly been asked by Western audiences to speak and write on behalf of "Arab women"—sometimes on behalf even of those Arab women who disagree with her assessments of Islamic culture and her critiques of global feminism. (Hitchcock, Ch 2, fn 3, 208).

<sup>8</sup> These blurbs, quoted from the *Labour Herald* and *Connexions*, respectively, appear opposite the title page of the English edition of *Woman at Point Zero*, trans. Sherif Hetata.

<sup>9</sup> In a 1992 interview with George Lerner of the *Progressive*, El Saadawi explained, "Feminism to us is a very English word. We call it women's liberation (*tahrir al-ma'rah*) because we don't have feminism in Arabic. Women's liberation means the liberation from class and patriarchal oppression." Qtd. in Saliba 144.

ses, and the prison that served as the setting of her novel, *Woman at Point Zero* (32–3).<sup>7</sup>

Despite this lack of official support, Nawal El Saadawi's texts have been internationally lauded for their analyses and representations of the socio-political oppressions experienced by "Arab, Muslim women." *Woman at Point Zero*, especially, has received critical attention due to its address of the practice and repercussions of female genital excision and infibulation. Like *Nice Coloured Girls*, *Woman at Point Zero* has achieved the status of an informant text in American academia, being used to round out the syllabi of Women's Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and Literature courses that seek an authentic representation of "Middle Eastern women's" subjectivity and subjugation. Indeed, the novel has been praised not only as "a powerful indictment of the treatment of women in many parts of the Middle East," but also as "a major radical and feminist analysis of women's oppression, not only of the Arab world or the Third World, but the world over."<sup>8</sup>

The interpretation of *Woman at Point Zero* as a documentation and analysis of universal patriarchal oppression is troubling for a number of reasons. First, the idea of a global feminism is one to which El Saadawi is vehemently opposed. She has asserted on numerous occasions that much of what is considered "feminist" discourse is based on specifically Western political models and cultural expectations.<sup>9</sup> Her rejection of a global feminist agenda and/or universal model of patriarchy stems from her insistence upon interrogating of the material specificity of the conditions under which Arab women live (Hitchcock 208).

The second reason an interpretation of *Woman at Point Zero* as a referential analysis of sexual oppression (on either a universal, or specifically Arab Muslim scale) is troubling, is because it ignores the complexity of El Saadawi's representation of the relationship between experience, alterity, and subjectivity. As one of the foremost scholars of El Saadawi's work, Fedwa Malti-Douglas, observes, those critics who approach El Saadawi's work on "documentary terms" tend to ignore the text's literary status and interact with El Saadawi's novel as if it were an informant/autobiographical account of the experience of sexual alterity

(44-5).<sup>10</sup> Although there are strong similarities between Nawal El Saadawi and the narrator of *Woman at Point Zero* (the novel is set in the same prison in which El Saadawi did research and was later incarcerated, both women are psychiatrists, both interview a female prisoner named Firdaus), as Malti-Douglas points out, El Saadawi very specifically refers to the work as “a novel,” distinguishing it from the case studies of the other women in prison she interviewed and recorded in her non-fiction work, *Women and Psychological Conflict* (45).<sup>11</sup> Far from offering its readers unmediated access to the experience of gender and sexual oppression, *Woman at Point Zero*'s highly-structured, richly-imagined, and self-reflexive narration is very consciously crafted to frustrate readers' desires for referential transparency. By analyzing El Saadawi's formal and thematic manipulation of her characters' experiences and perceptions, it becomes evident that these categories of subjectivity, rather than serving as touchstones of authenticity and identity, are themselves self-reflexive constructs open to interrogation. Like other “women of color” co-opted into the position of native woman informant, El Saadawi resists the relegation of either herself or her work to the role of transcendental signifier of oppression.

*Woman at Point Zero* is the story of the interaction of an upper-class, female, Egyptian psychiatrist—the novel's narrator—and Firdaus, a prostitute who has been condemned to death for killing a pimp. At the start of the novel, the narrator wishes to interview Firdaus before she is executed and, after several refusals, receives Firdaus's permission to enter her cell. After Firdaus tells the story of her lower-class birth and adolescence, life as a prostitute, and eventual murder of a pimp, she is executed, presumably leaving the narrator, deeply affected by Firdaus's tale, to record it for posterity.

