

Subjectivity and Embodied Experiences of Time in Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction and Film

by

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Abstract

My dissertation offers close readings of four literary and filmic Canadian works—Michael Ondaatje’s novel *Anil’s Ghost* (2000), Dionne Brand’s short-story collection *Sans Souci and Other Stories* (1983), Jeff Lemire’s graphic narrative *Essex County* (2009), and David Cronenberg’s film *Spider* (2002)—to demonstrate their engagement with embodied experience. This study argues that subjective experience is inseparable from the process of thinking through and with the body. This focus on embodiment, I argue, often gives way to a privileging of present-time experience, even within accounts of the traumatic past. I connect this interest in present-time embodied experience to a larger concern in the development of Canadian criticism and suggest that Canadian criticism is in need of a corrective shift away from a focus on the past and towards an attentiveness to the present. Chapter one examines embodiment, touch, and forgetting in

Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*. Here, I show how the novel provides a model of willed forgetting that allows characters to survive the horrors of war and to experience valuable moments of life-affirming embodied engagement and communication, often through physical touch, in the present. Chapter two shows how the body plays a fundamental and productive role in the psychological processes through which Brand's Black female characters confront a history of oppression. I read the *Sans Souci* collection as a short-story cycle that is unified by a thematic focus on embodied experiences of time, racism and sexism, and Black female subjectivity. Chapter three focuses on the second book of Lemire's *Essex County*, and its representation of the aging body in connection with memory and storytelling. I argue that the protagonist's physical movement and positioning in space help him to remember his past and tell his story, and also allow him to experience positive moments of engagement with his present-time embodied experience and the external world. My final chapter, on Cronenberg's *Spider*, shows how embodied experiences and gestures, such as Spider's writing and his creation of web-like sculptures, play an integral role in the process of constructing, reviving, and engaging with past and present experiences.

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Introduction

Behind your thoughts and feelings, my brother, there stands a mighty ruler, an unknown sage—whose name is self. In your body he dwells; he is your body. There is more reason in your body than in your best wisdom. And who knows why your body needs precisely your best wisdom?

--Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (146-147)

“Concentrate. Think of the bones, she tells herself. . . . A fossil of memory jumps to her consciousness like an old secret revealed.”

--Francis Itani, *Remembering the Bones* (11)

“What’s happened in the past can’t stay in the past for the same reason the future is always just a breath away. Now is what’s most important. . . . The past and the future are present.”

--Joseph Boyden, *The Orenda* (487)

My dissertation offers close readings of four literary and filmic Canadian works—Michael Ondaatje’s novel *Anil’s Ghost* (2000), Dionne Brand’s short-story collection *Sans Souci and Other Stories* (1983), Jeff Lemire’s graphic narrative *Essex County* (2009), and David Cronenberg’s film *Spider* (2002)—to demonstrate their engagement with embodied experience. In particular, this study argues that subjective experience is inseparable from the process of thinking through and with the body, what contemporary neuroscientists and narratologists term “embodied cognition.” I use the term “embodiment” to suggest a process of “reflection in which body and mind have been brought together” (Varela et. al 27). As it serves as a key concept in my dissertation, I expand on the definition of embodiment later in this introduction.

My study is specifically concerned with embodied experiences of and thinking about time. In a 2003 article entitled “Time in Literature,” J. Hillis Miller questions literature’s ability to effectively convey the experience of time: “If time is such an enigma,” he argues, “and if the word ‘time’ . . . does not give us any sense of what lived human time is really like, if all words for time are doomed to be catachreses, how then can literature find ways of expressing to a

reader this or that of the innumerable diversified experiences of human time?” (89). The question posed is a deceptively simple one, and yet would likely prompt critics and readers alike to respond with a massively diverse and perhaps contradictory set of answers. This project does not claim to definitively answer Miller’s question, but instead embraces and grapples with its scope by examining how four works of English-Canadian fiction from the last three decades have responded to the challenge it presents. Rather than consider time as a purely abstract or intellectual concept, my dissertation addresses embodied experiences of time that emerge in relation to imaginative engagements with the past and present (and occasionally the future) in contemporary Canadian fiction. Simply put, my project analyzes the relationship between the kinds of mental time travel associated with the faculty of the imagination and embodied experiences of time.

Frequently, I argue, the focus on embodiment gives way to a privileging of present-time experience that allows characters to confront the traumatic past while locating meaning—even, in the narrowest sense, the meaning that comes with the knowledge of having survived a traumatic event—and/or a sense of self in the present. Although I read this interest in present-time embodied experience in the specific context of each of the narratives I address, I also connect it to a larger concern in the development of Canadian criticism. I would suggest that Canadian criticism is in need of a corrective shift away from a focus on the past and towards an attentiveness to the present.

Time and Embodiment:

While a consideration of remembering and forgetting forms a large part of this dissertation, my concentration on embodied experiences of time rather than of memory alone is deliberate. I use the word “time” to encompass the vastness of temporal experience that includes but also moves beyond remembering and forgetting: present-time experiences, the imagining of a subjective future, the imaginative creation of alternative times (past, present, and future), and the positioning of characters within a larger temporal scale of the personal and historical past. The term also encompasses my interest in investigating how genre conveys these experiences of time and the differences between, for instance, the temporal progression in graphic narrative and prose fiction. By tracing represented instances of bodily engagement and by reading examples of gestural languages, I show that the characters in the works I examine depend upon bodily

movement or expression as much as on purely mental processes to navigate intersections between past and present, to work through experiences of trauma or conflict, and to imagine the future.¹ In focusing on the body and gesture, I move beyond the psychological approach to character development found in much modernist and postmodernist criticism to argue that considering bodily expression and the thinking “language” of the body is imperative to a thorough consideration of characters’ subjectivity in the works I examine.

With respect to my terminology, it is important to recognize that embodied experience is not the same as embodied cognition, but the two may be linked. Whereas embodied experience registers the senses of the body, the smell of a room or the feel of a particular surface, for example, embodied cognition moves beyond this experiential register to suggest that the body’s gestures, movements, or senses instigate or transform cognitive processes. It is here that my project departs from approaches that have considered narrative representations of the body as portraying universal and easily categorized emotions and physical responses, especially studies focused on Affect Theory. Unlike biological approaches in feminist studies that associate specific kinds of sensory experience with female bodies, or classificatory approaches in the new Affect Theory that seek to identify and label a limited range of possible emotional expressions, my project aligns itself more closely with theories of embodied cognition.

Recent years have seen a surging scholarly interest in representations of sensory and embodied experience in literature, particularly in the British tradition. Elizabeth Harvey’s *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture* (2003), Mark M. Smith’s *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting and Touching in History* (2007), William A. Cohen’s *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses* (2009), Andrea Wilson Nightingale’s *Once out of Nature: Augustine on Time and the Body* (2011), and Bryan S. Turner’s *The Routledge Handbook of Body Studies* (2012) are five notable examples. As several of these titles evince, however, the academic focus on embodiment has been primarily geared towards an examination of past ages and literary traditions; furthermore, as Anne Whitehead points out in *Memory* (2009), although “the

¹ Although the chapters here necessarily touch on the political aspects of individual embodiment—and, as critics such as Michael Foucault, Judith Butler, and Carrie Noland have argued, bodies are always implicated in the politics of culture and society—this study is neither defined nor driven by a focus on biopolitics.

body has been central to Western conceptions of memory,” in many critical discussions of memory, the body “has routinely been subordinated to consciousness and thereby overlooked” (11). This is the first study to explore in sustained detail the relationship between embodied experience and time in contemporary Canadian fiction.

In his recent book *About Time: Narrative, Fiction, and the Philosophy of Time* (2007), Mark Currie promotes the “need to revisit the relation of fiction and philosophy. . . to ask what domain of understanding or knowledge might be occupied by the contemporary novel on the subject of time” (6). My project builds on Currie’s assertions that reading fictional narrative offers “a kind of preparation for and repetition of the continuous anticipation that takes place in non-fictional life. . . . [F]iction has been one of the places in which a new experience of time has been rehearsed, developed and expressed. These propositions give fiction, and the study of fiction, a critical role in the understanding of what lies outside of fiction” (6). Currie’s approach to time in narrative fiction, however, reflects the modernist and postmodernist tendency to focus on psychological understanding and inner processes rather than embodied experience; for Currie, characters’ engagement with time in contemporary fiction is overwhelmingly psychological and almost entirely excludes embodied engagement or embodied cognition. My project revises this elision of the body in considering how time is represented in fiction by suggesting that not only is an engagement with the body inseparable from the psychological experience of lived time, but that the body can also in the present both instigate and transform engagements with the past.² For instance, in Brand’s short-story “Blossom,” the titular protagonist undergoes a brutal physical battle with a personification of the history and oppression of Black people called Suffering, during which Blossom endures bodily mutilation and great pain. By overcoming Suffering and winning the battle, Blossom reclaims her now powerful body from historical oppression and is able to move towards a more hopeful future. Similarly, in Lemire’s “Ghost Stories,” the elderly protagonist, Lou, remembers details from the day of his mother’s funeral by visualizing the event and translating his bodily posture and position in the narrative’s present time into his visual

² The refusal to separate body and mind and the body’s ability to alter and influence thinking has, in recent years, also been taken up in the field of neuroscience. In his book *Descartes’ Error*, Antonio Damasio, for example, argues asserts that “the mind is embodied, in the full sense of the term, not just embrained” (118).

memory of the past. Reconstructing his memory of the past through a bodily engagement in the present allows Lou to tell his personal story, an act which restores for him a sense of agency and purpose.

By considering how embodied experience challenges and is challenged by the progression of time and an engagement with different temporalities in each of these works, I seek to address a series of questions: what aspects of subjectivity are overlooked when we fail to include the body in our reading of individual temporal experience? How does the body register and navigate the progression of time? How do bodies support, transgress, or contradict verbal language and what are the effects? In considering these questions, my project asserts that characters' embodied engagement with and restructuring of notions of the past, present, and future is essential to the conception of self during experiences of trauma, memory, and aging. Specifically, by correcting the tendency to read selfhood as a primarily psychological construction, I show how in each of the works I examine the characters' subjective sense of self in time is dependent on an engagement with the body, beginning with sensory experience and physical gesture and, in many cases, embodied cognition. In Cronenberg's *Spider*, for instance, the eponymous protagonist considers his childhood experiences by envisioning past events in which he appears as both an adult and a child. In several scenes, the present-time Spider not only speaks the dialogue uttered by his younger self, but is physically present in the location he remembers from his youth, and mirrors the physical gestures of his younger self in his adult body. By presenting Spider's memories in this way, Cronenberg suggests that Spider's embodied experience in the present is crucial to Spider's construction of the past and to his shifting sense of self as both boy and man. My research therefore responds to the assumption that discussions of time today are "somewhat outmoded" and that a "concern with time in literature today is untimely"³ (Miller 86) by suggesting that Canadian fiction has been and remains preoccupied with embodied experiences of time.

³ Miller argues that although "all literature is about time" a scholarly focus on the topic "seems these days outmoded, old hat, *vieux jeu*. . . . In these days of focus on class, race, and gender, the subject would seem to many literary scholars far too abstract, artificial, philosophical, and formalistic to be worth pursuing" (86).

The Canadian Context:

My exploration of embodied experiences of time in specifically Canadian works is a result of my own physical location and academic interest and education. Although the issues I present are by no means limited to Canadian fiction, Canadian authors' interest in highlighting everyday lived embodied experiences and engagements with time may have its roots in a particularly Canadian set of concerns. In *Survival*, Margaret Atwood asserts that there

is nothing particularly Canadian about the use of the past as a vehicle for the present. . . . Nor is there anything unique about the search for roots, though in a ground more thickly populated with them the search would perhaps not be so frantic. But whatever you plan to use it for, you can dig up only what's down there, and in this country, when you've gone through a thin topsoil of immediate ancestors, what you hit will not be Richard the Third or the American or French revolutions; it will probably be either a settler or an explorer. (134)

In the following chapters I argue that this frantic search through the past to locate roots, or the search to understand (to use Northrop Frye's famous phrase) "where is here,"⁴ has given way to a more individual, immediate, and subjective inquiry. This is not to overlook the enormous body of contemporary historical fiction that engages with Canada's past, but rather to suggest that within this corpus of work, as in the narratives I examine, a focus on the past and with the ghosts that populate it is frequently countered by a search to locate meaning in individual embodied experiences in the present time. In this sense, my work expands upon Currie's suggestion in *About Time* that focusing on the retrospective aspects of fiction obscures how contemporary narratives engage with present-time temporal experience and anticipate the future. Currie argues that the structure of narrative fiction is able to more clearly represent complex accounts of time than philosophy, and suggests that contemporary fiction is defined by its interest in prolepsis and the future significance of the present rather than its concern with the past:

⁴ See Frye's *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination*.

the study of narrative has been attending to the notion of the present as a place from which we continuously revise stories about the past, and much less attentive to the relationship between storytelling and the mode of continuous anticipation in which we attach significance to present moments. There are some excellent studies of fiction in relation to the philosophy of time, but the approach is usually oriented around the search for lost time, around the remembrance of things past and the way they inhabit the present.

(6)

Following this, Currie challenges Linda Hutcheon's notion of historiographic metafiction by arguing that such a focus on engagements with the past and with history exclude the ways in which contemporary fiction "might be characterized by future orientation" (27).

Contemporary Canadian fiction is frequently preoccupied with issues of trauma, colonization, and the past. These concerns are often connected to or expressed through the (usually female) body and have been studied by critics of Canadian literature such as Jonathan Kertzer, Justin Edwards, Marlene Goldman, Gerry Turcotte, and Cynthia Sugars. Although this study is indebted to, and frequently engages with, work that has explored Canadian literature's interest in the past it also departs from this focus. While, as Sugars and Turcotte point out, many Canadian authors have in recent years "turned to the Gothic to articulate a postcolonial—sometimes transnational—revisioning of Canadian history and overarching meta-narratives" (xviii), I contend that Canadian authors have an equally powerful fascination, particularly over the past thirty years, with conveying present-day *embodied* experience. To illustrate the significance of an engagement with the present, I purposely chose works that have been read as examples of Canadian trauma narratives. While I recognize and examine the past, and aspects of the Gothic attraction to the trauma, in the works I address, my project illustrates the texts' emphasis on the importance of every day embodied experiences in relation to lived time—concerns that sometimes risk being relegated, overlooked, and overwhelmed by an interest in the past and the spectral identity of the nation.

