

Hammner Lecture  
Maira K. Amado-Miller  
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*Versions of Grandeur (and Defilement):  
Bodies that Mediate the Body Politic or How Sex becomes Text*

**I. Introduction**

I am honored to have you here. Thanks especially to my supportive colleagues who generously invited me to give this lecture tonight. Great appreciation to Jeanie Hamner, to have found inspiration to establish this lecture; one that I take to be beautifully adaptable for *speculative scholarship and collaboration*. When I'm working in comparative rhetoric within the Chinese tradition, I'm always struck by the fact that the Confucian logographic symbol for the "enlightened person," is not, as Western consciousness might imagine, a strong, solitary, individual, but rather, the symbol for the individual, TWICE. Enlightenment, for most of the world, does not happen outside of some community. It evolves within community.

Thanks, then, especially, to those who have come to listen because you and I share our art, or simply, to learn from Walt Whitman and the playwright Charles Mee: because you and I share a certain "delight" in one another. To you, I want to acknowledge that this activity is a bit strange, but, "delivering a paper" is a strange activity with a long and honorable tradition.

Scholars tend to work in great isolation: grappling with problems within their hard won specializations for years and even lifetimes, often speaking in a kind of academic code to others

in their very fine margin of interest. So, we need to come together and talk—probably much more often than we do. In English studies, the way we do this is to stand, individually, in front of one another and “read a paper.” There are good reasons that scholars stand, alone, and share their work this way. Primarily, we “read,” because we need something by which to anchor our ideas—if I were simply to “lecture” to you in a free-form, with no notes, I would go hither and thither, and I would be disappointed with myself, and you would be disappointed with me too.

So, this is a bit like performance, one *interpretation* of my research, something akin to a gallery opening where I hang my own words on the wall and try to shine the right light on them. So, if it’s possible to be a bit *idea-naked*, then you’ll know this sort of exposure is somewhat intimidating, especially in front of those one most admires. Not to mention that at every stage, I am simply afraid that the material is both too tragic and too lyrical, and I, not poet or philosopher enough.

## **II. Versions of Grandeur**

I’ll start by explaining my title, but, in order to do that, I think I need to say a little something about myself as a language specialist, trained in postmodern theory and rhetoric. Rhetoric sits at the nexus of literary criticism and linguistics—at the nexus of semiotics and hermeneutics—at the nexus of philosophy and literature—it is the place where text and politics and power come together for the same reason the ancients simultaneously wrote rhetoric and philosophy: because there seems no better way to a human ethic than through art. Rhetoric finds that all writing is—all art is—political, and that there are no theories more clearly ideological than those which are defined by their “attempts to ignore history and politics altogether” (Eagleton 170). As Annette Kolodny explains, a feminist critic must continually call into question “the dog-eared myth of intellectual neutrality.” We read and we write with intention.

As do most theorists who take their philosophy post-Wittgenstein—or post-Hegel, or post-Kuhn, or wherever one wants to mark the moment when language invaded the universal problematic—academic rhetoricians also claim that because the socio-symbolic realm is accessed through language, it may therefore be altered through the same medium. In short, that amelioration is possible.

In the current work I'm interested in how an ideology of purity, based on a false dichotomous relationship between the sublime and the profane, when imagining women's sex, is more responsible for gross violence against women than any other ideological restraint. I then claim that how we read literary texts—and how we teach them—can be used to highlight woman's sexual pleasure as a positive ethical value as opposed to a negative constraint of shame. Taking literary texts—storytelling—as my object of study, I'm interested in the “gaps” and “silences” that tell us something about the systematic and institutionalized oppression of marginalized groups *and* the possibility that the interrogation of this system can decrease suffering and violence.

This sounds, even to me, a tad hyperbolic. But, it only sounds over-spoken until one is convinced, as I am, that language *is* ideology.

The texts we write and the texts we read symbolically mediate and materially *constitute* ideology. In this way, language mediates relationship and justice. The archeology of sexual subjugation is within text every bit as much as it is within the subconscious. Whether or not the subconscious creates the work or the work creates the subconscious is not a question I will be pursuing today! I forgo questions of origin mainly because the old “chicken before the egg” problem really doesn't matter. Ideological structures *do* reside within text, regardless.

[Having said that, I do have one relevant issue to share with you tonight about origins.

A chicken and an egg are lying together in bed. The chicken's sitting up, leaning against the headboard, and smoking a cigarette. The egg, still on its back, is staring up at the ceiling, trying to control its heavy breathing, fists clenching and unclenching. And, the chicken says, "*Well, I guess there's that mystery solved.*" ]

Rortian pragmatists, as I am, "temporalize" exploration, maintaining a thoroughgoing secularism that "looks forward rather than upward" and rejects what Rorty calls "grand eschatologies" and Lyotard christened "meta-narratives." I prefer a *bricolage* of "*petite receipts*," or "small stories" as explanatory theories. Some simply call this stance "anti-essentialism," and I adopt it mainly because women have been badly hurt by ideas imbedded in the grand eschatologies—as is the ideology of purity I want to discuss here today. Or, as Whitman, the muse to the American pragmatists, writes:

All truths wait in all things,  
They neither hasten their own delivery nor resist it,  
They do not need the obstetric forceps of the surgeon,  
The insignificant is as big to me as any,  
What is less or more than a touch?