*Woman at Point Zero* is composed of three first-person monologues: the first and last in the voice of the narrator; the middle, which comprises the bulk of the novel, in the voice of Firdaus. This type of framing, which distributes narrative authority among more than one voice, occurs throughout El Saadawi's literary corpus (Malti-Douglas 38-40). The effect of multiple first-person narratives,

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Barbara Harlow and Françoise Lionnet.

<sup>11</sup> Although El Saadawi resists her own relegation to the role of informant/expert about the conditions under which most Arab women live in the Middle East, her relationship to the construct of the native woman informant is not only one of polarized resistance. As a psychiatrist and research scientist, El Saadawi uses her own native woman informants in the manner of case studies and individual histories. Firdaus, the protagonist of *Woman at Point Zero*, was inspired by her in-depth interviews with Egyptian women in prison. The inherently unstable and vacillating relationship of knowing subjects and known objects suggested by this duality is, in fact, one of the most important themes of *Woman at Point Zero*.

combined with El Saadawi's frequent repetition of images and phrases, and the similarities between the narrator and El Saadawi herself, are often interpreted as a destabilization of ego boundaries, or, in the words of Françoise Lionnet's commentary on the novel, a "blurring [of] the distinctions between 'subject' and 'object,' psychiatrist and case study, author and prisoner, biography and autobiography, fiction and documentary" (145). Such readings of the novel identify these thematic and formal "blurrings" as the method through which El Saadawi's representation of one Arab woman's story comes to reveal the experience of all women under Arab, Islamic law or even women the world over.

While it is possible to interpret *Woman at Point Zero* in this universalizing manner, doing so requires the belief that women living under the same cultural conditions share identical experiences of those conditions. This interpretation also attributes an authenticity and authority to individual experience which "denies that it is anything but a reflection of the real" (Scott 776). Restated in this manner such ideas are obviously reductive, yet these are the very types of epistemic assumptions that promote the fetishization of writers like El Saadawi and texts like *Woman at Point Zero* as privileged sites of difference.

Joan Scott, a social historian, summarizes the limitations of this view of experience and alterity thus:

When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence on which explanation is built. Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how the subjects are constituted as different in the first place...are left aside. The evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world. (777)

The complexity of individual experiences of the social, and the manner in which differences and subjects are consti-

tuted by experience, number among the central themes of *Woman at Point Zero*. To attempt to understand the character Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero* requires letting go of any determinate notion of the relationships between experience, knowledge, subjectivity and alterity, and resisting the illusion that such relationships are readily accessible. While experiences of oppression can be, and are shared, they are shared in a collective, aggregate sense, not a universal sense. More often than not, the novel suggests, these experiences are marked by indeterminacy, rather than authenticity and universality.

An analysis of *Woman at Point Zero* that focuses on the novel's interrogation of experience and knowledge makes it possible to view its structural and thematic blurring of boundaries not so much as mergers of pre-formed, sympathetic subjectivities, but as markers of the instability and constructed nature of subjectivity itself. To begin with, in addition to being a literary framing device, the novel's three-part structure of narrator/subject-of-study/narrator is a format commonly used in the presentation of psycho-analytic case studies and ethnographic research. Within these fields, the intention of this structure is both to provide a framework for the material of interest, and to separate what is objectively observed from the observer's interpretations. By simultaneously reproducing and subverting conventional narrative structures of objectivity, El Saadawi underscores the instability of the conventional division between observing subject and observable object.

In the first section of the novel, the narrator follows these same objective and objectifying conventions as she attempts to organize her experiences and the experiences of women who are the subjects of her case studies in a scientific manner. She asserts that she had come to the prison to do research on the personalities of women prisoners and detainees. When the prison doctor tells her about Firdaus and about the fact that she has killed a man and refuses to make an appeal to save her life, the narrator's professional interest is piqued. However, Firdaus's refusal to see her results in the narrator being unable to maintain a professional detachment: "I returned to the prison several times, but all my attempts to see Firdaus were of no

avail. I felt somehow my research was now in jeopardy. As a matter of fact, my whole life seem to be threatened with failure” (3).