In view of my findings, I argue that Canadian fiction demands a corrective shift in Canadian criticism away from a dominant focus on the past and towards an attentiveness to representations of present embodied experience and embodied cognition. Each of the works I examine is

unequivocally preoccupied with present-time embodied experience, and either directly or indirectly engages with a motion towards the future. This swerve away from the past as the defining feature of contemporary Canadian narrative, I hope, will instigate a new zeitgeist within the critical approach to Canadian fiction.

Why Now?

In our contemporary age of transnational movement, ever-increasing life spans, and scientific and technological developments, the individual search to locate human meaning in moments of present-time embodied experiences and interactions has perhaps never been so urgent. I see two central concerns that are unique to our contemporary, subjective experience: the fact that our interpersonal connections are increasingly mediated by technology—cell-phones, ipads, computers—and the fact that we live longer than we did even fifty years ago. These concerns are not limited to the Canadian experience, but they are openly reflected in our fiction. I suggest that Canadian fiction’s interest in the past is a response to the contemporary experience: the need to frequently return to a pre-technological state restores the emphasis on bodily touch, physical communication, and a focus on embodied experiences and embodied cognitive processes. Canadian fiction of the past thirty years therefore offers an implicit reappraisal of contemporary prosthetic devices by showing how the body still plays a crucial role in thought processes and in subjective understandings of the world. In this sense, even fiction about the past can be seen to be about the present. Our increased longevity also brings up questions of meaning and purpose within the life span: does a longer life mean a better life? How can meaning be found in living with illnesses (Alzheimer’s or dementia, for example) that in the recent past, without contemporary medical interventions, would have ended our lives more swiftly? Canadian fiction suggests that answers to these questions involve a movement away from mediating prosthetic and technological modes of communication and experience and a return to an engagement with embodiment and embodied thinking. In his book *New Self, New World*, philosopher Philip Shepherd argues that our contemporary Western culture creates an individual sense of isolation; it “lures us into our heads” (3) and assures us that “the sensational intelligence of the body is not really worth paying attention to. And we find, indeed, that the more unmindful we become of our bodies, the more they appear to be mindless” (2). While my thesis takes issue with and challenges the desire, which Shepherd advocates, to locate a feeling of wholeness—“the wholeness of self that lies beyond all division; the wholeness that, when we find it expresses its

truth in each of our actions; the wholeness of a body at peace with itself and in harmony with the world around it” (6)—it does support Shepherd’s argument about the need to re-examine and reconnect with the body. I see the interest Shepherd articulates in recognizing, revaluing, and “listening” to embodied experience as being reflected and complicated in contemporary Canadian literary and filmic works. Rethinking fiction’s approach to the past therefore allows us to acknowledge Canadian fiction’s engagement with the present time and contemporary experience.

Theoretical Context:

This project builds upon foundations laid by the many critics and theorists who have considered how embodiment resists a separation of mind and body. In each of the contemporary works I examine, the body plays a major role in the working through of memories and present experiences. My approach to embodiment is closely aligned with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s theoretical understanding of the body as more than merely a physiological entity. Merleau-Ponty considers the individual, phenomenological experience of one’s body as necessary to all aspects of thought, emotion, and subjective experience—as the “general medium for having a world” (*Phenomenology of Perception* 129). By considering the importance of the body, Merleau-Ponty (as well as more recent proponents of embodied experience, including neuroscientist Antonio Damasio) corrects the tradition of accepting consciousness as the singular source of knowledge by arguing that sensory, bodily experience cannot be separated from a psychological and cognitive engagement with the world. Merleau-Ponty’s arguments about the importance of sensory experience to notions of selfhood, his refusal of a mind/body dichotomy, and his consideration of subjectivity as being inseparable from the body are foundational concepts in each of my study’s chapters.⁵ This model of the synergetic relation between body and world, as well as the underlying tension between the objective and the phenomenological body, informs the theoretical thrust of this paper. In this sense, I take Miller’s broad definition of “lived human time” to apply, more specifically, to the experiences of thinking and acting as an embodied being. In keeping with Merleau-Ponty’s insights, my study remains attentive to embodied experience in the broadest sense, and considers sensory feeling and perception, touch, and

⁵ See James B. Steeves’s *Imagining Bodies: Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Imagination* (2004).

physical movement in connection to psychological understandings of the progression of time, recollections of past times, and the projections of possible future times.

My approach maintains that reading the body is not only about feeling and expressing emotions, like fear, disgust, or shame, but about how the body may instigate cognitive change. As Melba Cuddy-Keane argues, embodied cognition “refers to a recent, wide-ranging field of study running across disciplines such as cognitive science, linguistics, psychology, and neuroscience” (58). Critics working in the area use differing definitions and terms, but, and as Cuddy-Keane argues, “the theory as a whole depends on the underlying premise that the body thinks. Embodiment theory posits that bodies do not merely express, communicate, or influence thought; bodily experience is the shape of thought itself. Sensations, gestures, and interactions with the environment help us to understand the world and to devise strategies for achieving our goals” (58). Embodied experience and embodied cognition are not, therefore, the same, although there may be some overlap between registering sensory experiences, physical communication, and the processes of bodily thinking. My project addresses moments of bodily expression, bodily experience, *and* embodied cognition, and thus engages with the questions that Cuddy-Keane poses:

Experience is clearly recorded in the body, but does [the work] also depict the body as a means of altering our responses to experience? Does it offer insights into the fundamental questions posed by embodied cognition: Can perception play a central role in cognition, with no need for concept formation to be involved? Is cognition then modal (proceeding through the modalities of the senses) rather than limited to the amodal (abstract) terms that have traditionally explained our thoughts? (59)

In this way, many of the examples included here—such as the way, for instance, that Brand’s characters, and Anil in Ondaatje’s novel, dance to overcome the feeling of being overwhelmed by trauma and physically immobilized; or, in Cronenberg’s film, Spider’s construction of webs—are about how bodily movement can instigate change. I suggest, therefore, that reading the body is not about reading a *state* but a *process*.

My specific interest in reading gestures and body language, or forms of non-verbal communication (NVC), physical movement and placement in space, and instances of physical touch, is part of an effort to consider non-linguistic modes of communication in fiction and to create a space for individual bodies' expressions of self. To ignore these bodily expressions may also be to ignore significant subjective experiences and developments in narrative. Indeed, each of the following chapters suggests, in a very different way, that positive responses to problems of communication and isolation⁶ can often be located in embodied acts, which counter or replace verbal language. In Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, for example, positive touch becomes a primary mode of communication between characters that frequently offers them a form of comfort and a sense of connection in the face of isolation, war, and lost community. The narratives I examine offer examples of how embodied experience can be horrific and traumatizing—as is the case in Ondaatje's fictionalized account of the atrocities inflicted upon human bodies during the Sri-Lankan civil war, or in Brand's descriptions of how Black bodies have been historically owned, tortured, and oppressed—but they also suggest that the body's *response* to such trauma should be recognized in conjunction with psychological thinking so that subjective embodied experiences are not overlooked by focusing only on psychological narratives of experience.

While many humanities scholars have “read” bodies as indicative of psychological process and as providing inscriptions of larger social issues, this study attempts to move beyond what Carrie Noland calls the trap of “linguistic metaphor [which] forecloses the possibility of exploring alternative, non-text based vocabularies and concepts for approaching the body's own experience of itself” (11). My focus on embodied experience and gesture, as well as on form, allows me to examine how narratives *show* rather than *tell* us about lived experiences of time. This approach prompts me, for example, to conduct a new reading of Dionne Brand's *Sans Souci* as a short-story cycle rather than merely a collection of stories. I argue that the cycle is united by a thematic focus on Black women's embodied experiences of time—past, present, and future—racism, and sexism, as well as by a narrative structure that allows Brand to present both the individual and

⁶ “Communication” and “isolation” are well-established themes in Canadian fiction; critics, such as Frye, have pointed out that such problems are exacerbated by Canada's vast physical expanse and relatively low population.

collective experiences of her characters, and to offer a form of resistance to a fixed reading or resolution of such experiences.

My method develops the idea, presented in Barbara Korte's *Body Language in Literature* and Anthony Purdy's *Literature and the Body*, that body language "can either complement, replace, or contradict a spoken message" (Korte 27). Reading body language, both in textual and visual representations, against verbal language frequently directs my interpretation of the works I examine.⁷ For instance, in Lemire's "Ghost Stories," a caregiver describes the aged protagonist and storyteller, Lou, as being isolated and alone in the nursing home, and yet the images that precede the comment show Lou comfortably conversing with a group of friends. The counterpoint that arises between the visual and textual narrative suggests that Lou's desire to tell his story contrasts his apparent solitariness and involves an agential and interactive form of engagement with others, whether real or imagined. By attending to representations of embodied experience in graphic narrative (an as yet largely unexplored literary form in age studies) my third chapter works to correct Harry Moody's notion of the life review as a coherent narrative that enables the subject to make sense of lived time by showing the importance of allowing incoherence and expressions of nonsensical experience—trauma, fear, and confusion—to remain part of the protagonist's story. I also revise Roland Barthes' idea that descriptive details are superfluous to narrative progression by claiming that extensive details in both the visual and textual narratives I examine have the effect of slowing down the narrative pace. The result of this stasis in progression is that the reader frequently gains a heightened sense of awareness and focus regarding the immediate narrative event. By registering this pause in the process of reading, the reader is also brought into a temporal awareness that often mirrors the experience of the protagonist, and frequently involves the recognition of a privileged present-time experience. Following from this, and as already mentioned, my focus on how Canadian narratives represent the significance of embodied existence in the present time and frequently point towards the future builds upon and counters a body of literary criticism—by authors such as Linda Hutcheon,

⁷ This dissertation involves much close reading, but also engages with and in some cases revises the work of critics who explore experiences of aging, pain, and bodily abjection (such as Kathleen Woodward, Anne Basting, Harry Moody, Elaine Scarry, and Julia Kristeva), memory, (including Hanne Bewernick, Suzanne Nalbantian, and Friedrich Nietzsche), and narrative (such as James Phelan, Roland Barthes, Mieke Bal, Melba Cuddy-Keane, Rocío G Davis, Forrest L. Ingram, Gerald J. Kennedy, Robert M Luscher, Scott McCloud, and Hillary Chute).

Marlene Goldman, and Cynthia Sugars—that has focused predominantly on how Canadian fiction is defined by an engagement with the past.

In its examination of how the body expresses emotion, instigates psychological changes, responds to trauma, and transforms remembered experiences, this project also challenges Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Scarry's influential book demonstrates the ways in which bodies and subjective "worlds" are destroyed through physical pain and torture. However, not only does Scarry reinforce the mind-body binary by drawing clear distinctions between psychological suffering and physical suffering,⁸ she is also reluctant to show how bodies—through movement, touch, and gesture—might respond to pain and trauma. Instead, in the section she calls "making," *The Body in Pain* turns away from the experience of the individual body and towards a more abstract discussion of the relationship between pain and imagination/creation. In contrast, I maintain a focus on subjective, individual, embodied experience to show how the body can not only experience damage, suffering, and pain—both physical *and* psychological—but also play an integral part in the process of "re-making" the subject's world through embodied movement, gesture, expression, and non-verbal communication.

Despite my focus on what are commonly considered the medical issues of aging, trauma, and mental illness, I am interested in considering humanistic approaches to embodied experience rather than exploring related bio-medical concerns. This project therefore responds to and complements the wealth of important bio-medical and social studies that have been conducted on aging and mental health⁹ by attending to fictional representations of subjective, embodied

⁸ Scarry argues that "[p]hysical pain is able to obliterate psychological pain because it obliterates all psychological content, painful, pleasurable, and neutral" (34).

⁹ Examples in aging studies or gerontology include: Daniel Callahan's *Setting Limits: Medical Goals in an Aging Society* (1995), Ping-Chung Leung's *Healthy Aging* (2011), Roselyn Payne Epps and Susan C. Stewart's *The American Medical Women's Association Guide to Ageing and Wellness* (1996), Howard Fillit, Kenneth Rockwood, K.W. Woodhouse, and J.C. Brocklehurst's *Brocklehurst's Textbook of Geriatric Medicine and Gerontology* (2010). Examples in trauma studies and mental illness include: Judith Lewis Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1997), John Briere and Catherine Scott's *Principles of Trauma Therapy: A Guide to Symptoms, Evaluations, and Treatments* (2006), Catherine Cameron's *Resolving Childhood Trauma: A Long-Term Study of Abuse Survivors*, Bruce Carruth's *Psychological Trauma and Addiction Treatment*, Daniel R. Weinberger and Paul Harrison's *Schizophrenia*.

everyday experiences. As Currie suggests in his work on time and contemporary fiction, and as Martha Nussbaum has argued in *Poetic Justice*, I propose that fiction can provide a fruitful resource for such philosophical modes of inquiry as the consideration of temporal experience. All of the works examined here present individual lives within an aesthetic realm, but this project investigates how fictional accounts of subjective embodied experiences can contribute to broader understandings of aging, trauma, and mental illness, that reach beyond fictional narrative.