I have largely come to believe that an ideology of "purity"—a grand version of women's sex and defilement—drives misogyny. Women's sex has the status of Althusser's definition of ideology very specifically: he defines ideology as "the *imaginary* relationship of the individual to their *real* conditions of existence." Usually posing as either an "honor" or a "protective" device, the hegemonic discourse which claims women's bodies to substantiate an ethic of purity, the ideology is actually used as a method for maintaining lines of ownership and imposing control. This imaginary relationship is imbedded in text. The "versions of grandeur" in these stories simultaneously render women *extraordinarily powerful and dangerous*—responsible for The Fall!—and *outrageously insignificant*—unable to make decisions about their own bodies, and therefore presents a very plastic site for both judgment and redemption.

When I say that versions of women's "sex" adjudicate a civic ethic, I am not talking directly about gender, that fully socially constructed identity category. By "sex," I'm referring neither to a purely physiological fact or a pure cultural construct. Rather, "sex" here is the undetermined set of physical, mental, and emotional activities that seem to differentiate human beings from other life forms by virtue of the fact that human agents engage in sex primarily for pleasure. So, when I say that women's sex mediates civil society as a ethical system I literally mean the female body and its relationship to relationship—that is, women having sex, women as receptacles of sex, women enjoying sex, women as agents of sex, the resulting "proof" of sex on women's bodies, women's sex as redemption for sin, as justification for sin, and as the definition of sin itself.

#### **IV. Ideology and the Law**

But how does an ideology of purity become an ethic, drive an ethic? How does a false dichotomy between the sublime and the profane become a system of justice? And how do these false systems function? Let us first think, how, in our rational minds, we imagine that ethical systems develop. We can't go far down that road tonight, but suffice it to say, for the moment, that we often believe that our "politics"—those policies and institutions that translate what we believe into what we *do*—are mediated by some outside ethical source that determines justice: a sacred text, say, or a secular text—scripture or the law. It would be pleasant, or at least convenient, for this to be true. I don't, however, believe that it actually works that way in practice—not *even when such a source is strongly invoked*. It seems to me, rather, that politics are determined by the advantage, and expediency, and *expenditure* that andocentricity produces: a set of determinants that have assigned women the properties of chattels. As Slavoj Žižek suggests, "belief" is actually irrelevant to *what we do*. Žižek writes that even when culture

“recognizes [truth], [and] takes into account the particular interest behind the ideological universality, [and notes] the distance between the ideological mask and the reality, [the ruling culture] *still finds reasons to retain the mask*” (Žižek 29). The “mask” I address today are those andocentric ideological versions of female sex driven by the idea of purity. Having the power to choose who is “pure” and who is “defiled” within an ethical system *based on purity* is a powerful way to stay on top, especially when the power-brokers themselves have the ultimate ability to “defile” and are immune from the sin itself.

What is important to understanding ideological reproduction, then, is how we act *in spite of* what we “believe” or know to be the case. So that acting “as if” amounts to the same thing as a “belief” in terms of effecting the production and reproduction of ideology. We can name the yawning gap that exists between recognizing falsehood and the willingness to *renounce* falsehood that Žižek which names “the paradox of an *enlightened false consciousness*” because we are alive and because we can think. As an ethical descriptor for a human being, “purity” as a category, our “enlightened” consciousness spots a faulty logic. In our “false consciousness,” however, purity is, in practice, an ethical constraint.

For instance, we recognize—whether we’re willing to do anything about it or not—that the body politic in this country *believes* in the fundamental weakness, miscalculation, and indecency of “human rights violations,” but we also know that profit and freedom-to-pursue-prestige trumps compassion in the American economy [Iraq vs. Darfur]. We can easily name the gap between recognizing falsehood and the willingness to renounce falsehood because we know that the serious (and even the not-so-serious) Presidential candidates in this country are drawn exclusively from the wealthy classes, and exclusively from one gender and one race. Though no one seriously believes the idea that “purity” should control ethical thinking, the *grand delusion*

obtains. And, like any good ideology, the delusions necessary to reproduce it have become so fundamental and prevalent as to go unmarked.

Now, when female bodies carry the burden of an “ethic of purity,” these bodies are called on to mediate, in bizarre ways, *the space between the constituency and the law*. Social censure works its magic by transforming sentiment into law by virtue of the will. So, the idea of a “constituency” is problematized here because such a concept is never fully representative *or* fully supportive. The “law” is also highly problematized because ideology, via social censure, trumps law every time. “Law,” then, is a loose concept here—as most social reformers recognize—as Ida B. Wells put it so succinctly when attempting to eradicate Lynch Law: “public sentiment is stronger than law.”

Regardless of civic law “protecting women’s purity” or rather—*regardless of the fact that the law has absolutely nothing to say about “purity”*—the ideology governs how we relate to “sin,” how we punish for it, how we cleanse ourselves of it, and how we expel contaminants from community. It’s the “acting as if” that really counts.

Today, this drive to an ethic of purity goes largely unstated. But, examples of gap between recognizing falsehood and the willingness to renounce falsehood in relation to women who have been ejected from civil society because of their failure to live up to the—or, essentially the same thing, to protect themselves from male justice are rife. Women and men and families or all sorts continue to suffer because the gap between the ideal imposed on women’s bodies and the reality of women’s bodies is too great to bridge.