By refusing to play the role of informant Firdaus has simultaneously invalidated the narrator’s role as observer/informee, and left her unable to make sense of her own experience. Just as she is about to drive off, however, determined to purge herself of subjective feelings unworthy of a researcher of science, the warder comes running out gasping that Firdaus has finally agreed to a meeting. The narrator finds herself strangely elated, revealing that the only other time she has had such feelings was on the way “to meet the first man I loved for the first time” (6). Despite her efforts to regain her composure, and to return to the role of psychiatrist, the moment that the narrator walks into Firdaus’s cell she is struck wordless and motionless by the intensity of the presence of the woman in front of her. Firdaus tells her “Sit down on the ground,” and she obeys like a sleepwalker. Although the ground underneath her is cold, she says,

the cold did not touch me, did not reach me. It was the cold of the sea in a dream. I swam through its waters. I was naked and knew not how to swim. But I neither felt its cold, not drowned in its waters. Her voice too was like the voices one hears in a dream. It was close to me, yet seemed to come from afar, spoke from a distance and seemed to arise from nearby. For we do not know from where these voices arise....(7)

This dissociative, dreamlike state suggests that the narrator has been left without a structural framework within which to understand Firdaus. She is in a state of suspension, unable to place or delimit Firdaus’s voice. The epistemic structures with which she is most familiar (science, heterosexuality) are incapable of containing or explaining her “experience” of Firdaus.

The contextual breakdown experienced by the narrator is reflected in the novel’s deviation from case study conventions. Instead of following its self-reflective introduction with a detailed set of observations about Firdaus, what follows in Part 2 is Firdaus’s first-person account of

her life, an account that begins, “Let me speak. Do not interrupt me. I have no time to listen to you” (11). Rather than the consciousness of the narrator organizing the experience of her informant, the narrator’s consciousness and the novel are organized by Firdaus’s narration.

Part 2, the story of Firdaus’s life, is the section of *Woman at Point Zero* that has received the most critical attention. Those critics that focus on its content emphasize the suffering that Firdaus experiences growing up poor and female in Egypt’s highly patriarchal Islamic culture.<sup>12</sup> Born the daughter of a farmer, Firdaus watches her brothers and sisters die of malnourishment while her mother saves the best of everything for her father. As is the custom in her village, when she begins to mature she undergoes a clitoridectomy and is assigned women’s work. Subsequently, Firdaus is taken to Cairo by an uncle, sent to boarding school and then married off by her aunt and uncle to a 70-year old man who beats her. She runs away, and is taken in by a shop owner who imprisons her and forces her to have sex with his friends. When Firdaus escapes, she meets up with a woman who introduces her to the life of prostitution. With prostitution comes money, and Firdaus’s first sense of independence and self-worth, but that sense of worth is quickly struck down when she experiences the double-standard by which the men who sleep with prostitutes can accuse them of lacking morals. After getting “respectable” work at a factory, and falling in love with a socialist revolutionary only to be betrayed by his marriage to the boss’s daughter, Firdaus come to believe that in her culture all women are whores, and she returns to prostitution and economic independence. When a pimp threatens her independence and finally her life, she stabs him to death. She is arrested, convicted, and sentenced to die, refusing all opportunities to appeal her fate.

The harsh material realities of Firdaus’s life are indisputable. However, Firdaus’s narration does not so much describe that reality, as it renders her shifting experiences and interpretations of it. Many of the formal qualities of the novel that have been associated with the merging of its two main characters—El Saadawi’s repetition of phrases, scenes, and entire paragraphs; her use of vivid yet indeter-

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Hitchcock (25-52), Lionnet (129-53), and Saliba (131-146). I do not want to suggest that readings of *Woman at Point Zero* that emphasize its depiction of Firdaus’s suffering are necessarily “wrong.” I only want to propose that to the extent that such readings overlook or ignore El Saadawi’s complex rendering of those sufferings, and her portrayal of how Firdaus’s experiences and subjectivity are constructed and change, they are incomplete readings, and risk reproducing the objectifying dynamics they seek to critique.

minate imagery—may better be explained as functions or illustrations of the narrator’s and Firdaus’s struggles to make sense of their changing experiences and the way those experiences and changes construct each woman’s subjectivity.