Selection of Texts:

The four works I examine were chosen because of their preoccupation with history, memory, and trauma, and their equally dominant concern with bodily sensations, communication, and embodied thinking. Common to each of the works I address is a focus, to a greater or lesser extent, on the body as restrictive, or as a site of vulnerability or suffering. If embodied experience and cognition refuses a separation of body and mind, then the critical responses to these instances of negative embodied experience should not only focus on the psychological outcomes of living with physical trauma or of experiencing the body as a reminder of oppression, but should also include the ways in which both mind *and body* respond to and counter such negativity. In my close reading of Canadian fiction, I show how each of the works I examine highlights the body's crucial contribution within accounts of subjective experiences of aging, trauma, remembering and forgetting.¹⁰ I also see a compelling pattern and an opportunity to explore accounts of embodied experience and thinking in depth within this smaller fictional selection. In each of these four works is a connection between a psychological unearthing of the past and a present-time physical experience, what I refer to in my chapter on *Anil's Ghost* as a kind of self-excavation. The protagonist in Ondaatje's novel undergoes a project of self-excavation that is so connected to her physical movement that she is described as "brushing earth away" while she sleeps (34). In *Sans Souci* the past has to be unearthed and examined in order for Brand's protagonists to exist in the present. For instance, in the short-story "Blossom," the protagonist is required to face her past in order to gain the strength to survive in the present, a

¹⁰ I aim to be attentive to the ways in which embodied experience differs greatly between individuals, and pay particular attention to experiences of age and gender in this study. Iris Marion Young, for instance, points out that women's embodied experience is radically different from that of men because women's bodies move within a "constricted space," a limited area of movement informed by a social tradition of female oppression and physical inhibition (10).

psychological process that is inseparable from her performing an aggressively physical dance. In “Ghost Stories” and *Spider*, both protagonists physically enter the places and environments from their past in order to unearth memories. This link between physical experience and remembering suggests the ways that the body “thinks.” In *Spider* this thinking is expressed quite literally when Spider runs his fingers through the soil in the allotment where he imagines his mother is buried. The action not only suggests his effort to unearth his past, but also the connection between physical movement and cognitive process. Each of these works show that narratives of trauma are not wholly preoccupied by the past, but also acknowledges the importance of embodied experiences and even embodied thinking in the present. Although this study is limited to an exploration of four Canadian narratives, it demonstrates an approach that might be applied more broadly to the field of Canadian fiction at large.¹¹

My selection of texts demonstrates how the interest in embodiment and time is apparent in popular narrative forms as well as in more conventional genres like the novel. The chapters are organized to reflect this approach, each addressing a traditionally less literary form to suggest a future-oriented movement towards new directions in Canadian literary and filmic works. My inclusion of film and graphic narrative is part of my project to analyze a variety of fictional forms to show the diversity of aesthetic portrayals of embodied experiences of time as well as the pervasiveness of the interest in doing so in different mediums. Like film, “comics expands modes of historical and personal expression while existing in the field of the popular” (Chute 453). Rather than limiting my study to, say, an examination of the novel, this juxtaposition of forms allows me to examine and compare the nuances of how temporal experience is conveyed through different narrative techniques. However, I am also interested in tracing how visual

¹¹ The chapters that follow explore what I read as four of the most pivotal and representative examples of contemporary fiction that present complex relationships between time and the body, but there are many other examples. Some of the most salient works from recent years include, in literary fiction, Tessa McWatt’s *Vital Signs* (2011), David Bergen’s *The Time in Between* (2005), Francis Itani’s *Remembering the Bones* (2008), Carol Shields’s *The Stone Diaries* (1993), Lisa Moore’s *February* (2010), Angie Abdou’s *The Bone Cage* (2007), Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996), Mordecai Richler’s *Barney’s Version* (1997), Alistair MacLeod’s *No Great Mischief* (1999); in graphic narrative, Seth’s *It’s a Good Life if you Don’t Weaken* (1996), Bernice Eisenstein’s *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* (2006), Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki’s *Skim* (2008); and in film, Sarah Polley’s *Away from Her* (2007), François Girard’s *The Red Violin* (1998), Atom Egoyan’s *Exotica* (1994) and *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), Guy Maddin’s *Keyhole* (2011), and Denis Villeneuve’s *Incendies* (2010). Works such as Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel* (1964) and Ernest Buckler’s *The Mountain and the Valley* (1952) are also notable for their early interest in individual embodied experiences of time. All of these works offer fascinating and varied accounts of subjective embodied experiences of time that warrant further investigation.

representations of embodiment and time echo, amplify, and alter written descriptions of embodied temporal experience. Representations of embodied experience in the visual mediums of comics and film differ from textual descriptions because they present us with sequences of concrete images of bodies. Written imagery, regardless of how much detail is provided, always contains a degree of abstraction that requires readers to form a subjective mental image of what is being expressed. In film and graphic narrative, the body is also more consistently present: whereas literature can provide cues to inform the reader of embodied experience and movement, images are able to convey the body with a more persistent and inevitably more detailed focus (in a visual medium we can, for example, see the exact shape, size, and expression of a character's smile). This is especially the case in film. I do not mean to suggest that comics and film rely on the same narrative structures—indeed, in the following chapters I examine the intricacies of form to parse apart these very different mediums—but they do share a commonality in their narrative interest in storytelling through sequential images and spatial configurations. My intent here is to reflect on the differences and similarities between forms in their attention to the body and temporal experiences. I consider these formal comparisons in greater depth in the conclusion.

Chapter One begins the discussion of remembering and temporal suspension through an examination of embodiment, touch, and forgetting in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000). I argue that the novel, which provides fragmented depictions of individual experiences during the brutality of the civil war in Sri Lanka and is deeply concerned with the past, creates a vital focus on present embodied experiences and touch. While the novel recognizes the ethical importance of remembering the past, it also provides a model of willed forgetting that emerges as a way for characters to survive the horrors of war and to experience valuable moments of life-affirming embodied engagement in the present. As part of my approach I also consider how touch has the potential to violate and harm, but can also close the distance between self and Other and thus appears in the novel as a vital mode of communication.

Chapter Two examines Dionne Brand's short-story collection, *Sans Souci and Other Stories* (1983). Brand's stories demonstrate that the body plays a fundamental and productive role in the psychological processes through which her Black female characters confront a history of oppression. By exploring how the past, present, and future collapse not only in temporal space, but specifically on and around the body, I show how Brand's Black female characters both revile

and revere their bodies as symbols of history in order to survive and persist in the present and to think about the future; in some cases, this bodily engagement ultimately allows them to become empowered in the face of oppression. By attending to embodied experience, this chapter revises the focus in previous criticism on the psychological trauma experienced by Brand's characters,¹² while, as previously mentioned, my approach to the collection as a whole also corrects critics' persistent tendency to read the individual stories as self-contained, and instead aims to position them in conversation with each other. This new critical approach allows me to argue that Brand uses the cycle to present the individual, subjective Black female experience through her focus in each story on a single woman, but also to attend to a collective Black female experience by presenting a number of individual stories as part of a larger whole.

Chapter Three extends and complicates the relationship between temporality and the body by focusing on Book Two of Jeff Lemire's graphic novel trilogy, *Essex County* (2009), and its representation of the aging body in connection with memory and storytelling. Elderly, deaf, and suffering from alcoholism and dementia, Lemire's protagonist, Lou Lebeuf recalls his earlier life in fragments of memory that emerge sometimes from triggers (photographs or places, for example) and sometimes spontaneously. In addressing Lou's struggle to remember his past and tell his personal story, I explore how the narrative's visual rhetoric and complex spatial configuration of time work to express Lou's recourse to memory, as well as the vital role of the body within the process of remembering and storytelling. I argue that Lou uses bodily movement and his physical positioning in space to help him to remember his past and tell his story and that in doing so he is able to regain a sense of agency and purpose. The relationship between memory and the body that enables Lou to tell his story also helps him to experience positive moments of engagement, often figured in the narrative as a pause in time, with his present embodied experience and the external world.

My final chapter, on David Cronenberg's *Spider* (2002), builds on the previous three chapters' discussions of imagination, storytelling, and art to focus on the *artistry* of remembering and engaging with temporal experience. In *Spider*, the mentally ill protagonist of the same name

¹² Although the body of criticism existing on *Sans Souci* is relatively small, critics, with the exception of Candida Rifkind, have not considered the role of the body in Brand's collection as a primary focus.

writes his version of his personal traumatic past in a notebook in order to prompt, reorder, create, and revisit memories. As is the case for Lou in Lemire's *Essex County*, Spider's memories converge with the present, and he actively experiences the past, both real and imagined, in the film's present time. Also like Lou, Spider's temporal experiences—his engagement with past and present moments—are intimately sensory, embodied experiences that rely heavily on his physical presence, movement, and positioning in specific locales. This chapter argues that the film presents a version of memory and selfhood that centres on self-creation and expression, while also contending that embodied experiences and acts, such as Spider's writing and his creation of web-like sculptures, play an integral role in the process of constructing, reviving, and engaging with past and present experiences. As such, this chapter engages with theories of embodied cognition to examine the ways that Spider's body influences his thinking and is inseparable from his psychological navigation of the past and present. Each of the narratives examined here is chosen to convey a spectrum of the ways in which contemporary Canadian narratives engage with time and embodiment; together, they indicate the depth, strength, and complexity of this current of interest.

Chapter 1

Distancing Memory: Touch, Embodiment, and Forgetting in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

“Touch, said Rennie. Is that all? Does it matter that much? Isn't there any more to it than that?”

--Margaret Atwood, *Bodily Harm*, 201

“How can I begin anything new with all of yesterday in me?”

--Leonard Cohen, *Beautiful Losers*, 39

“A person will walk through a hundred doors to carry out the whims of the dead, not realizing he is burying himself away from others.”

--Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost*, 58

Perhaps more than any other Canadian novel, Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000) highlights the role of the body in confronting experiences of war and trauma. Chosen as “the Geneva organization's forensic specialist” (16), Sri Lankan born Anil Tissera travels from the U.S. to Colombo and is teamed with archeologist Sarath Diyasena to investigate the increasing number of deaths in Sri Lanka. Upon the discovery of a recent skeleton in a government protected zone, Anil and Sarath attempt to ascertain the identity of the skeleton, whom they name Sailor, in order to have condemning evidence of state involvement in the war. As the plot driving issue, the search to locate Sailor's identity and to retell his story foregrounds the novel's central concern with the tension between objective evidence, the past, and subjective experiences in the present.

Anil's Ghost juxtaposes descriptions of objectified, often dead, bodies with detailed, individual accounts of the living to suggest the importance of recognizing subjective embodied experiences that are integrated with the specifics of time, culture, and place. Set mainly in Sri Lanka, *Anil's Ghost* provides fragmented depictions of individual experiences during the brutality of the civil war; the novel foregrounds subjective embodied experiences that are in constant dialogue with

the past and the external world.¹³ The recognition of the impermanence of both history and the body frequently leads to a valuing of embodied experience in the present moment. I explore how characters' relationship with history, both personal and political, engages the body, and argue that the novel creates a focus on present embodied experiences and touch that emerges as humanizing and potentially restorative in the face of atrocity and civil war. However, while a focus on the humanizing present may seem to diminish the importance of an engagement with the past and with remembering, I contend that the novel draws attention to the necessity of both past and present, remembering and forgetting.

The scene in which Anil interacts with her medical students while performing an autopsy demonstrates the complexity of the relationship between the past and present. Furthermore, the scene exemplifies how this past-present relationship translates into the ethically charged problems of the characters' communication with and recognition of the personhood of others. My use of the term "recognition" draws on Judith Butler's theory of ethical relations. In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler builds on a Levinasian ethics to argue that to recognize the Other, one must learn the "ability to affirm what is contingent and incoherent" (41) in oneself and thus "vacate the self-sufficient 'I' as a kind of possession" (136). Ethics, she argues, "requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness" (136). For Butler, it is only by recognizing the limits of self-knowledge that one can ethically recognize the Other:

¹³ There have been varied critical responses to the book that both defend Ondaatje's literary engagement with the war in Sri Lanka and criticize the novel as an ethically irresponsible, orientalist aestheticization of violence and political conflict (See Chelva Kanaganayakam's "In Defence of *Anil's Ghost*," Qadri Ismail's "A Flippant Gesture Towards Sri Lanka," Suwanda H.J. Sugunasiri's "'Sri Lankan' Canadian Poets," and Ranjini Mendis's book review for some examples of this debate). I position myself alongside critics such as Margaret Scanlan, Elke Rosochaki, and Gillian Roberts in my approach to the text as being, for the most part, ethically attentive to the trauma of war in Sri Lanka. In her article, "Ethics and Healing: Hospital/ity and *Anil's Ghost*," Roberts argues that "the text presents hospitality and its embodiment in healing as necessary to the process of reconstruction, both personally and nationally" (962). Having said this, and although I think it would be wrong to read such a political text as *pure* artifice, I do approach it as a work of fiction rather than a historical record of an event. As Chelva Kanaganayakam argues, and I agree, "the novel insists on its artifice, not because life does not matter, but because it is the capacity of art to transform reality that allows for the perception of intersections [personal, political, and social]" (16). Ondaatje's interest, as he has expressed in interviews, is in the personal experiences of how individuals survive through and live with violence (Wasqfiri 7). Elsewhere Ondaatje has similarly stated that the novel is not a "statement about the war," but rather his "individual take on four or five characters, a personal tunnelling into it" (qtd. in Jaggi 6).

As we ask to know the other, or ask that the other say, finally or definitively, who she or he is, it will be important not to expect an answer that can ever satisfy. By not pursuing satisfaction, and by letting the question remain open, even enduring, we let the other live, since life might be understood as precisely that which exceeds any account we may try to give of it. If letting the other live is part of any ethical definition of recognition, then this version will be less based on knowledge than on an apprehension of epistemic limits. (41-42)

Butler's theory provides a useful model for considering how Anil's own (failed) recognition of Others gives way to moments when she is willing to "risk" herself—to consider her own bodily fragility and epistemic limits and to reach out to Others, both emotionally and through touch. Occasionally, an awareness of her place in time makes Anil conscious of her own limits.

When Anil arrives in Colombo and is asked to meet with forensics students, the connection between personal and professional time and the body is highlighted to show how personal experience can humanize the historical past. Learning that the "first body they brought in was very recently dead" (13), Anil connects the time of death to her own personal experience during the same time: "When she realized it must have happened during her early-evening walk in the Pettah market, she had to stop her hands from trembling....She never usually translated the time of a death into personal time, but she was still working out what hour it was in London, in San Diego. Five and a half hours. Thirteen and a half hours" (13). Although "the novel estranges and distances the body by recasting or transforming it as forensic object" (Rosochacki 87), Anil's awareness of personal time works against this objectification: it is the realization of her own lived experience at the hour the man was killed that causes her hands to tremble, an embodied reaction that suggests her understanding that the corpse in front of her "was still someone" (Ondaatje 13).

Despite this recognition, Anil attempts to distance herself from the present by submerging herself in a focus on the past. Although she recognizes that the body she examines is still "someone" and spends much of her time trying to locate Sailor's identity—"[to] give him a name would name the rest," the narrator tells us (56)—she does not remember in the present time the names of the two students with whom she interacts:

They seemed nervous, even afraid.

“What are your names again?”

They told her. (14)

The apparently deliberate elision of the students’ names from the text, coupled with the fact that Anil has to ask “again” who they are, draws attention to the link between naming and the recognition of human subjectivity and suggests that Anil neglects to consider the lives of the living even as she tries to create a life narrative from the corpse she examines. It is not, then, surprising that when one of her students, responding to Anil’s observation that the victim’s hands had been raised before death, suggests that the victim was praying when he was killed, Anil “stop[s] and look[s] up at the student who had spoken” (14). The student’s suggestion, which is sandwiched between Anil’s objective readings of the corpse to determine the cause of his injuries, causes Anil to pause because it asks her to consider the living, subjective experience of the person who died and, by acknowledging the speaker, the lives of those with whom she works. Still, Anil’s momentary emergence from her focus on the past does result in her ethical recognition of the student. Instead, she remains “out of touch” with the present and the living—a position that is enforced by the sentence that immediately follows her pause, which objectively describes the “next corpse brought in” (14). Anil’s detachment from others and from the present is progressively countered by moments when she recognizes her own present embodied experience, as well as that of others.