### **III. Sex in a Cold Climate**

In 1998, Steve Humphries released the documentary “Sex in a Cold Climate,” describing the experiences of women sent to Magdalene Asylums across Ireland in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The

Magdalene asylums were laundries in which girls and women faced hard unpaid labor, sometimes for life. Being sent to work in the “Magdalene Laundries” indicated that the woman’s body had been “defiled” in one way or another: of out-of-wedlock pregnancies, sex of any kind outside of marriage—primarily sex by way of sexually assault. “The work of the laundry was symbolic: the purging of sin by the washing of dirty linen.”

It’s estimated that 30,000 women and girls were sent to these laundries. This is an historical document, yes, but please remember with me that this is recent history: our grandmothers, our *mothers*, and, let’s not kid ourselves, it’s us too. The last of the Magdalene asylums was closed in 1996.

In interlocking interviews (and in the full-length feature film it inspired “The Magdalene Sisters”), the women in the film describe being sent indefinitely to these asylums with spiked eight-foot walls topped by barbed wire and bars on all the windows—these were dangerous women indeed. Young women were sent to these virtual fortified prisons because they somehow fell afoul of the injunction that the only protection against the sin of sex was complete chastity. In a double-bind understood by inmates of all kinds, because their purity was already compromised, they also became targets for abuse from their supposed moral teachers. Girls were also sent to the laundries in a sort of pre-emptive warfare: because they were thought to pose an *incipient threat*. That is, girls were put away from their communities for being “too pretty,” too sensuous. Beautiful girls were thought to embody sexual activity—or, more likely, to attract male attention.

In the documentary, Phyllis Valentine, after four years incarceration and never knowing why she was sent from an orphanage directly to a Magdalene laundry, was finally bold enough to ask. 40 years later, she repeats for the filmmaker the answer she was given that day: “You’re

pretty as a picture. You're pretty as a picture. The nuns sent you here because they were afraid you'd fall away." In the film version, the nun instructs: "all men are sinners, so all men are open to temptation, and in any God fearing country, in order to save men from themselves you'll remove that temptation."

The punishment for "bringing shame" upon their families and the sin of defilement upon themselves were brutal: children taken from the arms of nursing mothers and the mothers forced to bind their breasts to stop the flow of milk. Thousands of forced adoptions. Renaming some of the girls to strip them of their identities, cleanse them of their pasts, and infuse them with the subjectivity of the penitent. One woman tells a story of being a resident in an orphanage attached to one of the laundries. She and two others were beaten and their heads shaved until bloody for speaking to "The Magdelenes"—the defiled girls who could corrupt through contact.

The film is rich in Lacanian contradiction: when a girl was too pretty, too mouthy, too independent, she was whipped—high on the back of her thighs, her rough dress held up to expose her bare flesh. The nuns stripped the girls naked every Saturday, hosed them down, and made jokes about their naked bodies. The "simple-minded" girl was easy prey for the lecherous priest and was forced to perform fellatio on him before Sunday services. When evidence of his abuse is discovered, the woman is sent away to a mental hospital where the "treatments" they gave her left her mentally destroyed. Forcing her fingers down her throat repetitiously in the only touch she understood to confer importance and affection, and in the only way she could rid herself of herself, this young woman died of "bulimia" at the age of 24.

There are explicit and material relationships between an ideology of purity and shame and the way women's bodies are used as social ethic. Just ask any woman—she has suffered some shame, in some way, at some time, for the perception that she has, or might, violate the

code, or even, how she simply violates the code by embodying it. I'll never forget the woman who approached me after performing a specific interview in the *Vagina Monologues*, thanked me for speaking words she never dared speak but found necessary to hear spoken, and related an excruciating incident she lived through with her husband. He, apparently, was offended by a smell in their sex and made her submit to a sort of "experiment" to "prove" that the offense was solely hers. The myths are strong. It's important to remember that this economy produces predictable violence not only against women bodies, but also against *the family*.

[As an aside, I want to note that consequences of an *ethic of purity* are paid not only by women but by the entire family/community. When babies are torn from their mothers, women punished brutally by their "lovers," women are so badly abused that they cannot ever love with either their bodies or their minds, when women simply give up or divorce three or four times (as was the case with most of the interviewed women), then it seems to me that it simply doesn't make any sense to talk about "values" based in *how* we love and *who* we love when the issues of violence and perversity seem to radiate directly from an ethic based in an *ideology of purity*.]

One could interpret these films as a story about the Catholic Church. But, like Judith Butler, I don't find much use for any patriarchally-based metatheory *in whole*, not only because they offer a false sense of security, but because such grand narratives obscure promising methodologies more interested in *history* and *consequence* than origin. As I've said, I'm more interested in the "little stories" of purity that effectively *enjoin individuals to participate in an ideology that harms them*. "Sex in a Cold Climate," is less a story of The Church's 1500 years of hypocrisy and misogyny, and more a story about the gruesome consequences of the undisputed authority of *any* faith-based institution. Perhaps more to the point, its about the horror that results when there is no discernable separation between church and state. To go a necessary step further,

however, we see that “The Church’s” relationship to an “ideology of purity, though certainly fundamental, is almost irrelevant in terms of change, because the violence, in its individual day-to-day form, is a *male ethic practiced upon the bodies of women*. “Sex in a Cold Climate” is a documentary of the way the idea of purity is used as an ethic, and of the devastating, strident, unapologetic, and unyielding way that social censure is used as the law.

Although we don’t necessarily encourage women to burn themselves on the pyres of their dead husbands; although we don’t necessarily shock, drug, or take a scalpel to the brains of independent and rebellious women; although we don’t *always condemn* beautiful and sensual women, although we don’t necessarily “send away” “fallen women” away and lock them up – we still do some of this some of the time.