The idea that the narrator or Firdaus would have to struggle to find meaning in the things that happen to them, or that those meanings would change, rebuts what Joan Scott describes as the belief that “the experience of oppression is the source of resistance to it” (787). Chandra Talpade Mohanty calls this “the feminist osmosis thesis”: the idea that “females are feminists by association and identification with the experiences that constitute us as female” (qtd. in Scott 787). Feminist osmosis suggests that all women existing in the same oppressive, cultural conditions necessarily have the same, consistent experiences of those conditions. This is certainly not the case in *Woman at Point Zero*, where female characters are portrayed as having multiple, mutable, and even contradictory experiences of oppression. For example, while both the narrator and the female prison guard can relate to Firdaus’s murderous resistance to the patriarchal hierarchy of Islamic culture, Firdaus’s step-aunt—who along with her uncle, forces her to marry the disgusting old man who beats her, and then tells Firdaus that such beatings are religiously condoned—obviously has a different subjective relation to that hierarchy. Even Sharîfa—the madam who befriends Firdaus when she runs away and who believes all men are dogs, cannot be said to experience the same subversive urges that motivate Firdaus’s actions; in fact, it is Sharîfa who acts as Firdaus’s first pimp.

Likewise, the novel does not support the assertion that because the narrator and Firdaus share the same resistant attitude to patriarchal oppression, those attitudes stemmed from *identical* experiences of patriarchy. To be sure, the two women have undergone similar experiences—indeed, one of *Woman at Point Zero’s* thematic threads is each woman’s growing awareness of how all women in their society suffer under its patriarchal hierarchies. However, for a reader to homogenize these collective experiences into an unchanging, generic “suffering” that ignores the differ-

ences among women in that society is to once again seek an authentic (and authenticating) representation of oppression. The complexity of the novel's portrayal of its female characters, and of the differences as well as the similarities between them, subverts such a homogenization. The novel's narrator is depicted as a well-educated, middle-class physician engaged in a clinical survey of women prisoners. Her status is shown to allow her certain mobilities and privileges not enjoyed by lower-class women. Any mobility Firdaus enjoyed was a function of her status as a prostitute. She was born a peasant and existed on the abject fringes of the circles in which the narrator moves.<sup>13</sup> Through Firdaus, *Woman at Point Zero* may assert that men make all women prostitutes (86, 99), but it resists an interpretation that asserts there is a predetermined and unchanging definition of what that reality means for individual women. Instead, the novel depicts "experience" as already always bound up with variable interpretations, countering any notion that "women of color," by virtue of their race and sex, embody an authentic experience of alterity.

Within the novel's interpretive model of experience then, the repeated phrases and images in the second section are less iconic symbols of a universal female oppression than they are markers of points of disjunction in Firdaus's subjectivity, and of experiences that undergo multiple, and sometimes incommensurate, transformations. While there are many recurring patterns in Firdaus's narration, two in particular stand out. The first is the pattern associated with Firdaus's sense of her sexuality and the effects of her clitoridectomy; the second, the image of being reborn and seeing things newly. Like the experience with which each is associated, the meaning of the patterns shifts according to when in Firdaus's life and narrative they occur.

Firdaus's description of her clitoridectomy is brief and made without explication: "They cut off a piece of flesh between my thighs. I cried all night" (13). In her daily life the event means she can no longer go work in the fields or play at "bride and bride groom" with a little boy called Mohammadain, but must stay at home and attend to womanly chores. The subjective significance of the experience

<sup>13</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the construction of the experience of alterity, and the complex relationship of bourgeois and subaltern women in third world countries, see Therese Saliba. Saliba examines *Woman at Point Zero* as a narrative produced by a postcolonial bourgeois woman writer that operates as a "collective text[t] of women's multiple experiences that expose[s] the problematic conditions facing postcolonial women as they examine the heterogeneity of third world women's experience" (132). In doing so, Saliba opens up interpretation of the novel not only to issues of class, but also to those of colonialism and post-colonialism, and of the ideological values that are placed on women and their bodies in the construction of nationalism. By insisting on the hybridization of culture resultant from colonization, Saliba, too, writes against the idea of an

authentic, transparent  
notion of alterity.

is something Firdaus struggles with throughout the entire novel. The marker of that struggle is not given in the narrative until several pages later. When her uncle touches her the way Mohammadain used to, she realizes