Although remembering and a “preoccupation with history is at the very heart of *Anil’s Ghost*” (Burton 40), the focus on embodiment and present time often involves a recognition of the importance of temporary forgetting: the novel features experiences of momentary oblivion in which characters “forget” history and the traumas of the civil war and are able to experience themselves and others wholly in the present. While I consider remembering in relation to and as inextricable from forgetting, my primary focus is on the latter; much scholarship already exists

about the novel's interest in remembering.¹⁴ There is an overarching concern with various forms of forgetting that run throughout the novel. *Anil's Ghost* highlights the characters' various attempts to both remember and forget the past, the individual forgetting of traumatic events, and subjective experiences of pathological forgetting through the character Leaf, Anil's friend who suffers from Alzheimer's disease. It also suggests that the civil war has installed in Sri Lanka what might perhaps be best described as a "national forgetting" of community and ethics. In illustrating these various forms of forgetting—individual/collective; agential/traumatic/pathological—Ondaatje complicates the straightforwardness of the division between remembering and forgetting. The novel also suggests that instances of willed, or motivated, forgetting are not always easily separated from traumatic forgetting; both may involve an agential act in which one purposefully attempts to forget certain events. Pathological forgetting, on the other hand, is portrayed in the novel as a less agential form of forgetting that highlights the transience and materiality of the body and the impossibility of maintaining a perfect or complete memory. The novel's presentation of pathological forgetting shows that subjectivity does not depend on remembering; Leaf's memory loss, for example, challenges Anil's need for shared memories to define her relationship to Leaf. While *Anil's Ghost* recognizes the ethical importance of remembering the past, then, it provides a model of willed forgetting that emerges as a way to survive the horrors of war and to experience valuable moments of life-affirming embodied engagement in the present. It also, however, complicates this idea by showing that just as characters' engagement with the past can be solipsistic, forgetting can also be escapist. Ondaatje shows in *Anil's Ghost* that forgetting, while generally considered a negative experience, is inseparable from the processes of remembering and of ethically recognizing the Other, and is therefore humanizing and integral to his characters' development.

This chapter builds on the work of thinkers, such as Anne Basting, Frederich Nietzsche, and Søren Kierkegaard, who, in their respective disciplines, attempt to correct the notion that

¹⁴ See, for example, Antoinette Burton's "Archive of Bones: *Anil's Ghost* and the Ends of History," Milena Marinkova's "'Perceiving [...] in one's own body' the Violence of History, Politics and Writing: *Anil's Ghost* and Witness Writing," and Aarthi Vadde's "National Myth, Transnational Memory: Ondaatje's Archival Method."

remembering is always better than forgetting. Basting, in her work on aging and memory loss, rallies for a new approach to memory loss that confronts the fear of forgetting and ultimately promotes an engagement with the present. While recognizing the difficulty of everyday living with dementia and memory loss, Basting questions the assumed notion that memory is the basis of identity. In *Either/Or* Kierkegaard differentiates forgetting from being forgetful to argue that forgetting is active and can be developed as an art (27). In “The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” Nietzsche argues that “it is altogether impossible to live at all without forgetting” (62). He connects the ability to forget to the experience of being fully present and being fully human. Humans, he argues, envy animals because the “animal lives *unhistorically*: for it is contained in the present . . . it conceals nothing and at every instant appears wholly as what it is; it can therefore never be anything but honest. Man, on the other hand, braces himself against the great and ever greater pressure of what is past” (61). While I do not agree with Nietzsche’s assumption that animals are contained wholly in the present (indeed, many recent studies prove that animals can remember past events, traumatic experiences, language, and even solutions to puzzles), and we cannot say for certain whether or not animals have a sense of the past in relation to the present, the ability to recognize our transience and position ourselves within a vast temporal framework is perhaps a particularly human quality. Despite the novel’s highlighting of the desire to live in the present, it is the limitations of time and memory—the awareness of history and the past that is, Nietzsche argues, unavailable to animals—that push characters to recognise the value of the present and of the momentary forgetting of time. Nietzsche reaches the conclusion that “*the unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people, and of a culture* (63; italics in original). The editors of *The Art of Forgetting* make a similar assertion when they write that “forgetting is often a merciful as well as a mandatory art” (Forty et. al. xiii). Nietzsche’s assertion that the unhistorical and the historical are equally necessary is central to my approach to *Anil’s Ghost*, and is apparent in the novel’s portrayal of moments when characters’ forgetting of their history allows them to experience, through touch and embodied engagement, more ethical connections with others and/or the briefest moments of pleasure.

As a way to frame representations of embodied experiences, of forgetting, and of the past and present, I consider the relationship between “distance” and “closeness” with which the novel is concerned. This tension between distance and closeness is often presented in the literal physical

distance between characters or in the “distance” between self and body—the moments when characters are “out of touch” with others and with their own embodied experience. In *Anil’s Ghost*, an engagement with one’s own body and a closeness to others entail a distancing from history or a temporary forgetting that allows characters to fully experience the present. In her work on witnessing in *Anil’s Ghost*, Milena Marinkova notices the “dialogue between distance and proximity” (122), which she reads as a relationship between vision, or sight, and physicality: “Ondaatje foregrounds proximity as a non-appropriative approach to the Other that reasserts their opaque unknowability and unsettles the assumed supremacy of ocular centrism” (109); the novel, she argues, renounces the “power of vision and visibility [and reinserts] the importance of tactile experience,” the importance of “the body in the act of witnessing” (121). I disagree that the novel wholly renounces vision to acclaim the tactile on the basis that vision is an inherently embodied, sensory experience that cannot be detached from experiences of embodied being,¹⁵ but Marinkova is right to stress Ondaatje’s empowerment of the body “to act as an affectionate witness to the inscrutability of pain, the inexpressibility of grief, the silence of the witnesses to pain” (121). I extend this dialogue between embodiment, distance, and proximity to include the distance between time, past and present.

The novel complicates a purely negative reading of Anil’s distancing, or her forgetting, of the external world by including scenes that point to the necessity of such forgetting. The description of the *walawwa*, the house where Sarath, Anil, and Ananda stay, might be read as a clue to Ondaatje’s use of distance in describing the relationship between the subject and the external world: “The site and location, the careful use of distance—how far back you can stand from the building to look at it, the lack of great views from another person’s land—make you turn inward rather than dominate the world around you” (201). The description provides a concrete example of how Ondaatje connects certain experiences of distance between the self and the external world to an ethical relinquishing of power or control and an inward turn to the self. Anil’s reconnection

¹⁵ Marinkova’s reading emerges from an understanding of the text as depicting “[discursive] formulations of the corporeal [that] alternate between an impenetrable irreducibility that is constantly undergoing mystification and an authentic reflection of internal essence that needs deconstruction” (110). This leads Marinkova to assert that “[one] cannot help discerning in such interpretations the stark delineation between an intangible essence (the true self) and a corporeal shell enveloping it” (110). Such an approach seems to leave out the novel’s portrayal of the kind of complex embodied experiences that this chapter examines.

to her individual embodied experience through a distancing of the external world is central in the scene in which she showers as she comes down with an illness. The scene nuances the notion that one must be constantly engaged with Others and with the external world by suggesting that the suffering body is all-consuming and removes one from the outside world.¹⁶ The passage reads as follows:

She was still half asleep in the shower. Her toes nestled against a piece of rough granite, cold water gushing down onto her hair. She washed her face, rubbing the peppermint soap on her closed eyelids, then rinsing it off. When she looked over the plantain leaves at shoulder level into the distance she could see the blue mountains beyond, the out-of-focus world, beautiful. But by noon she was encased in a terrible headache. (59)

Rosochacki points out that in this passage Anil's embodied experience is "grounded in sensory perception of the environment"¹⁷ (35) and argues that "Anil's immediate physical surroundings as she showers are experienced at the same time as that which constitutes the interior of her consciousness" (35). Although I agree with Rosochacki that Anil appears as "an embodied subject whose consciousness is incarnate and who is indissolubly connected to the world" (35), the passage, in its conscious use of the word "distance," simultaneously suggests Anil's separation from the outside world and particularly, as in the case of the students whose names she cannot remember, from others. At this point in the novel the present world is, for Anil, somewhat "out of focus." This position is not, however, without value. In being distanced from the world Anil is also distanced from time—from her engagement with the historical and personal past—and thus is made wholly present during her bodily experience. The detailed cataloguing of her corporeal movements and sensations suggests her focused engagement with the present, which functions, despite her illness, to reconnect her to an embodied sense of self.

¹⁶ As Elaine Scarry has argued in her work on the body in pain, "[it] is the intense pain that destroys a person's self and world, a destruction experienced spatially as either the contraction of the universe down to the immediate vicinity of the body or as the body swelling to fill the entire universe" (35).

¹⁷ Carla Comellini similarly argues that the physical world is "expressed through imagery connected to the body" (187).

Anil, in this scene, might also be read as a model for Western readers, who may have a similarly “out of focus” relationship to Sri Lanka and its history. Indeed, my discussion of distance cannot be separated from formal aspects of the text that signal Ondaatje’s interest in Sri Lanka’s distance—both geographical and cultural—from the Western world. This distance is indicated by Ondaatje’s references to maps, which reveal the contours of the land but no “*depiction of human life*” (40; italics in original), and his attention to the multiple but limited views of the country they reveal: “*The National Atlas of Sri Lanka has seventy-three versions of the island—each template revealing only one aspect, one obsession*” (39; italics in original). Ondaatje’s interest in touch and embodiment in the present time, then, provides a model that strongly contrasts with the distanced and objective, specular engagement with Sri Lanka symbolized in the references to maps. This focus on subjective experience allows Western readers, even if only within the aesthetic realm, to respond to a more immediate and humanistic portrayal of Sri Lanka. The novel thus counters the focus on the past with moments of embodied engagement that occur in the narrative’s present time, and which often bring characters into a state of “closeness” to their own present, embodied experiences and to others.

Such attendance to the body, I contend, is inextricable from an intimate engagement with time, both in the novel’s content and form. The formal aspects of the text mirror the novel’s thematic focus on archeology, excavation, and time: the novel swerves between different times and characters and provides frequent interruptions in the form of italicized pages that offer fragments of information or details of past events. The temporal dimensions of the novel—the fragmented parts that the reader must piece together—are, as Margaret Scanlan suggests, critical to conveying “the experience of terror” (302). The “abrupt breaks in time,” or “chronochisms,”¹⁸ that occur throughout the novel refuse a sense of unity and thus create “a sense of time experienced through terror, by people living in fear that they can be blown away in an instant, to whom historical perspective is an alien luxury” (303). Building on and expanding Scanlan’s analysis, I suggest that a focus on fragmented present-time experiences is both an indication of the effects of trauma and a strategy to move beyond trauma.

¹⁸ Scanlan draws on Ursula Heise’s term “chronoschisms” to refer to “ruptures [in time] that postmodern novelists, unlike their modernist predecessors, refuse to assimilate to the ‘unifying time of the individual mind’” (303).

Breaks in time accommodate moments of forgetting in which characters become aware of their embodied experience and their connection to others, but these breaks also require the reader to piece together the fragments of the story to create meaning and thus make the reader acutely aware of the text as a highly stylized and self-conscious artifact. By conveying the effect of specific moments in time through individual, non-linear narrative episodes, the novel's form reflects the privileging of momentary, present experiences that characters experience. Scanlan rightly argues that the novel exemplifies "Ondaatje's skill at reconfiguring the postmodern sense of time, the time of chronoschism, so that it acquires human possibilities" (315-316). I argue further that these human possibilities are located in the embodied relationship between self and world and self and other. The fragmented, non-chronological progression of the novel also mirrors the resistance to wholeness that Ondaatje espouses and highlights the characters' impossible struggle to locate a coherent version of history.¹⁹ As Scanlan asserts:

Ondaatje seems to assume the failure of a progressive historical narrative, making no attempt to project fictional solutions to terrorism and guerilla war. That nothing lasts, that granite monuments crumble, seems to drive him to value the briefest fragments of time, to respect the moment of absolute love or generosity, the flash of intuition, the graceful walk of a young woman who will not survive another day. (316)

These brief fragments of time, I contend, centre around embodied experiences and touch and highlight moments when the seemingly impossible project of assembling a coherent historical and personal past is temporarily forgotten or distanced.

¹⁹ Scanlan's approach resonates with critical approaches to postmodern literature that point out the impossibility of a unified self and history. In their article "Time and Postmodernism," David R. Dickens and Andrea Fontana draw on Jaques Lacan and Fredric Jameson to assert that postmodern culture effaces historical time on a collective level (393) and thus "individuals in postmodern society cannot unify the past, present, and future of their own biographical experience" (394). The acceleration of experienced time is largely due to technological advancements, which Ondaatje foregrounds in his work but also counters with moments of temporal suspension when characters engage with their embodied experiences and with others.

The novel's wartime context highlights the potential vulnerability and suffering of the body and shows how violence during war aims to injure or destroy the body. Both Elke Rosochacki²⁰ and Milena Marinkova work with Elaine Scarry's theories of the body to address how the novel demonstrates the potential for the body to become dissociated from the self through pain and torture. "[The] person in great pain experiences his own body as the agent of his agony," argues Scarry. "The ceaseless, self-announcing signal of the body in pain, at once so empty and undifferentiated and so full of blaring adversity, contains not only the feeling 'my body hurts' but the feeling 'my body hurts me'" (47). The descriptions of killings and injured bodies, as well as the intermittent focus on the emergency rooms in hospitals that bears witness to the "multitude of injured" (Rosochacki 90), emphasize Ondaatje's attempt to "disclose a physical experience" (91) that not only grants the embodied experience of war a central place in the narrative, but positions "dead and injured bodies [as a] proscription against harming the other and as a solicitation for help" (94). My exploration of the novel's temporal dimensions and the non-violent, embodied experiences of living characters is likewise positioned against this backdrop of killing and injuring.