Nicole Flynn and her collaborators, for instance, seem to me to find evidence that, in criminalizing and incarceration procedures today, a standard of the purity of women’s bodies adjudicates women’s relationship to the community. These researchers find, for instance, that girls and women are more often sentenced for “status offenses,” while men are more often sentenced for “property offenses.” They find that girls and women have longer periods of probation and are monitored more closely. Possibly due to causal relationship with longer periods of probation, girls have higher levels of recidivism than their male counterparts. Further, these researchers are finding that the relationship with a “male other” contributes significantly to women’s entry into the penal system.

#### **IV. The Caricatures Necessary to Sell an Ideology of Purity**

There’s a danger that we might begin to believe that the sort of civic law that depends upon an ideology of purity is simply a fanatic device of an ultra-conservative church on a small, cold island. So, it’s probably instructive to recall the common caricatures of women necessary to

build the sort of mask required for the complicated game of “acting as if” women’s sex can provide a community ethic. The images we have taken to represent women are prevalent enough in the fabric of our society to be counted as constituent. One common way to talk about these imaginary images of women is to talk about them in their contradictory polarities.

I’ve presented images, for instance, as “mere titillation or monster taboo.” Even more commonly we understand the paradox articulated as the “virgin/whore.” Possibly the two most pedestrian characterizations—the ice-princess and the seductress—are somehow supported, in a weird male-driven tango, by the image of the whimpering, timid, incapable female whom, if she is to be “taken” at all, must be taken by force, working in tandem with the deceiver, the shamefully lust driven woman, seeking out sexual prey, leaving both men and “pure” women open to defilement. Apparently, the fear of women’s sex is so great that even caricatures can be used as cautionary tales. These are powerful versions of grandeur. But, as is the case with any dichotomy, these characterizations only go so far, and are perhaps too simple to be finally useful. It’s important to remember the many faces of sexual subjugation.

In fact, there are many, many versions of women’s sex that correspond with the drive to an ethic of purity which are then used to order women for consumption and trade.

Annette Kolodny, for instance, has reminded us of the humiliation and absolute sense of loss that *textual caricatures* presented to women readers. She brings the experience into sharp relief through recognizing the normative functions of language-as-ideology:

For those of us who studied literature, a previously unspoken sense of exclusion from authorship and a painful personal distress at discovering *whores, bitches, muses, and heroines dead in childbirth* where we had once hoped to discover ourselves. (1)

Gloria Anzaldúa warns against a sort of programmed fear that she claims is an important part of a xenophobic ideology, specifically meant to keep women from talking-back. Anzaldúa’s images

are drawn from her experience as a gay woman of color—triplely disenfranchised—who knows what its like to live in a world that prefers its women in the “white’s comfortable stereotypic images:”

The Black domestic, the lumbering nanny with twelve babies sucking her tits, the slant-eyed Chinese with her expert hand – “They know how to treat a man in bed.” The flat-faced Chicana or Indian, passively lying on her back, being fucked by the Man *a la* Chingada. [la Malinche]

The anthropologist Gayle Rubin provides a critical insight into this “weird tango” when she argues that to understand the “phenomena of social subordination,” one must understand that positions within the social order are created and maintained by *relationship*. In this passage, she paraphrases Marx as he addresses the problem of slavery:

What is a Negro slave? A man of the black race. The one explanation is as good as the other. A Negro is a Negro. He only becomes a slave in certain relations. A cotton spinning jenny is a machine for spinning cotton. It becomes capital only in certain relations. Torn from these relationships it is no more capital than gold in itself is money or sugar is the price of sugar. . . . What is a *domesticated woman*? A female of the species. The one explanation is as good as the other. A woman is a woman. She only becomes a *domestic, a wife, a chattel, a playboy bunny, a prostitute, or a human Dictaphone* in certain relations. Torn from these relationships, she is no more the helpmate of man than gold in itself is money.

Rubin’s observation about relationship may seem obvious to us. But perhaps less obvious is the important part that the notion of purity plays in *defining the relationship of woman to the community*. These relations are spread throughout history, science, literature, philosophy, and theology. “Versions” of female sex inhere via the convention of positing individuals from the debasing composites of male fantasy.

These *fabrications*, or *domestications*, of the crazed sexual woman, whether in “fiction” or within the hard reality of the US justice system, I believe, are manifestations of the fear of imagining the *true erotic name* of the real sexual woman and the pleasures of female sex. But before we go on to the possibility of moving past the caricatures and toward legitimate

representations of women's sex, we must be sure we understand that the image of the over-sexed or frigid— either way, “unnatural”— representation of woman is never confined to the text: it always already emerges from the text and is superimposed on real women to evaluate and to condemn.

If you keep your eyes open for the ways that caricatures of women and an ethic of purity are used against real women, you'll find a surprising number of cases reported of young men killing their young girlfriends. [You'll also find and an absolutely *shocking* number of rapes-per-month: rape, domestic violence, and sexual harassment continue to function as the most insidious methods for the control of women who stray too far from the status quo or who do not do a good enough job of “protecting themselves.”] In news coverage, the brutality of the violence of the male crime itself seems sometimes used as titillation. Quite often, the sub-text in the reporting is the question of whether or not the victim had had sex with her boyfriend or anyone else; whether the woman in question had somehow violated or been suspected of violating the code of purity.