I no longer felt the strong sensation of pleasure that radiated from an unknown and yet familiar part of my body. I closed my eyes and tried to reach the pleasure I had known before but in vain. It was as if I could no longer recall the exact spot from which it used to arise, or as though a part of me, of my being, was gone and would never return. (15)

Variations of this passage occur each time Firdaus recounts an incidence related to her growing sexual awareness. Upon the eve of her graduation from primary school, her uncle takes her to see a movie which contains scenes of a woman dancing and being kissed by a man. That evening, as her Uncle begins touching her in the ways he has before, she feels a strange thing happening: “Somewhere, in some distant spot within my body was awakening an old pleasure lost a long time ago, or a new pleasure still unknown, and indefinable, for it seemed to arise from outside my body, or in a part of my being severed from it many years ago” (22).

Similarly, after a discussion with a classmate about being in love, images of Mohammadain emerge in Firdaus’s mind and the same familiar pleasure begins to arise, but as she tries to hold onto the sensation, it slips away and is lost. She later relates, “I wept in my sleep as though it were something I was losing now; a loss I was experiencing for the first time, and not something I had lost a long time ago” (26). The same distant pleasure is evoked and lost when she shares an intense moment of intimacy with a female school teacher; and when, having escaped from the shopkeeper, she is rescued by Sharifa and becomes aware for the first time of her beauty and the pleasures of soft silk and perfume; and when she falls in love with the revolutionary. Firdaus’s distant pleasure and its loss, and concurrently her experience of having undergone a clitoridectomy, changes each time someone exposes her to a different aspect of sexuality. Each repetition of the phrasing both

evokes her past sexual encounters and retroactively alters her perception of them. The effect is not to deny the validity of her earlier interpretations of those encounters, but rather to underscore their mutable and indeterminate nature.

The repetition of the images of Firdaus being reborn and seeing things newly, works in a similar manner. Each significant transition in her life, be it social or cognitive, is marked by a moment when Firdaus experiences a radical defamiliarization from the life she had been living just a second before. She describes these moments as rebirths, or as having veils removed from her sight. The first time this occurs to her, her uncle has told her that she cannot study like he does, because such schools are only for men:

Back in my father's house I stared at the mud walls like a stranger who had never entered it before. I looked around almost in surprise, as though I had not been born here, but had dropped from the skies...to find myself in a place where I did not belong, in a home that was not mine, born from a father who was not my father, and from a mother who was not my mother. (16)

When she leaves her village after the death of her parents and moves with her uncle to Cairo, she has a similar episode. She enters her uncle's home and shuts her eyes against the fright of her first glimpse of electric lights. When she reopens them she has the feeling of looking out through them for the first time, or of being born a second time, "since I knew that I had in fact been born some years before" (20).

The public street she enters after having run away from her prospective marriage is like no other street she has seen before; a world opens up which had never existed before, or perhaps had always existed, but to which she had been blind (40). When she earns the first money she ever keeps as a prostitute, the ten-pound note tears away "the shroud that covered up a truth I had in fact experienced when still a child..." (64). Destroying the money offered to her by the first client she has sex with after killing the pimp tears off the last remaining veil, revealing "the true enigma of my life" (98). That final enigma is the connection she fi-

nally comprehends between money, patriarchal authority and her experience of her self. "I am not a prostitute," she says angrily, "But right from my early days my father, my uncle, my husband, all of them, taught me to grow up as a prostitute" (99).

While *Woman at Point Zero* clearly portrays Firdaus as undergoing oppression, it does not offer a definitive pronouncement about her experience of that oppression. Each time Firdaus becomes aware of another aspect of the socially constructed nature of her life, she discovers another world, one that may or may not have been there all along. The idea that "knowledge" can be defined by a congruence between one's internal representations and an objective, external reality cannot account for the story of Firdaus's life. Her earlier "experiences" change as her ongoing interpretations of them change, and it seems entirely too simplistic to say that her earlier experiences were "false" and while her later experiences were "true."