Touch emerges as a particular kind of embodied experience that has the potential to violate and harm, but that can also close the distance between self and Other. "Where hearing, sight, and smell extend the body beyond its own boundaries," asserts Elizabeth Harvey, "touch insists on the corporeal because it relies upon contiguity or proximity for its operations" (Harvey 2). *Anil's Ghost* presents the connection between touch and distance/proximity as complex: touch is at once feared and destructive, desirable and healing. The novel suggests a dialectic between violent and tender touch that posits positive forms of touch as remedial to the violence of civil war. Both forms of touch—violent and non-violent—involve a proximity between characters that highlight physical intimacy. The complexity of this intimate relationship is perfectly captured in the scene in which Sarath remembers watching insurgents capture and blindfold a man and take him away, presumably to his death, on the crossbars of a bicycle. "When they took off," Sarath recalls, "the blindfolded man had to somehow hang on. One hand on the handlebars, but the other he had to put around the neck of his captor. It was this necessary intimacy that was

²⁰ See Rosochacki's fifth chapter, "The Body in Peril: Death and Injury in Contemporary Warfare," for a detailed discussion of the injured body during war.

disturbing....The blindfolded man had to balance his body in tune with his possible killer” (154-5). A similarly complex presentation of the dialectic between violent and non-violent touch occurs in the descriptions of Lakma, the young girl who lives with the elderly epigraphist Palipana and who witnessed her parents’ brutal murder. Lakma’s trauma is described as a physical experience of touch: “The shock of the murder...had touched everything within her, driving both her verbal and her motor ability into infancy....She wanted nothing more to invade her” (103). The invasive touch of what Lakma witnesses silences her voice and damages her own relationship to her body and its movement. Yet, years later when she lives with the blind Palipana in the Grove of Ascetics, it is her touch that restores his world: she washes and shaves him, guides him, and rubs his feet (106). Frequently, the novel situates the body’s potential for violence next to the kind of tenderness of touch that Lakma exhibits towards Palipana.

Anil’s Ghost’s focus on embodiment and touch also involves a relationship to place; indeed, Lakma’s movement from an embodied experience of violence to one of tenderness also entails her physical relocation to a forest monastery, a pastoral setting. Such connections extend the relationship between interpersonal experiences of distance and proximity to encompass geographical distances: the space between the physical places where instances of physical violence and instances of meaningful embodied experience/non-violent touch occur. The novel therefore frequently suggests a correlation between rural, natural settings and embodied experience or touch, and implies that the return to the body, or to touch, also involves a return to the pastoral. In this sense, nature is posited as an antidote to war and violence.²¹ However, although it reasserts the value of material, embodied existence, the novel sometimes borders on generating a problematic and essentializing correlation between nurturing, maternal touch or care and Nature—an association of which I am critically aware as I trace the connections between physical place and instances of touch/embodied experience.

The first instance of physical violence in the book is represented through art, in what reads like a self-reflexive comment on Ondaatje’s own fictional project. The second italicized passage

²¹ The idea of the natural or pastoral offering relief from or contrast to industrialism and wartime suffering might be traced in other works of Canadian war fiction such as Joseph Boyden’s *Three Day Road* (2006) and Timothy Findley’s *The Wars* (1977).

describes a Buddhist temple where in 1918 archeologists had discovered a panorama of Bodhisattvas carved into the walls, which were then removed and/or destroyed. The cave is described as the site of a “*complete crime. Heads separated from bodies. Hands broken off. None of the bodies remained*” (12). The corporeal language that describes the brutal dismantling of the art foreshadows the brutality of human atrocities that the novel later addresses: the Bodhisattvas had been “*cut out of the walls with axes and saws, the edges red, suggesting the wound’s incision*” (12). In using art to introduce human violence, the book signals its own status as art in relation to the wounded bodies it represents; as Hutcheon points out, Ondaatje is a writer “fascinated with borders, including those between art and reality” (81). This self-awareness reminds the reader that touch, both violent and caring, is mediated through the book and through the reader’s imagination. Such awareness grants the focus on touch and embodiment a political element in that it brings a non-native reader “in touch” with events in Sri Lanka.

The passage also functions to indicate Ondaatje’s resistance to unity and his interest in embodiment: the separation of “heads from bodies” functions on a metaphorical level to suggest the problematic separation of mind and body, while also suggesting the impossibility of a fixed version of self. The distance established in this early scene between the psychological and the corporeal is increasingly attended to as the novel progresses in moments in which characters become acutely aware of their embodied experience. Marinkova similarly observes of the novel as a whole that the “loss of integrity of the human body—with body parts removed, stitched, replaced valued in monetary terms, purchased and discarded—is mirrored in the impossibility of a unitary and coherent self” (113). This resistance to unity and wholeness is later captured in the novel’s image of the reconstructed Buddha, the reassembled face of which looks “quilted” (302). The novel thus recognizes the desire for unity while acknowledging, as Marlene Goldman points out, “separation and difference” (8). Such recognition of this lack of unity has roots in Buddhist thinking. The process of mindfulness meditation, for example, attempts to correct the dissociation of mind from body to achieve mindfulness/awareness, which both “works with, and so expresses, our basic embodiment,” while recognizing the impossibility of a fixed or coherent self (Varela et. al. 28). This emphasis on the fragmentation of bodies and of the self, which is further embodied in the form of the text, is countered by instances of engaged, embodied experience; in these fleeting moments, the forgetting of time and the privileging of the present

and the body—essential to forms of Buddhist meditation—provide both characters and readers with temporary and necessary relief from the impossibility of achieving coherence and order.

Following this relationship between fragmentation and embodied awareness, it is not surprising that Anil and Sarath's engagement with the dead, their work of exhuming and examining bone fragments and corpses, is juxtaposed with their own embodied experiences; in fact, the trope of excavation—of unearthing the past, but also of unearthing one's own memories and emotions—is central to the novel. Anil pieces together information about dead bodies in order to locate the identity of the skeleton, Sailor, that she discovers, while Sarath collects ancient fragments in order to piece together historical places and events. These scientific explorations of the past give way to very personal subjective explorations of self in the present. Archeology, then, comes to represent time and memory, and the trope of excavation also applies to the uncovering of human emotions and feelings through an engagement with the living body: a shift that unearths, or reveals, the present as much as the past.

Throughout the novel Anil undergoes what I will call an excavation of self, whereby a focus on the past, both personal and historical, moves her toward an engagement with the present. This self-excavation culminates in her pivotal interaction with the artist-turned-miner Ananda Udugama, an event to which I will return later in the chapter, in which Anil considers, for the first time in any depth, the subjectivity of others. Anil's return to Sri Lanka is itself a kind of self exhumation. Although she leaves Sri Lanka at eighteen and feels that the island “no longer held her by the past” (11), her return revives memories of her childhood and marriage that she had previously repressed. Not long after her return Anil feels “glad to be back, the *buried* senses from childhood alive in her” (15; emphasis added). This link between archeological work and emotional exhumation is made again when Anil's oppressive marriage is described as a claustrophobic event that “almost buried her” (144). The connection between her own ongoing self-excavation so parallels her professional work that even before her return to Sri Lanka she is described as sleeping buried “deep in the white linen bed” while her hand moves “constantly, as if brushing earth away” (34). The scene suggests a connection between her physically movement and her cognitive process. Anil's engagement with the past and with her work is so consuming that present moments of embodied experience, in which she temporarily forgets both work and history, emerge as intensely meaningful. For example, when Anil reunites with her *aya*, Lalitha,

they communicate in a “lost language” that centres around touch: “When Anil leaned back the old woman was weeping; she put her hands out and ran them over Anil’s hair. Anil held her arms” (22). Part of Anil’s excavation of self involves a slow retrieval of this lost language of touch for which she “aches” (22), and which moves her into an aware and present experience with herself and others. The maternal nature of her bond with Lalitha also signals the first instance of Ondaatje’s interest in exalting mothering relationships as examples of unconditional care and love that juxtapose with instances of violence. It is also, perhaps, no coincidence that Anil’s recovery of a lost language of embodied communication with Lalitha corresponds with a movement away from the city and towards nature; they reunite in a small village outside of Rajagiriya, and outdoors amongst the “speckled leaves of crotons” that had fallen in the yard (22).

Such moments of individual temporary forgetting exist alongside a focus on memory that pulls characters into an acute awareness of personal and historical time and other characters. Indeed, forgetting is “part and parcel of a larger project of remembering” (Forty and K uchler xii). Often, the novel juxtaposes the past and the reading of dead bodies with Anil’s recognition of living bodies and a consideration of those in the present. The short italicized section that opens the novel introduces the tension between reading bodies as objects of science and reading individual identities and emotions through bodily language, and demonstrates how representations of embodied experience are frequently preceded by empirical readings of bodies. It also suggests the intimate relationship between history and present embodied experience.

The passage describes how a forensic team, which includes Anil, works at a grave site in Guatemala to unearth the dead while family members who have lost loved ones wait, “*present all day,*” in case it is “*their son in the pit*” (5). The scientific, objectifying language that describes the dead as “*half-revealed forms*” and “*submerged bones*” is countered by the grieving actions of the living, those who conduct a “*vigil for the dead*” (5). Even the use of the word “present” to describe the living contrasts the forensic team’s focus on the past and draws attention to the experience of the watching family members—their absolute awareness of the present time as they wait in the hope of recovering the body of a loved one. Although Anil works to excavate and identify the bodies in the grave, the passage points to her reading of living bodies as equally important. On returning to the site the team see a woman, who had “*lost a husband and a brother*

during an abduction in this region a year earlier” (6), “sitting within the grave” beside the two bodies (5). Both the living and dead, who exist, for this moment, within the same underground space, are connected by Anil’s reading of their physical appearance. That this unnamed living woman sits within the grave—the site where past and present, living and dead, meet—invites us to interpret Anil’s reading of her body as an alternative form of excavation, the exposure of human feeling and emotion. The scene is echoed at the end of the novel when Ananda, overseeing the reconstruction of the Buddha statue from within a “mud trench, which resembled a hundred-foot-long-coffin” (301), occupies a similar position between past and present and remembers the dead as he engages with the living. It is Anil’s reading of the grieving woman’s body in the present, rather than her reading of the bodies of the deceased, that returns her to the human and to a more ethical engagement with other characters.

The woman’s posture is almost scientifically catalogued—“[she] *was on her haunches, her legs under her in formal prayer, elbows in her lap, looking down at the remains of the two bodies*” (Ondaatje 5-6)—yet Anil is unable to describe or forget “*the woman’s face*” (6) or the “*grief of love in that shoulder*” (6). The emotions that are so vividly registered in this woman’s body contrast with the objective inertness of the descriptions of dead bodies that appear earlier in the section. Additionally, the unnamed woman’s intense emotions resist the scientific modes of discourse linked with forensics, which reduce those who have died to “forms” and “bones.” Instead, the woman’s presence instigates a shift in both time and language, whereby Anil considers the dead as seeming like men in the present, “*asleep beside each other on a mat in the afternoon*” (6). The novel thus suggests that an engagement with living bodies brings characters into an engagement with the present and is crucial to humanizing the tragedies the book addresses.

This scene also sets up a tension between historical/professional time and personal time: the distance between the facts of history that the scientists obtain at the gravesite and the mourning woman’s subjective temporal experience. Indeed, the grieving woman’s life with the deceased is described in terms of the personal time she spent with them: “*they would return for the afternoon and enter the hut, eat the lunch she had made and sleep for an hour. Each afternoon of the week she was part of this*” (6). For Anil, too, her professional work of piecing together the past shifts into a personal experience of the present through her reading of the woman’s body. That she

“will not forget, still remembers” the woman’s embodied grief makes the past a personal and present experience for Anil. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the skeleton that becomes the focus of Anil’s investigation, “Sailor,” is discovered in a “timeless” region (50) and within a cave that contains ancient burials. In the same way that the unnamed woman weeps in the grave of the dead, Sailor’s location in an ancient burial site suggests that the present is superimposed on the past and that Anil’s engagement with Sailor’s history will also instigate an engagement with the present.

The novel frequently alludes to the distance or closeness of time to highlight the tension between the characters’ interaction with the past and with the subjective experience of present time. The impossibility of making sense of history due to the distance of time only increases the significance of moments that occur in the novel’s present time. When Anil considers the tragedies of Hiroshima and Pompeii, for example, she realises that “there could never be any logic to the human violence without the distance of time” (55). However, the novel’s focus on contemporary wartime devastation and cruelty, and Anil’s inability to locate any stable logic to explain human violence, suggests that even with the distance of time such violence still evades logic and meaning. As Scanlan points out, “Ondaatje implies not just that the victim does not have time to get into a debate about how many casualties a U.S. land invasion of Japan would have created, but that any time we do so, we are moving away from the victim’s experience, to which ‘no one could ever give meaning’” (306). The novel suggests, then, that if meaning is to be found anywhere, it is within moments that occur in the present time during which characters simultaneously recognize their own embodied experience and the experiences of others. To complicate this further, Ondaatje is, as I have previously shown, careful to point to the artifice of his work by drawing subtle, self-reflexive connections between art and the novel. The meaning I locate in present moments of embodied engagement, then, must be recognized to exist only in the aesthetic realm, in fictional representations of embodiment. This creates another form of distance between reality and imagination: the shifting gap between the experience of reading fiction and of ethically considering the very real implications of Sri Lanka’s civil war.

The relationship between art and life is also signalled by the title of the novel’s final section “Distance,” which details the reconstruction of the Buddha statue and Ananda’s painting of the eyes in the Nētra Mangala ceremony. The title refers in part, perhaps, to Ananda’s feeling of

distance from the “greatness of a faith” (304) as well as from a belief in the “originality of artists” (303). These distances, however, are countered by his physical interaction with, or closeness to, the boy with whom he works. Despite its engagement with the past through the reconstruction of the Buddhas, the scene, which I will later examine in greater detail, offers perhaps the most overt example of diminishing distance between Ananda and the external world. The section title therefore draws attention to the closing of distance through moments of embodied engagement and touch. Such embodied moments as are envisioned in the aesthetic realm of the novel might also be seen to offer a form of consolation for the inability to intervene in the acts of violence that have already occurred.

The novel also uses ideas of distance and closeness to underline the restrictions of time experienced by characters and how the limitations of time affect personal relationships. For example, the word “distance” appears when Anil receives a phone call from her best friend Leaf and hears “the noise of great distances on the line between them” (63). As it is later revealed that Leaf is suffering from Alzheimer’s, this distance refers not only to the physical space that separates them, but to the separation of past and present time, the history of their friendship which Leaf is increasingly unable to recall. Emotional distances between characters are frequently connected to references to time. Doctor Linus Corea, who is kidnapped by insurgents and made to work at a camp, is described as being emotionally distant from his family and exhibiting an “essential lack of interest or, if not that, a *lack of time* for others on the street” (120; emphasis added). The novel’s brief diversion into Corea’s life works to highlight the often restrictive connection between time and human relationships that runs throughout the novel: his life is controlled by the hours of the day that he is made to work, just as Anil’s own relationship to her work is restricted by the limited amount of time she and Sarath have been allocated. Anil and Sarath are, as Antoinette Burton points out, on their own “race against time...to prove Anil’s theory about [Sailor] being murdered and then moved by government agents” (46). The presence of such time restrictions foregrounds moments in the narrative when characters become aware of the present moment and their embodied experience and/or recognise the experience of others.