One case I was following in the summer of 2005 in the UK involved a pregnant woman whose “lover” slit her throat. Most of the newspapers published the head-shot of the victim in their daily reports. In others, however, the reader would be confronted with un-cropped photograph: a pretty young woman in a black cocktail dress, a drink in one hand, and a full one-half of the photo devoted to her bare, crossed legs. In this layout, she was described as a “bar-worker,” odd terminology in the UK, where one drinks in a “pub.” This was an “Americanism,” apparently adopted especially to give the whole “affair” a more tawdry feeling. In the text, the woman's sexed body was also always at issue: her pregnant body was in constant association with the murder. The latent question was whether her boyfriend killed her *because* of her pregnancy.

You'll find plenty of cases in which the lover didn't just kill his girlfriend—he punished her. In another case, a 15 year old woman was brutalized both before and after she died. The crime happened directly after the victim told her boyfriend that she had contracted a sexually transmitted disease. Proof of another lover? A punishable cause. Proof of his own disease, exposed? Another punishable cause. Proof of defilement, either way.

I've written this latest attempt at theorizing readings of women's sex outside an ethic determined by an ideology of purity—under the shadow of the death of the 24 year old Mobile woman who was shot by her ex-boyfriend in broad daylight, outside the sandwich shop where she worked. Just another story of a history of domestic and community violence: a rape reported, rape charges dropped, threats, stalking, the ever ubiquitous and yet consistently useless restraining order. Here we have the same story that's been told countless times, a story, of “no refuge against various assailants;” a story of the “order of law [that is] required to protect women,” but that by “negligence and apathy” has “allowed women to be mistreated”—as a woman writer described it in the *fourteenth century*.

What really strikes me about the media insouciance in which we all participate by omission, is how little we seem to notice even the most striking part of this oft-told story: the absolute boldness with which the crime was committed. The full light of day, in a very public place, on a busy road, five yards from a drive-through food lane. The public execution—arrogant, shameless, bold, righteous, and shamefacedly titillating—public lethal violence carried out not by a gang member, not by a desperate, psychotic transient, but by a “lover”—a man who believed himself to have *public rights* over his woman's body. He had lost his sexual rights to this woman, an intolerable situation to a young man who was not perfectly stable to begin with

apparently, but especially intolerable to an unstable young man who *has been taught from infancy that a violation of the codes of sexual ownership are punishable offenses.*

Further, although this aspect of the ideology is made invisible, this crime and punishment only work in one direction. For a cultural critic, this uniform but unstated concern is important. Gloria Steinem, wrote the article called “Supremacy Crimes” in reaction to the Columbine tragedy.” This seemingly senseless violence is at the forefront of our minds again today; which one of us has not cowered with those 10 little girls in that Amish school house? Bound with plastic ties, reasoning, praying, bartering. 10 Little Girls. The gunman “bent on killing girls,” the news reports said, armed with ammunition, stun guns, and lubricating jelly. The horror seems designed for repetition, possibly because, when violence requires “enlightened self-consciousness,” there are large and important aspects of the equation we’re ready to make invisible. Steinem points out an almost forced “innocence” about our understanding of community violence, an innocence that Barbara Christian and others remind us *is a crime in itself.* Here’s Steinem:

I don’t know about you, but I’ve been talking back to the television set, waiting for someone to tell us the obvious: it’s not “youth,” “our children,” or “our teens.” It’s our sons—and “our” can usually be read as “white,” “middle class,” and “heterosexual.”

Steinem’s argument is not about blaming boys for being the shooters, anymore than it’s about blaming the girls for being, so often, the victims. It’s an argument about causation and about not noticing this sex differentiation *on pain of culpability.* Steinem notes that not only school shooters, but also “virtually all the serial, sexually motivated, sadistic killings, those characterized by stalking, imprisoning, torturing, and “owning” victims in death,” are committed overwhelming by white, non-poor males, the population, she says

most likely to become hooked on the drug of superiority. It’s a drug pushed by a male-dominant culture that presents dominance as a natural right; a racist hierarchy that falsely

elevates whiteness; a materialist society that equates superiority with *possessions*, and a homophobic one that empowers only one form of sexuality.

It turns out that most significant positive correlations to early death among young *women* are, first, that which is referred to in the literature as “sexual behavior,” and second, the men who “love” them. The most telling statistic I’ve seen lately is that by one measure, homicide is the leading cause of death for pregnant women.

## V. The *Écriture* and the *a Savoir*

So, what to do? Let’s go back to the fact that literature both conceals and reveals structures of value and power that underlay our beliefs and our beliefs about beliefs. Literature transmits ideology, and as an ideology, literature *interpellates* individuals and communities—that is, literature “hails” and transforms the individual. In order to close the gap between recognizing falsehood and the willingness to renounce falsehood—I’d like to begin the process of “reading women’s true sex”: looking closely, interpreting, speaking the unmentionables into full existence, striving to understand at the deepest level possible, welcoming fullness of experience, and learning to teach these readings to our students. Some believe that this can’t be done, but, we’ve been doing it for and with men’s sexuality for at least as long as there have been art critics writing and a “literature” worth studying.