Firdaus's killing of the pimp, and her subsequent behavior in prison are as much an internal assertion as they are her response to an external oppression. When she kills the pimp, she frees herself from a fear based on a belief that women are necessarily lesser beings than men. Before, she could hate men, fear men, and even scorn men, but until she realizes every experience she has ever had has been given its meaning by her belief in her own inferiority, she is unable to see that the entire society around her is given its meaning by that same "lie." "When I killed," she claims, I did it with truth not with a knife. That is why they are afraid and in a hurry to execute me. They do not fear my knife. It is my truth which frightens them. This fearful truth gives me great strength. It protects me from fearing death, or life, or hunger, or nakedness, or destruction. It is this fearful truth which prevents me from fearing the brutality of rulers and policemen.

I spit with ease on their lying faces and words,  
on their lying newspapers. (102-3)

These are Firdaus's final words. In the last section, the voice of the narrator returns, the police come and take Firdaus away, and the narrator never sees her again, bring-

ing the novel both to its end and back to the point where it originally began. The self-reflexiveness of *Woman at Point Zero*'s non/conclusion gives the narrative a circular, rather than linear, trajectory and invites the reader to reflect upon his or her "experience" of the novel from the perspective gained by its end. In doing so, s/he becomes aware of how carefully and consciously El Saadawi orchestrated this experience. Instead of a sense of mastery and/or closure, the reader is left with the realization that there are parts of the novel to which s/he does not have access. Moreover, there must be things that were not represented at all—parts of Firdaus's, and the narrator's subjectivities that are not accessible, not universal, and that are, in the end, indeterminate.

When approached as an interrogation of the categories of perception and knowledge, as well as a critique of sexual alterity, *Woman at Point Zero* regains an existence outside of its relation to any dominant center. Nawal El Saadawi's complex rendering of the construction of women's subjectivities in an Arab, Muslim culture reintegrates racial and sexual "differences" with the cultural, religious, and social structures that engender them. Her deft manipulation of the accessibility (and inaccessibility) of that rendering refuses any notion of transparent representation, thereby frustrating readerly or critical attempts to pigeon-hole her work or self as transcendental sites of difference.

## V

If one looks at the history of post-Enlightenment theory, the major problem has been the problem of autobiography: how subjective structures can, in fact, give objective truth. During these same centuries, the Native Informant, who was found in these other places, [her] stuff was unquestioningly treated as the objective evidence for the founding of so-called sciences like ethnography, ethnolinguistics, comparative religion, and so on. So that, once again, the theoretical problems only relate to the person who knows. The person who *knows* has all the problems of selfhood. The person who is *known*, somehow seems not to have a problem-

atic self. These days, it is the same kind of agenda that is at work. Only the dominant self can be problematic; the self of the Other is authentic, without a problem, naturally available to all kinds of complications. This is very frightening. (Spivak 66, emphasis included)

“Pocahontas” was a common nickname for Powhatan Indian girls (Hutner 17). Like the figures of La Malinche, Madame Butterfly, Ramona, and Shahrâzad, she, too, may be a composite character, an amalgamation of details and stories about multiple, native women. While many critics and scholars are now interrogating the agendas of race, gender, and sexuality that create the composite of the native woman informant, we have not yet lost our yearning for, as Spivak puts it, the authentic “stuff,” of Otherness. We still treat “native women” as metonymic extensions of their cultures, simultaneously incorporating them into our center and marginalizing them. We treat their works as if they were transparent windows, or even more troubling, as reflective mirrors offering an unobstructed view of some objective truth. We still seek some version of the perfect tribal Eve.

Certainly, there are differences between the objectifying fetishization of filmmakers and authors like Tracey Moffatt and Nawal El Saadawi, and the knowledge constructs that authorized colonial soldiers’ sexual enslavement of native women. And yet, it is becoming increasingly apparent that when discourses share similar logics of representation, it leads to their mutual encroachment. Ironically, it is those “dark women” who, along with their films and texts, continue to be treated as unproblematic embodiments of authentic otherness, who are most likely to explicitly identify such encroachments in their work. Through their formal and thematic choices, artists and authors like Moffatt and El Saadawi bring to the foreground the intersecting nature of knowledge and alterity, and reassert that racial and sexual differences cannot be isolated from the structures of their differentiation. When, as viewers, readers or critics, we ignore the epistemic critiques in these women’s works—even in favor of racial and sexual critiques—we reproduce those structures and engage in the

very practices we believe (or, wish to believe) we deconstruct. We forget, once again, that there can be no dictionaries of alterity.

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