The oscillation between professional/historical time and personal time that occurs throughout *Anil’s Ghost* helps to move Anil from experiences in which she appears distanced from the present and the living to experiences where she gains an awareness of herself and/or of others.

The constant swerving of history and science into the personal has the effect of bonding private emotional experiences and memory with scientific and professional work and time. When, at work, Sarath tells Anil about the tradition of placing stones on top of a skeleton's chest area so that years later the stones would fall "into the space left by decayed flesh, as if signalling the departure of a spirit" (20), Anil is reminded of a childhood experience that continues to haunt her. She recalls that as a child she "stepped on the shallow grave of a recently buried chicken, her weight driving the air in the dead body out through its beak" (20). The "muffled squawk" that Anil remembers seems to parallel the "departure of a spirit" that Sarath describes in the human ritual that jolts her childhood memory (20). The sound signals a confusion between life and death and thus between present and past. That Anil as an adult remembers the event so vividly and is "still haunted by what had occurred that afternoon" (20) suggests, like her memory of the "*grief of love*" in the mourning woman's shoulder, that the past informs her present. Indeed, it is likely no coincidence that her memory of the chicken, which blurs past and present, life and death, occurs immediately before Anil recognises that one of the bones from Sarath's sixth-century collection "doesn't come from that time" (21). The bone, of course, belongs to Sailor, the skeleton whose unknown identity Anil and Sarath attempt to discover through the course of the narrative.

Such moments of connection between the personal past and Anil's work in the present are made all the more powerful due to Ondaatje's portrayal of Anil as an aloof or detached character. Interestingly, Rosochacki uses the word "distance" to describe Anil's unknowability: "Anil's seeming strangeness or inscrutability may be construed as a distance deliberately maintained by the writer, signaling an understanding of human subjectivity as fundamentally enigmatic or never entirely knowable" (35). The generally sustained enigma of Anil's subjectivity draws attention not only to the impossibility of fully knowing the other, but also to moments when Anil recognizes, or fails to recognize, the subjective experience of other characters.

Present moments that privilege physical experiences of pleasure or communication with others are firmly situated against the recent and/or the historical past. Characters' engagement with their physicality, as occurs when Anil reunites with Lalitha, signals a shift back to an embodied experience that is grounded in an engagement with the world. For instance, standing after work in the shallow pool of water in her Colombo apartment, Anil cleanses herself of the past through

a sensual, somatic experience: “Anil would slip out of her sandals and stand in the shallow water, her toes among the white petals, her arms folded as she undressed the day, removing layers of events and incidents so they would no longer be within her” (Ondaatje 67). Although rituals of being in water or washing, which occur throughout the novel, “articulate an aesthetics of everyday living based in a fundamental attentiveness to the body” (Rosochacki 48), they are also inseparable from an engagement with time that moves characters into an acute awareness and appreciation of the present. Time, in the previous example, is expressed as being accrued like geological layers and contained within the body; Anil must remove, or forget, “layers” of the past to return to an awareness of, and a closeness to, her embodied experience in the present. A similar connection between time and the body is expressed when Anil and Sarath visit the elderly epigraphist Palipina. Anil becomes alert to the “intricacies of what was around them” (Ondaatje 97), and gains an awareness of her embodied experience that is presented as animal-like: “It felt to Anil as if her pulse had fallen asleep, that she was moving like the slowest animal in the world through grass” (97). Time, syntactically linked to the body by the description of Anil’s sleeping pulse, is suspended while she experiences the details of her body and her surroundings.

The frequent references to water—washing, showering, and swimming—play into the novel’s focus on pleasurable sensual experience and embodiment that closes the distance between world and self and counter the examples of violence done to the body. They also reinforce connections between the body and the natural world, suggesting that embodied engagement and touch are often coupled with a pastoral shift. Swimming, for instance, is positioned as a sensual pastime that allows characters to engage with the body and to find some release from “the mental regime imposed on the subject during the workday” (Rosochacki 38), but also involves a physical movement that frees the body from the confines of urban space. For Sarath, dancing and swimming conflate to enable such a feeling of embodied liberation: “Alone in the waves he would let go of himself, his body flung around as if in a dance” (278). Swimming is also, though, connected to a specific experience of time. During work and when swimming, Anil situates herself within a temporal frame and compares both pursuits by using a temporal register of experience: “In some ways her later obsessive tunneling toward discovery was similar to that underwater world, where she swam within the rhythm of intense activity, *as if peering through time* (69; emphasis added). The sentence suggests that the physical experience of swimming allows Anil to engage with different temporalities as much as her intellectual work, but that the

rigour of both pursuits does not instigate a forgetting of time but rather an acute awareness of it. This is contrasted by moments in the lab when her work brings her into a state of suspended time in which she feels that she “could walk around the table watching a body from the corner of her eye, then sit on the stool and time would be forgotten” (67). In the latter instance, the forgetting of time results in Anil’s being fully present so that she has no “hunger or thirst or desire for a friend or lover’s company” but only an awareness of her immediate surroundings, “someone in the distance hammering a floor” (66). Her experience in and connection to her environment is fully embodied: “She stood against the table and it nestled into her hipbones. She slid her fingers along the dark wood to feel for any grain of sand, any chip or crumb or stickiness. In her solitude” (66). The experience of forgetting time and being fully present results in Anil’s increased awareness of her body, and allows her to exist, temporarily, in an unhistorical mode that allows her to engage with her present embodied experience.

The embodied experience of listening and dancing to music also functions to allow characters to forget the past and the duress of work so they can fully experience the present. Remembering her experience in Oklahoma, Anil recalls how she and her colleagues, whose work with the dead makes them acutely aware of human mortality, “snuffed out death with music and craziness” (147). A similar snuffing out of a personal and historical sense of time occurs when Anil dances to music in the *walawwa* courtyard. As with other representations of intense embodied engagement, Anil’s experience occurs away from the populated city in a secluded, outdoor space, “out of harm’s way” (164). Anil performs a back flip, “waking every muscle in herself, blindfolding every rule she lives by, giving every mental skill she has to the movement of her body” (181). Dance, like music, acts as a “moral and spiritual force” (261) that frequently entails a temporarily liberating forgetting of the outside world and an engagement with the body. Being fully aware of her embodied experience in the present requires Anil to “blindfold” the rules that govern her everyday life—to forget the death and war that surrounds her and the skeleton, Sailor, who lies in the room beside her as she dances. In this state Anil is “invisible to herself, though it is the state she longs for” (181-182). Rosochacki interprets this invisibility as signifying “an oblivion of sorts, an altered state or loss of the ordinary sense of self” that equates to transcendence (Rosochacki 39). However, rather than transcend her state of being, I contend that Anil becomes fully conscious of it during the dance; it is Anil’s oblivion, her temporary forgetting of time and the outside world, that allows her to be acutely aware of her present,

embodied experience. In contrast to her experience of physical stasis that precedes the dance, where she stands “lost in the stricture of no movement, in a precise focus of thought” (176), her dance is so overwhelmingly physical that when it ends she is able to “[witness] her brain coming back” (182). Even the use of the word “brain” rather than “mind” emphasizes the physical aspect of Anil’s body. Anil’s forgetting of her intellectual focus and of historical time results in her communication with “nature’s cosmic time, with her body’s biological rhythm, thus allowing the body to ‘speak’” (Staels 984). In other words, during the dance, an awareness of historical time is temporarily replaced by an awareness of immediate time and the rhythm of the body. That Anil longs to remain in this state suggests her desire to exist in the present.

This kind of embodied engagement with the present, and distance from the external world, is most overtly demonstrated through the blind character Palipana, for whom the body is central to his understanding and interpretation of what is around him. Although Palipana’s sheltered existence in the “Grove of Ascetics” is presented as enviable, it also suggests what Rosochacki calls a “sublime sort of detachment from the world” (48) where the painful truth of human suffering, death, and war is concealed. Palipana’s seemingly romanticized lifestyle and the Edenic world in which he lives “can perhaps be perceived as an all too precious escapist fantasy, too severely at odds with the extreme realities disclosed in the rest of the novel” (50). Although some critics, such as Tom LeClair,²² have argued that the novel fails to offer an ethical approach to human rights because of this kind of aestheticization, Ondaatje’s inclusion of such an apparently idyllic lifestyle and distanced perspective in a novel that foregrounds human atrocity seems consciously to ask the reader to take a critical position. LeClair’s reading, I argue, overlooks Palipana’s care of the traumatized Lakma, which might be read as one of the most ethical models of care that the novel provides; that Palipana wishes “more than anything to deliver her from the inflicted isolation” (105) that she suffers, grants him an elevated moral position in the text as a model of altruism. The pastoral setting in which he and Lakma care for each other, then, suggests that a return to the natural world offers a remedial, almost necessary, alternative to the pain of civil war. On the other hand, while Palipana devotes his life to Lakma, he does exhibit a problematic detachment from other characters that mirrors Anil’s aloofness at

²² LeClair argues that Ondaatje’s “retreat into the ‘aesthetic’” and his “collage method” are “a way to avoid banal, ‘old coin’ cause and effect, the logic by which human rights are denied or defended” (31).

the beginning of the novel. His refusal to use his student's names, as if they "were immaterial to the discussion or search" (94)—an echo of Anil's own inability to remember the names of her students—and his refusal to recognize Anil's subjectivity by refusing to use her name and referring to her only as "you" (87-88), suggests his human complexity: his failure to recognize others is juxtaposed with his empathetic awareness of Lakma's needs.

Palipana undergoes a movement from an engagement with time that privileges the past toward one that privileges the present. Recalling his years as Palipana's student, Sarath tells Anil that Palipana would "take one imagined step and be in an earlier century" and notes that he "must have found it difficult to distinguish the present age from ancient times" (191). Palipana's movement between temporal realities, his blurring of time and elimination of "borders and categories" (191) presents a relationship with history and time that is inseparable from his embodied experience. Telling Lakma, "'We are, and I was, formed by history'" (105), Palipana connects the materiality of his body to his assertion that "history fades" (104):

He lived in the forest grove with his books and writing tablets. But for him, now, all history was filled with sunlight, every hollow was filled with rain. Though as he worked he was conscious that the paper itself that held these histories was ageing fast. It was insect-bitten, sun-faded, wind-scattered. And there was his old, thin body. Palipana too now was governed only by the elements. (84)

The passage offers "a reminder . . . that the physical world will long outlive the written histories that chart its passage through time" (Rosochaki 47), but also draws a connection between the body and history; as the surgeon Gamini exclaims in admiration of Palipana's skills: "Wonderful! To study history as if it were a body" (Ondaatje 193). Gamini's words becomes especially poignant when he is required to do the reverse. When his brother's body is brought into the hospital, Gamini reads Sarath's personal history in the scars that cover his body: "The gash of scar on the side of your elbow you got crashing a bike on the Kandy hill. This scar I gave you hitting you with a cricket stump" (287).

Palipana's acute awareness that both history and the body are transient leads him to privilege embodied experiences in the present moment and moves him closer to what Nietzsche might call

an animal-like experience; indeed, Anil considers Palipana as “some lost animal” (90).²³ Following Anil’s washing of her own body at the well in a “mantra of gestures” (90), she watches Lakma washing Palipana’s naked body: “Lakma kept pouring water over him, and they were both gesturing and laughing now” (90). The scene describes one of the very few moments of laughter in the novel to suggest the joyful bond between Lakma and Palipana that emerges in this physical activity; indeed, the “language of physical and vocal gestures is associated with the reawakening of affects, specifically, joy, and thus of the life drive” (Staels 985). The scene therefore suggests the pleasure that both Lakma and Palipana, with their respective awareness of the horrors of the past and the progression of time, locate in fleeting present moments of embodied being.

Palipana’s focus on embodied forms of knowledge and touch complements Anil’s Westernized and scientific approach to her work. When Anil and Sarath bring Sailor’s skull to him, Palipana reads the skull through touch in a way that largely contrasts with Anil’s more scientific “reading of bones” (177): “Anil watched his fingers, beautiful and thin, moving over the outlines of the skull Sarath had given him” (87). The emphasis on touch highlights Anil’s false conviction in the superiority of science over touch and embodied experience. When Anil tells Palipana that she can be more sure of Sailor’s age using contemporary science than he can be by “feeling the skull and the brow ridges and measuring the jaw” (95), Palipana responds by delicately mocking her superiority and making Anil flush with embarrassment: “‘How wonderful.’ He turned his head to her. ‘What a wonder you are’ (96). The exchange is evoked later in the novel when Anil uses Palipana’s method of touch to answer questions about Sailor that she cannot answer using science: although trained by “teachers who could take a seven-hundred-year-old skeleton and discover through evidence of physical stress or trauma in those bones what the person’s profession had been” (176-177), it is by touching Ananda that Anil is able to interpret Sailor’s

²³ It is worth noting that *Anil’s Ghost* frequently draws subtle connections between humans and animals in a way that might be seen to play into its engagement with the pastoral. Although I point to some of these in the body of the chapter, other examples abound. For example, the woman Anil sees in the gravesite at the beginning of the novel sits, on her “haunches,” in an animal-like position; when walking through the forest in Arankale with Sarath, Anil notices a dog following them and remembers “that Tibetans believed that monks who hadn’t meditated properly became dogs in the next life” (189); when Ananda attempts to kill himself, Anil hears him make unknown sounds and sees him “like deer in her light” (195); and, although Anil spends her time turning “bodies into representative of race and age and place . . . the tenderest of all discoveries was the finding, some years earlier, of the tracks at Laetoli—almost-four-million-year-old footsteps of a pig, a hyena, a rhinoceros and a bird” (55).

“markers of occupation” (177). Palipana’s retort, then, highlights the limits of all forms of knowledge, but also foregrounds touch as a potentially restorative act, even in the most scientific of contexts.