It’s now thirty years since Hélène Cixous first called for women to “write their bodies” and began the process herself in her mytho-poetic language, naming an *écriture féminine*, a process at once poetic and noetic (noetic=generally, the symbolic realm or domain of human mind or consciousness), in which women would “write about women and bring women to writing from which they have been driven as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goals,”

In the French critical sense *Écriture* is not just writing itself, not merely the conventions of writing, but the refusal to use the symbolic mediation of language to go along with what merely *is*—it is writing that resists and undermines the ultimately normative functions of language.<sup>1</sup> The *écriture féminine* is, then, in and of itself, a subversive act; it is powerful and threatening because it opposes the given social order so thoroughly.

I suggest that the power of language embedded in the word *Écriture* can be realized in the *reception* of language as well. We can begin to read—to know—in a process I sometimes call *a savor feminine sexual*, which entails a sense of knowing and of resistance, but, this form of “to know”—*savoir*—also implies a sense of learning, a reaching, a searching, a becoming, an impatience for perfect closure, and a celebration of *the processes of discovery*. These processes are *sensual*, they are a *coming*, a pleasure in *knowing*, a feminine *lingering in the process as process*. The “*a savoir feminine sexuel*,” is a process that is sister to *jouissance* in that it implies pleasure and knowledge beyond any essentialist version of either, while also answering to the subversive nature of the *Ecriture*. The *a savoir feminine sexuel* stops playing at the game of caricatures and refuses to genuflect at the alter of the “purity.”

As Cixous called for writing, then, I am looking for evidence of *reading* and understanding the radical nature of women’s sex itself, even within the phallogentric psycho-social order. The *a savoir feminine sexuel* has not been silent, even though it has been silenced; it is not invisible even if it has been made transparent; it does not lack presence and significance within the symbolic even if it has been forced underground. We have only to listen a little more attentively, explore with honest and celebratory curiosity, and decipher with our full critical, emotional, and sensual powers, even if, as Cixous writes, women’s bodies have been written in “white ink.”

What is the sort of thing we might be looking for when we attempt to read women's pleasure? Cixous, appropriately, may start us off. She finds evidence of "the new writing" in Joyce's Molly Bloom. The last chapter of *Ulysses*, the "Penelope" chapter, has inspired a virtual cottage industry built up around Molly's sexuality. Much of it is devoted to the idea—either the fear of the idea or the celebration of the idea—of Molly's "dirty girl" image, based in her "yes-ing." I love the "yes," myself, but I believe *what is most at stake* includes not only the affirmative expectant, "Yes," but, also the open, iconoclastic example of female pleasure: the "O" itself. We will note, for instance, that besides the "Yes," the "O" (not at all the "oh") occurs more than 50 times in the Penelope monologue. I'm convinced that the final eight words of this monologue are genius (and yes I said yes I will Yes), but I also want to think about those 50 "O's." In them is the affirmation is the affirmation of presence *and of openness*. Not presence and absence, you see, not the epistemology based on strict dichotomy. Rather, that in the openness of words to *project* feminine pleasure—is no lack at all, but a contradiction-less paradox, a powerful instance of writing woman's pleasure.

It is within this paradox, via this paradox, that Cixous can claim that "We don't fawn around the supreme hole. We have no womanly reason to pledge allegiance to the negative." The O, then, is not a lack as long as no one tries to fill it with a presence beyond itself or separate from itself—as long as no one attempts to fill it, that is, as *a target*.

The O is understood as already filled, as already alive, as already *ready to define* not only space but pleasure. This sexed and unsexed open O, this sometimes surprised O, this *expiratory* O, this head thrown back, chin proudly raised; this sweet song of the O, defines on its own terms. Can we teach the "*a savoir feminine sexual*, the paradox that women know to not only be the silence of a scream, but also the excruciating, affirming power of a moan carried on the invisible

thread of breath, the expiration, exhalation, exhilaration of breath? The near invisible, inaudible and audible breath of pleasure?

If ideology can be altered, it's time to turn our critical readings to telling stories about representations of women's sex that not only point out, but *actively undermine* the cult of women's purity. The 20<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher Nicolai Hartmann may lend some direction by suggesting that "purity" is a value within a particular ethical system built on faith and intended for a "higher realm." But, he suggests, for human subjects, that "a positive breath of valuational judgement" might be called upon which he describes as "fullness of experience."

Hartmann writes:

Not unity of effort is the highest concern, but many-sidedness and diversity of interest, all-round participation in values as an ideal, the ethical exploitation of life which understands and embraces everything, and with this also axiological richness of content and development of personality, ethical greatness in the sense of spacious capacity for everything that is in itself valuable, positive breath of valuational judgement.

Like Whitman, we know that loving and living are not *exclusive*, but *expansive*.

To finish up, then, let me just give a few quick examples of the sorts of "readings" that I believe help actively undermine the "ideology of purity," and perhaps, even, suggest "fullness of experience," as a positive ethical value. The readings I want to foreground, demonstrate the ways the *a savoir* can be deployed to resist the ideology of purity and to highlight the sensuous woman.

## **VI. Texts to Know**

Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea is counted among both post-colonial and feminist literatures. It is written as the pre-quel to the traditional canonical novel *Jane Eyre*: the story of the "mad woman in the attic." And here, "Bertha"—the name merely given to her by Rochester

in a violent act of renaming aimed at stripping her of her own identity and imposing possession—is really, Antionette. The story is also the story of Antionette’s mother, Annette. Both women are understood as defiled in the surest ways that women were not quite proper by Victorian standards: they weren’t *properly English* (caught between French Martinique and British Jamaica) and they were both visibly, and unrepentantly, sensual. When I teach this novel, students have some trouble seeing how Rhys plays with this idea of defilement—it’s never clear, for instance, that Antionette ever “kissed her cousin Sandy,” as the Iago character claims, but students are sure that this charge condemns her in exactly the way the shadow possibility of it condemns her in Rochester’s eyes.