The push and pull between the violence and tenderness of touch is symbolized in the images of hands that run throughout the novel: while hands are used to touch and comfort the Other they are also used to harm and are harmed. As John Kertzer points out, Ondaatje uses “hands to express all that is tactile and textured in human perception. Hands evoke our grasp of the heft of being....To handle things, to be handy, is a [sic] both a virtue and a horror for his characters” (118). When Anil and Sarath find Gunesena crucified to a road, Anil’s tender bathing of his wounded hands in salt water is situated directly against the act of crucifixion itself: “the man tentatively gave her his left hand. Under the faint roof light Anil soaked a handkerchief in the saline solution and squeezed it onto his palm, the bridge nail still in it. Then the other hand, then back again to the first” (112). Similarly, when Anil recalls her experience with her lover, Cullis, she recounts the touch of love and passion alongside a memory of violence: she recalls how Cullis’ hand held her by the hair and did not let go until “she swung the small knife he had been cutting an avocado with earlier in a sure arc and stabbed it into the arm holding her” (100). The repeated images of damaged hands—the broken hands of the bodhisattva statues, Gamini’s discovery of Sarath’s broken hands, and Gurnesea’s crucified hands—work to suggest the importance of touch within the novel as a gesture that has the potential to both wound and heal.

The single occasion on which Sarath touches Anil exemplifies the complex presentation of touch in the novel as both feared violence and restorative tenderness. Sarath slaps Anil after her speech at the Armoury Auditorium when he realizes the audience’s malevolent reaction to Anil’s findings: “He slapped her hard. He was aware of people on the periphery, her gasp, her face as if it contained fever” (281). It is during this event that Sarath, unknown to Anil, both saves Anil’s life and regains possession of Sailor so that she has the evidence she needs to resume her work; ultimately, Sarath is murdered for assisting Anil in her work. Sarath’s violent slap, which Anil does not understand at the time, functions to save Anil by displaying to the watching “people on the periphery” his false animosity towards her and by encouraging Anil to make a swift exit. As Sarath tells her, “[it’s] just you who has to be safe” (282). Sarath undergoes perhaps the most extreme shift from a focus on the past into an engagement with the present: his “apparent desire

to insulate himself from the present by burying himself in the past is undermined by the investigation into Sailor's death" (Thieme 41), and is ultimately countered by his own sacrificial death. When they first meet, Anil recognizes Sarath's obsessive interest in the past and his resistance to engaging in the present in his focus on her past as a swimmer, which Anil points out was a "long time ago" (16). Even in his speech she notices "a precise and time-stalling mannerism" (16). Sarath's focus on the past also creates a physical distance between him and Anil. It is only when Anil experiences an intimate touch from Ananda that she realizes Sarath's lack of physical contact with her: "In all her time with Sarath, she realized, he had hardly touched her. With Sarath she felt simply *adjacent*" (187; emphasis in original). This distance between past and present and between Sarath and Anil, however, is abruptly closed through the slap. Considering an archeologist to be "the link between the mortality of flesh and bone and the immortality of an image on rock" (278), Sarath speaks to his own position as a crucial link between life and death, present and past. This temporal link is later made even more explicit in Ananda's reference to Sarath as Anil's ghost—a presence who exists in the remembered past but continues to haunt Anil in the present (305). The ghost figure, in fact, comes to symbolize the novel's concern with the necessary tension between past and present, remembering and forgetting. The slap, at once both violent and life saving, signifies the complexity of touch in the novel, a complexity felt so intensely by Sarath that it ends in a moment of desired forgetting: he places "his head in his hands" and makes a conscious attempt to forget, to "lose touch with the world around him" (282).

Indeed, part of the focus on the value of the present is also a focus on fear, an emotion that is connected to the pervasive awareness of mortality/death and can make one wholly present. In fact, the novel suggests that fear is the only emotion capable of uniting the living during the war; as Sarath tells Anil, "*I wanted to find one law to cover all of living. I found fear. . . .*" (135; italics in original). Read this way, fear and its connection to death are part of a drive that both motivates and inhibits touch; just as fear can unite or divide characters emotionally, it also frequently instigates a physical reaching out to the Other. Such anxiety surrounding touch is apparent in Gamini's relationship to his brother's wife, whom he loves. On the single occasion he takes her to lunch, before she is married to Sarath, Gamini keeps a strict physical distance from her: "He was as gracious as possible, didn't touch her once, the only touch was when her arm had slipped through his as they met. When they separated he didn't embrace her. She would

have felt how thin his frame was” (211). Gamini’s concern about touch is also an anxiety, or fear, about revealing his physical vulnerability to another and closing the distance he maintains between himself and others. Indeed, when he sees her again, “years later, after his own marriage had ended,” he is careful to implement a physical distance between them that involves a resistance to touch: “He kept a distance as he said good-bye, not touching her, just that offhand hungry gaze, that offhand wave to the departing vehicle” (211).

At the same time as the novel conveys the awfulness of living in fear of violence and war—as it does through the retelling of Lakma’s childhood experiences, or through Gamini’s painful distancing from others, for example—it also suggests that a recognition of a different kind of fear, the feared unknown that is associated with the abandoning of belief systems and the acknowledgment of the limits of human knowledge and power, may be integral to human being and ethical interaction with others. This model of fear is inextricable from an engagement with death. It is, for example, Ananda’s recognition of the fear surrounding his wife’s death, linked to his acknowledgment that the Buddha statue he reconstructs is “no longer a god” (307), which allows him to see “with human sight” the persistence of life in the face of impending obstacles. Ananda connects the small flying birds that dive “towards gaps within the trees” and through the “shelves of heat currents” (307), the “tiniest of hearts in them beating exhausted and fast” (307), to his murdered wife, Sirissa: “A small brave heart [who died in] the heights she loved and the darkness she feared” (307). Similarly, Gamini’s strained relationship with Sarath is described as due, in part, to a refusal “to show hesitation and fear” (289). It is only once Gamini faces the “*fearful* metamorphosis” (228; emphasis added) of Sarath’s body in death that he reaches out to his brother, physically and emotionally; Gamini places “the warmth of his hand against [his brother’s] still face” (289) in a gesture of touch that attempts to close the emotional and physical distance between he and Sarath. In the same scene, Gamini recalls a sentence Anil spoke to him: ““I can never understand someone by his strengths. Nothing is revealed there. I can only understand people by their weaknesses”” (289). Fear, frequently perceived as a weakness, emerges as a humanizing emotion even as it is destructive.

The loss of belief in protection against fear is symbolized in Anil’s wearing of the faded *rakha bandhana*. When Anil strikes a match to light the dark interior of the *Oronsay*, the ship where she and Sarath are asked to work, she notices before anything else the “cotton thread of

‘protection’ on her left wrist, and then the match went out” (18-19). She goes on to note that the *rakha bandhana* that was “tied on during a friend’s *pirith* ceremony had lost its rose color. When she pulled on a rubber glove in the laboratory, the thread was even paler under it, as if within ice” (19). A *pirith* ceremony is a Buddhist ceremony conducted to ward off fear and ailments.²⁴ That the symbol representing this rejection of fear is so faded seems to suggest its ineffectiveness, and that any belief Anil had in her own protection against fear is also faded; as she later admits to Sarath, there is “only a mad logic here” (187). It also suggests that Anil’s immersion in Western, scientific practices, symbolized by the laboratory glove that makes the thread of protection “even paler,” further weakens her bond to Buddhist beliefs. Anil becomes, like Ananda and Palipana’s companion, Lakma, aware of “the falseness of the supposed religious security around her” (103). Anil’s recognition of the faded cotton bracelet therefore connects to Sarath’s comment that fear is the only governing law.

Anil’s acknowledgment of her faded *rakha bandhana* is an early indication of the novel’s concern with belief as a protection against fear, and is set against Anil’s interest in a biologically determined form of fear. As a student, Anil expresses her fascination with the *Amygdala*, “a small knot of fibres made up of nerve cells,” which is described by her professor as a place to “house fearful memories” and that “specializes in fear” (134). In the novel’s present time Anil “remembers the almond knot” and during autopsies makes a point of searching for the “nerve bundle that houses fear—so it governs everything” (135). The biomedical reduction of an emotion so powerful that it “governs everything” to a small almond-shaped knot highlights the novel’s humanistic focus on fear and the physical and emotional connections between people that fear both motivates and destroys. Touch, in particular, models a potentially ethical reaction to fear. That Anil’s consideration of the *Amygdala* is immediately preceded by an intimate moment of touch between her and Gamini draws attention to the reductive discussion of fear that follows. This moment of tender physical touch again corresponds with a movement away from the urban and towards nature: the characters walk out “onto Galle Face Green,” and sit, facing away from the city, “near the breakwater by the darkness of the sea” (131). After discussing with Sarath and Gamini the fearful horrors of war, Gamini rests his head “against her thigh” and falls

²⁴ For a thorough discussion of the representation of Buddhism in the novel see Marlene Goldman’s article, “Representations of Buddhism in Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*.”

asleep in her lap: “She touched his shoulder. He brought his hand up for a moment and then his head slipped away and soon she saw he had fallen asleep. His skull, his uncombed hair, the weight of his tiredness on her lap” (133). The tenderness of touch and physical contact in response to Gamini’s acknowledgement that they are “all fucked” (133) illustrates the importance of touch and closeness in the present moment.

The novel’s focus on fear and forgetting, symbolized in the *Amygdala*, highlights pathological forms of forgetting that unseat the position of memory as a defining feature of selfhood. Anil’s scientific interest in *Amygdala* shifts into a more subjective experience in her personal life when her best friend, Leaf, tells her she is suffering from Alzheimer’s disease due to a childhood episode of encephalitis. Leaf’s memory loss has the effect of taking her out of time in that she cannot remember her past and also highlights the tension between fear, remembering, and forgetting. Her illness is set in contrast to “the telescope assembly that picked up languages of data out of the universe above the desert. She was living alongside these receivers of the huge history of the sky” (255). As occurs elsewhere in the novel, the focus on history and the attainment of knowledge contrasts with and thus highlights Leaf’s “unhistorical” and personal experience: “Ondaatje’s juxtaposition of temporal scales, the prehistoric footsteps and the satellite transmission of voices across continents, reflects [a] postmodern reality” (Scanlan 315). While the telescopes function to find out “[who] was out there? How far away was the signal? Who was dying unmoored?,” Anil realizes that it is Leaf who is “dying unmoored” (256). Leaf’s long-term forgetting differs from depictions of temporary and willed forgetting elsewhere in the novel, but appears consciously woven into the narrative as part of a reconsideration of what it means to forget. This focus also ties into the novel’s presentation of fear and of the unknown. In her work on dementia, Anne Basting suggests that dementia is usually accompanied by fear, including that of the unknown and of losing control (8-10), but she points to how a movement away from the past and future concerns and into a focus on existing fully in the present can prove both ethical and pleasurable. The scenes that show the exchange between Anil and Leaf highlight Anil’s desire to retain a grasp on the “reality” of the past and her inability to focus wholly on the present. Anil’s question to Leaf, repeated twice in the novel, about the movie that they used to watch together appears as a command to remember as well as a question that is impossible for Leaf to answer: “Leaf, listen, remember—who killed Cherry Valance?” (63). That the question refers to a fictional story only undermines the imaginary aspect of creating a coherent narrative

of the past. Anil's inability to talk with Leaf in the present without asserting pressure on Leaf to remember the past suggests Anil's deep-seated fear of forgetting. This fear is further suggested in the line, "She was starting to lose her memory, fighting for her life" (256), which conflates the loss of memory with death. Anil's fear of losing her own history with Leaf, which contrasts with Palipana's recognition that history and the body both fade, draws attention to the concerns of forgetting and the fear of mortality to highlight the importance of recognizing present experiences, both solitary and social. Indeed, the novel juxtaposes this scene with alternative models of forgetting, of being distanced from the personal past and from history (as Palipana and Lakma demonstrate), in which present embodied moments emerge as life affirming.

Embodied experience and touch, then, emerge as a new kind of "belief" system, one that is grounded in the body and which encourages characters to engage with themselves and others in the present time even as they recognise the significance of the past. Having lost his faith in "man's rule on earth," Gamini "[believes] only in the mothers sleeping against their children, the great sexuality of spirit in them, the sexuality of care, so the children would be confident and safe during the night" (119). This belief in physical touch and closeness replaces Gamini's belief in "man's rule on earth" (119) to suggest that an embodied engagement is part of the dismantling of human power and knowledge. The image of the mother's body as a source of comfort is repeated several times in the novel through different figures. The aforementioned opening scene in which the mother and wife of the deceased men hovers over them in the grave; the relationship of care that Lakma has with Palipana; Anil's tactile, maternal relationship with Lalitha; and the rock carving "from another century of a woman bending over her child" that Sarath cherishes: all emphasise the value of touch and physical closeness that Anil, Sarath, Gamini, and Ananda desire. Gamini, who wants "a mother's arm to hold him firm on the bed, to lie across his rib cage, to bring a cool wash cloth to his face" (119), finds such a mothering figure in Anil, who, tenderly touches and comforts him in sleep as he lays his head on her lap. His posture in this scene directly echoes his description of the children in the hospital. As he sleeps, Anil's recollection of the line of an unknown song, "*Sleep come free me*" (133), implies Gamini's comfort lies not only in Anil's touch, but also in the freeing oblivion, or forgetting, of sleep.

The comfort Anil provides to Gamini is returned to her by Ananda in a subsequent scene. Crying for ““Ananda, Sailor, their lovers,”” and Gamini, Anil allows herself to feel emotion that she has previously restrained. Like Gamini’s vulnerable gesture of laying his head in Anil’s lap, as a child might do with a mother, Anil’s recognition of her own fear and pain, as well as that experienced by others, moves her into an experience of shared communication through touch. Ananda, unaware that Anil’s tears “were partly for him” (187), touches her “in a way she could recollect no one ever having touched her, except, perhaps, Lalitha. Or perhaps her mother” (187). In this moment, Anil experiences “the softest touch on her face” (187) as Ananda wipes away her tears: “He moved two steps forward and with his thumb creased away the pain around her eye along with her tears’ wetness....Ananda’s hand on her shoulder to quiet her while the other hand came up to her face, kneaded the skin of that imploded tension of weeping as if hers too was a face being sculpted” (187). The softness and emotion of his touch, which speaks of his recognition of a shared pain, appears in stark contrast to Anil’s earlier attempt to touch Ananda’s ankle, causing him to jump up and cry out while Anil turns “away in frustration” (179). Anil takes “hold of Ananda’s ankle” to study its condition in her attempt to discover Sailor’s identity, but the objective nature of Anil’s touch—and her focus on the past life of Sailor—means that she neglects to see Ananda’s *own* humanness and suffering: Anil touches Ananda as though examining the bones of a corpse (179). It is only when Sarath reveals to Anil that Ananda’s reconstruction of the skull, which seems ““so peaceful”” (184) to her, has been influenced by the disappearance of his wife that she realises she has overlooked Ananda’s own subjective experience: ““It’s been three years. He still hasn’t found her. He was not always like this. The head he has made is therefore peaceful”” (185). Having not believed in Ananda’s work on the skull, Anil “[can] no longer look at the face, [seeing] Ananda’s wife in every aspect of it”; ““I . . . I feel ashamed,”” she admits to Sarath (185). Ananda’s touch is therefore received by Anil as “a tenderness” that momentarily unites them in their different experiences and suffering and brings Anil into an engaged relationship with the present (187).