Even more damning for students is the fact that she loved loving her husband, a lover passionate, but ultimately unkind. In the form of a woman, the taking and giving of pleasure is the true sign of a hysteric. Students seem to identify closely with this Othello: Rochester justifies locking “Bertha” away in a room above his home for the remainder of her life, because of her sordid sexual nature, even though this wild sexuality, disgusting him greatly, also gave him great pleasure. But he didn’t know how to name this contradiction, so he called it insanity—hers. Even in the throws of his own pleasure Rochester’s English consciousness rebelled against the *savoir*, because within the learned economy of virtue and vice, “honor” meant denying pleasure as wicked:

rooted disgust at [her debauchery] and [at] *her* [herself] restrained me much, even in pleasure. Any enjoyment that bordered on riot seemed to approach me to her and her vices, and I eschewed it (307).

Rochester forced himself to loathe this Bertha *and his own pleasure*. Jean Rhys, on the other hand, transforms these sorts of passages into the truth they might have told. Rochester is continually “confused” by his new wife’s loving; there’s always a “secret” he’s convinced he

doesn't know. And here, as always, the notion of the "inscrutable" is the most pernicious and damming of all: always the power play which in one stroke thoroughly dismisses and completely judges.

In fact, students will insist that Rochester did not love Antionette; that he must have hated her. They are confirmed in this belief when confronted with the following passage—even after I introduce them to the idea of the "beautiful agony" of the *petite mort*:

then one night [she] whispered, 'If I could die. Now when I am happy. Would you do that? You wouldn't have to kill me. Say die and I will die. You don't believe me? Then try, try, say die and watch me die.' [Antionette]  
'Die then! Die!' I watched her die many times. In my way, not in hers. In sunlight, in shadow, by moonlight, by candlelight. In the long afternoons when the house was empty. Only the sun was there to keep us company. We shut him out. And why not?

In Anita Diamant's popular novel, The Red Tent, students also experience a very difficult dissonance when they are faced with the practices of a woman's community celebrating woman's life and woman's body before ever sharing it—or even instead of sharing it—with the male community. It is especially difficult for students to understand anything appropriate and good about the "blood-moon" rituals in which the newly menstruating girl, fêted with wine and anointed with sacred oils, is taken out to lie with the earth, to merge her life-blood with that of mother earth. The culmination of the blood-moon ceremony is the piercing of the hymen with a small, smooth amulet. Students are disgusted at this woman's ceremony which effectively celebrates women on their own terms and assures that no girl will be traded for her "virginity." But students read the piercing of the hymen as a thing "to be saved for marriage," a man's right. The story of the "pure" virgin bride, complete with the successful tearing by force and the "proof" left on bloody sheets, is a story much more predictable, comfortable, and palatable.

In a story of a coming-to-consciousness through an openness to sensuality, Jane Campion and Kate Pullinger's The Piano is a novel rooted in sensuality and its explicit rejection of the

enforcement of an ideology of purity. Ada represents a different sort of sensuality from Annette and Antionette, but no less vital and urgent. What I love about the *a savoir feminine sexual* of this story is its attention to the power of personal resistance within servility; the extraordinary will to *full life*; the tensions between violence and sensuality; and especially, the importance of vision and sound—art and music—to physical ardor. This story breaks the back of an ethic based on purity: even the presence of a woman with a child—an “illegitimate” child no less—does not terrify when the community’s attention is engaged by the struggle to survive, as if the judgment doesn’t really matter after all.

There are also literatures which directly confront the male economy of sex head-on. Marguerite Duras’ autobiographical novel The Lover challenges systems which define the age of reason via one-size-fits-all “standards” of moral decency that are applicable only to girls. Duras writes a story of her first love affair at the age of “fifteen and a half.” It is a complex story of class, rebellion, regret, desire, and opportunism. And it’s also a story that is extraordinarily aware of the fact that the idea of “defilement” of the body is merely an *idea*.

Perhaps my favorite, and perhaps the book with the most complex relationship to the *a savoir feminine sexual* is a story of traditional lovers—a husband and wife on their honeymoon—that quickly become non-traditional lovers through the woman’s experimentation. Ernest Hemingway’s *The Garden of Eden*—I’ve been told by critics that I simply can’t use Hemingway to explore women’s “true” sex, but I strongly disagree—is a book about writing; about, perhaps, Hemingway’s own struggle with writing and perhaps with his belief that making art and making love are somehow incompatible. But, it is also about sex, experimentation, androgyny, gender bending, women loving women, and invitations extended and rejected.

Catherine Bourne's sexual desire is complex and equally impossible to "read" if we exercise only the puritanical, hetero-valorizing, one-way-only-dominance sexual "terministic screen."<sup>ii</sup> Catherine knows that to love one's self is sometimes in contradiction with loving another, but it doesn't have to be. In fact, sometimes loving oneself is quite complementary with loving another, and she wants to explore this possibility for herself and for her lover. She wants to transform physically, and her transformation enables a cognitive shift, a new exciting erogeneity. She cuts her hair "like a boy," dyes it almost white, and tans her skin as dark as possible in the sun. Together, David and Catherine take pleasure in her boyish look and attitude, and in bed, Catherine takes charge, taking David to new erotic acts, allowing him at times to lay, as she laid, being loved. And David, though verbally protesting at times, seems also to derive sexual pleasure from her experimentation, her interest in a playful, androgynous sexuality, her ease with deriving pleasure from alternating dominant/suppliant roles with David, and finally, also from deriving pleasure from the body and the presence of the second woman that Catherine brings into the relationship.

Like Antoinette, Catherine—newly married and initiating herself into the pleasures of the flesh—also disputes and disdains her place of consumption and contract within the traditional marriage relationship. Unlike Antoinette, however, Catherine was not already written-in to her fate and did not, therefore, have a literary obligation to choose insanity and death by burning at the hands of her captor. She simply left him. She chooses another psycho-sexual reality, asked him to join her in it *as her husband*, and when he could not and would not, she left. This story is very much about heterosexual love and the pleasures of sex; but heterosexual "love" here is fluid and stretched, explored in ways that do not distinguish or obtain strenuously as different from the homoerotic. The story, in many ways, is a story of hunger.

Catherine represents the postmodern distaste for the imperative to choose a stable identity. She represents a female sexuality aware of circularity, of ambiguity, of division, fragmentation, plurality, and no attempt at ultimate reconciliation. She represents the tactile and the pleasure of words, of speaking words, hearing words, of play, and change, and abandon. And, like, Rochester, David likes it too; he likes it, he simply won't *allow* it.

## **VII. Conclusion: The Magic inside Myself**

As Dorothy Allison knows, even when the female body has been taught to hate itself, sex is the place of power and lust and love. There is always the possibility for love, "a piece of magic, magic in the belly, the domed kingdom of sex, the terror place inside where rage and power live" and it's possible to "make a piece of magic inside myself, magic to use against the meanness of the world." She writes:

When I make love I take my whole life in my hands, the damage and the pride, the bad memories and the good, all that I am or might be, and I do indeed love myself, can indeed do any damn thing I please. I know the place where courage and desire come together, where pride and joy push lust through the bloodstream, right to the heart.

And all this is necessary and good Allison writes, because

Women lose their lives not knowing they can do something different. Men eat themselves up believing they have to be the thing they have been made. Children go crazy. Really, even children go crazy, believing the shape of the life they must live is as small and mean and broken as they are told.

We must work to read women's sexuality and all the coherence and contradiction that sex supplies: we must read the subtle transformations, the permissions and restrictions. We must read about retreating, eruption, delicacy, and textures upon textures. We must read the self revelation and outward pouring and the withholdings; the soft and wet and dry and the hard and fast. We must read active desire and passive desire, whole languages of sex and the resounding silences. Like the ideology of purity itself, and the shame that attends it, I know that the requirement of

silence *is the very language of shame*. So, I ask language scholars not to pretend an “innocence” about women’s sex, to push beyond the charge of inscrutability. I ask them to refuse to relegate women’s sex to the realm of the invisible. The Israeli philosopher Avishai Margalit writes that the definition of “a decent society,” is one in which *institutions* do not humiliate” and he defines a “civilized society” as a society in which *individuals do not humiliate one another*. In such a civilized society, “tolerance for other people’s fantasies and choices is instinctive and habitual.” We need not explore our sex in hushed, transgressive tones. We can do without the shame. If the “outing” of women’s sexuality, in its experimentation and intimacy and sensuality, is opposed to the cruelty and irresponsibility and *mereness* of an “ideology of purity,” then perhaps it’s time to move on to the bold and explicit, *the possibly even profane*.

**END**

O that awful deepdown torrent O and the sea the sea crimson sometimes like fire and the glorious sunsets and the figtrees in the Alameda gardens yes and all the queer little streets and pink and blue and yellow houses and the rosegardens and the jessamine and geraniums and cactuses and Gibraltar as a girl where I was a Flower of the mountain yes when I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a red yes and how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes<sup>iii</sup> (783)

## **V. The Gaps: Reading What’s Missing**

That which we do *not* acknowledge, then, seems as powerful, if not more powerful, than that which we do acknowledge, when it comes to understanding violence.

As an Undergraduate (UNM): my Honors Thesis—

*Othello* (Shakespeare), presented Iago not as Shakespeare’s greatest villain, but as an almost Oscar Wilde-sort of dandy, who understood the misogyny and egocentricity in Othello’s obsession with Desdemona’s purity, but, believing Othello to be an equal to him in comprehension, expected that Othello would also come to see the insanity of his

worry. So, Iago's taunting was really good-natured barbing that Othello couldn't understand.

*The Dead* (James Joyce), I argued that Gabriel's refusal to see his wife (Nora) as a fully sexual creature created the sort of existential despair and practical non-sequetors in their relationship that killed Desdemona.

For the M.A.—

“Argumentative Insouciance.” An unethical argumentative move in which

As a PhD Candidate—

*Oedipus Rex* (Sophocles) A reading of the play in which Jocasta “knows” and will not let the knowledge of her and her family's unfortunate past play a destructive part of their future. Her knowledge and mental health imply that that the idea of “incest,” though socially abhorrent because of an ideology of purity, does not really matter in the long run.

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<sup>i</sup> Roland Barthes; *Writing Degree Zero*

<sup>ii</sup> Kenneth Burke

<sup>iii</sup>These are literally the last words of the novel. A space down from this passage, Joyce has affixed the time and place of his writing: “Trieste-Zurich-Paris, 1914-1921”