Anil’s reaction to Ananda’s touch implies that he helps her to gain an awareness of others’ suffering and fear, as well as of her own, that she has not previously allowed herself to experience. A metaphorical reading of the body would connect this awareness to the body through the metaphor of vision. Touching Anil around the eyes, Ananda recalls the procedure of painting the eyes on a Buddha: ““Without the eyes,”” explains Palipana, ““there is not just

blindness, there is nothing. There is no existence. The artificer brings to life sight and truth and presence” (99). As “eye-painter,” then, Ananda metaphorically gives Anil vision and the ability to be fully present: the almost ceremonial way that Ananda touches Anil’s face appears as a kind of “Nētra Mangala”—a “ritual of the eyes” in which an artist paints the “eyes on a holy figure” (97)—which enlightens Anil and allows her to experience herself and those around her in a more “truthful” way (168). Moving beyond this symbolic reading, though, Anil’s responds with embodied action. Indeed, although Anil realizes that in all the time she has spent with Sarath “she felt simply *adjacent*,” she reaches out to him shortly after this scene when Sarath tells her that Ananda’s attempted suicide was not successful: “‘Oh,’ she murmured. She pressed Sarath’s hand to the side of her face” (200). Her gesture suggests her desire to re-experience the tenderness of touch she received from Ananda, but also shows that Anil makes the effort to overcome the feeling of being adjacent to Sarath, the burden of which she previously places entirely on him. This hand-to-face touch is repeated a third time in the aforementioned scene when Gamini tenderly touches his dead brother’s face.

These instances of touch resonate with the novel’s ending, where it is Ananda who experiences a “boy’s concerned hand on his” at the time when he emotionally thinks about his wife (307). “This sweet touch from the world” (307) is therefore experienced at different times by Palipana, Gamini, Gunesena, Anil, and Ananda, and not only has the effect of moving each character’s focus on the past into a present, embodied experience, but also implies that human kindness and understanding prevails in the midst of extreme violence and hatred. The final scene, in fact, centres around sensory experience—sight, touch, smell, and sound—and makes Ananda wholly present in the world while also being acutely aware of “all the fibres of natural history around him” (Ondaatje 307):

He could witness the smallest approach of a bird, every flick of its wing, or a hundred mile storm coming down off the mountains near Gonagola and skirting to the plains. He could feel each current of wind, every lattice-like green shadow created by cloud. There was a girl moving in the forest. The rain miles away rolling like blue dust towards him. Grasses being burned, bamboo, the smell of petrol and grenade. The crack of noise as a layer of rock on his arm exfoliated in heat. . . . The great churning of weather above the earth. Ananda briefly saw this angle of the world. (307)

In this instance, time pauses in the present to allow Ananda a brief glimpse of what would normally be the inconceivable scale of time, past and present. The attention given to the present time is also connected to Sri Lanka itself; as Thieme points out, the ancient eye-painting ceremony “transforms the way that place is being produced in the present (41). On another level, then, I read the scene as a comment on how the novel puts readers in touch with Sri Lanka’s history and events: just as Ananda’s engagement with art allows him to briefly see the world anew, Ondaatje self-reflexively acknowledges that he offers, through art, a “brief” glimpse into an “angle” of Sri Lanka’s recent political and social history. Although Ananda’s momentary embodied connection with the world, in which he becomes part rock, suggests an intensity of experience that allows both past and present to exist simultaneously, the “epiphany of the moment is...not in the transcendent splendour of the scene, but in the gesture of concern as the boy touches the hand of Ananda” (Rosochacki 17). The connection between touch and the return to the natural world is perhaps most explicit in this scene. Moreover, the implication here is that Ananda’s brief glimpse into this angle of the world, while beautiful, suggests an overwhelming awareness of time and an abundance of information—the kind of experience Anil earlier describes as “peering through time”—that echoes Nietzsche’s argument about how with the inability to forget a person may be “condemned to see everywhere a coming into being” and thus “loses himself in this stream of becoming” (62). Ananda’s brief engagement with the “stream of becoming” is countered by the boy’s restorative, “sweet” touch, which returns Ananda to the present moment and to closeness to another human being.

Although *Anil’s Ghost* upholds the value of remembering the past and of considering history, it aligns such remembering with a model of temporary forgetting that allows characters to locate moments of peace within a war-torn world. Indeed, Ondaatje reminds us that remembering is not possible without forgetting, and that “we must know the right time to forget as well as the right time to remember, and instinctively see when it is necessary to feel historically and unhistorically” (Nietzsche 8). Such momentary forgetting enables an embodied engagement in the present time, a closeness to oneself and to others, which offers an ethical way of being in the world that supersedes faith in religion or science. Pondering the human ability to exist peacefully, Anil asks the unanswered question: “If two lovers felt they could kill themselves over loss or desire, what of the rest of the planet of strangers? Those who were not the slightest way in

love and who were led and swayed into enemy camps by the ambitious and the vainglorious” (202). Ondaatje offers no overt answer to Anil’s quandary, but instead tasks the reader with locating amidst the despair of war the smallest and briefest fragments of hopeful life and love: the tiny beating hearts that persist against all odds, the tenderness of touch between two people, and the fleeting moments of embodied engagement that allow one to experience the sensory joy of being in the world. Through its reconsideration of the value of certain experiences of fear and forgetting, the novel suggests the importance of reconnecting with the body and engaging in the present moment in order to locate, even in the smallest measure, meaning and pleasure.

Chapter 2

“My Body is History”: Embodied Temporalities and Dionne Brand’s Short-Story Cycle

First of all my hands and my body feel like they don’t belong to me. I think that they’re only extra baggage because there’s nowhere to put them or to hide them. The truth is I begin to hate my own physical body, because I believe it has betrayed me by merely existing. It’s like not having a shelf to put it on or a cupboard to lock it in; it’s useless to me and it strikes me how inefficient it is. Because the ideal form in which to pass a war is as a spirit, a jumbie. My body is history, fossil, passé.

—“I Used to Like the Dallas Cowboys” (Brand 128)

Dionne Brand’s short-story collection, *Sans Souci and Other Stories*, contains narratives that relay both contemporary and historical experiences of Black, female oppression, often simultaneously and always from a female perspective.²⁵ In Brand’s collection, the body is often figured as a symbol of history, and in possessing such a body one is also forced to possess the history of its oppression. In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Dionne Brand writes that the

Black body is situated as a sign of particular cultural and political meanings in the Diaspora. . . . those leaping bodies, those prostrate bodies, those bodies made to dance and then to work, those bodies curdling under the stinging of whips, those bodies cursed, those bodies valued, those bodies remain curved in these attitudes. *They remain fixed in the ether of history.* (35; emphasis added)

²⁵ Brand, who was born in Trinidad in 1953 and has lived in Canada since 1970, is one of the most powerful and political voices in Canada’s Caribbean literary community. Her political and critical engagement with her experience of living in Toronto as an immigrant and a Black lesbian woman is central to much of her writing. As Lynette Hunter observes, Brand’s “work is firmly assertive with an anger that readers either immediately recognize or need to make a place for: the necessity of voicing the fears, reactions, rejections that are tied up in the Black experience of Canada’s racism.” Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Brand was involved in Toronto’s activist community while also working as a cultural critic. For more information on Brand’s activism see Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy’s *Poets Talk: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch, Daphne Marlatt, Erin Mouré, Dionne Brand, Marie Annhar Baker, Jeff Derksen and Fred Wah*.

To live in a Black body, Brand suggests, is to embody a history. It is not, therefore, surprising that the characters in *Sans Souci*, like the narrator in “I Used to Like the Dallas Cowboys,” experience the past through the body. While past and present are often depicted as very physical experiences for Brand’s characters, the future is often evoked as a transformation of the body in either imaginative or spiritual terms—what anthropologist Michael Lambek might term an “alternative state of mind” or even an alternative state of body (726). Certainly, many stories in the *Sans Souci* collection resist any attempt to separate body/mind experiences.²⁶ Instead, Brand’s stories suggest that they are inextricably linked, and that the body plays a fundamental and productive role in the psychological processes through which her characters confront history, and the dynamic between past and present experiences.

By exploring how the past, present, and future collapse not only in temporal space, but specifically on and around the body, I argue that, in many of the *Sans Souci* stories, Black female characters both revile and revere their bodies as symbols of history in order to survive and persist in the present and to think about the future; in some cases, this bodily engagement allows them to become ultimately empowered in the face of oppression. Although critics have written about particular stories from *Sans Souci*, I attempt, as much as possible, to address the collection as a complete work that presents its stories in a purposeful order. This focus means that I choose to focus on this single, complete work rather than addressing selected stories in conjunction with Brand’s other fiction or poetry. A wealth of scholarship exists on the body of work I exclude. Although the *Sans Souci* stories can stand alone as individual works of fiction, I read the collection as a short-story cycle—a genre defined by Forrest L. Ingram as “*a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader’s successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of the component parts*” (19; emphasis in original)—that is unified by a thematic focus on experiences of time and belonging, racism and sexism, and on Black female subjectivity. In what follows I address the

²⁶ Lambek troubles this kind of duality by asking a series of questions:

Isn’t it odd that we speak of altered states of mind but rarely of altered states of body, even when we know we mean the latter? Is this because part/whole relationships are differently conceived or experienced in mind and body? Do we use mind-talk to express our condition holistically and existentially, and body-talk to break it down?” (727)

Sans Souci stories in a loose order of appearance, although I deviate from this order at times to focus on themes or motifs that connect the stories, what Ingram calls the “dynamic pattern of recurrent development” (21), to show how Brand develops her overarching focus on the search for self in the face of oppression.

Although critics, such as Robert Luscher and Gerald Kennedy, have challenged and nuanced Ingram’s definition of the short-story cycle, the pattern of development that Ingram identifies remains a key idea. Luscher uses the term “short story sequence” to draw attention to the successiveness of the work,²⁷ but similarly argues that individual stories develop ideas that contribute to the overall reading of a cycle/sequence: “While each short story probes a select and seemingly isolated episode in some depth from a particular standpoint, it may still be part of some larger conceptual whole, one indication of a wider truth or thematic current that a single short story cannot chart completely” (152). Brand’s focus on various forms of Black female oppression is developed through the various stories in the collection to give a textured, complex representation of Black female experiences.

Indeed, the form of the short-story cycle also lends itself to Brand’s exploration of the individual and collective Black experience. As Rocío Davis has suggested in her work on “ethnic writing” and the short-story cycle, the form, as a hybrid of the novel and the short story, is a “pertinent vehicle for the distinctive characteristics of ethnic fiction in general” (6) because it echoes the writer’s experience of a “literary double inheritance or, at least, the reality of an insider/outsider point of view” (7). The “[ethnic short story cycle] may be considered the formal materialization of the trope of doubleness as the between-world condition is presented via a form that itself vacillates between two genres” and thus the “text itself becomes the embodiment of the histories, the mechanism for modifying and recreating personal and collective identity” (7). There emerges, then, a correlation between the body of the text and the human bodies that Brand presents, which are often integral to acts of storytelling within the narrative. The form of the cycle allows Brand to present the individual, subjective Black female experience through her

²⁷ I use the term “cycle” in this chapter for the reason that, as Kennedy articulates, “the term cycle has by now achieved currency in critical parlance, and its connotations of structural organization help to differentiate consciously arranged collections from mere miscellanies” (14).

focus in each story on a single woman, but also to attend to a collective Black female experience by presenting a number of individual stories as part of a larger whole.

Both Kennedy and Davis also link the short-story cycle to oral storytelling traditions, and in turn imply an engagement with embodied experience. Davis points out that the form emulates “the effort of a speaker to establish solidarity with an implied audience by recounting a series of tales linked by their content or by the conditions in which they are related” (4). For women, such “conditions” frequently involve the body. Trinh Minh-ha argues that women’s storytelling is directly connected to women’s bodies: “The world’s earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women. Patiently transmitted from mouth to ear, body to body, hand to hand. In the process of storytelling, speaking and listening refer to realities that do not just involve the imagination. The speech is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched” (121). Brand engages with this oral tradition in stories such as “Photograph,” in which the female body becomes central to the act of storytelling. The short-story cycle, then, provides a framework that compliments Brand’s engagement with narrative traditions that are specifically related to Black women’s embodied experiences.

The short-story cycle also reflects Brand’s focus on time and her presentation of remembered experiences or histories. Indeed, Davis’s assertion that the “shifting borders of identity, isolation, fragmentation and indeterminacy find their formal expression in the isolated episodes that make up a cycle” (Davis 8) might be applied to *Sans Souci*. Although, as in Brand’s collection, these “episodes” do not often combine to form a clear temporal progression, the short-story cycle highlights time through its shifting movement between different temporal spaces and its fragmentation of continuous plot. In short-story cycles, one often notices “some kind of mythic advance in time or some general reference to historic time: chief concern seems to be reserved for psychological time, symbolic times of seasons, times which recur, and mythic times of legendary events” (Davis 6). *Sans Souci* does indeed focus on psychological time, the ways that characters use their present experiences to confront and rethink their histories. Brand’s “narrative approach,” argues Kathleen Renk, “relies on a storytelling practice that foregrounds a dissolution of boundaries between storyteller/listener and the past and present” (98). The shifting and fragmented nature of this hybrid form, then, lends itself to Brand’s depiction of Black women’s history and her characters’ psychological confrontation of the past in their present time.

The fluidity of time and experience that Brand presents operates as a strategy that opposes rigid, limited interpretations of Black women's bodies, and instead portrays such bodies as sites of "multiple pleasures and possibilities"²⁸ (deCaires Narain 154). Brand presents a variety of Black female bodies that occupy a range of subject positions, and thus presents her characters' embodied experiences as individual, subjective, and diverse.²⁹ Her stories do not always offer positive outcomes, and the female bodies about which she writes are rarely redemptive; however, Brand relentlessly presents characters who confront pain and suffering through bodily engagement to suggest the complex mesh of oppression and liberation that entangles Black female bodies. As is true in individual stories, the overall cycle resists a fixed reading or resolution—a resistance that is enabled by the form, which is without the chronological progression or movement towards a conclusive or satisfying end that a novel might provide.

The issues of gender, race, diaspora, spirit possession, and language that feature prevalently in Brand's writing have been examined by several critics,³⁰ although few have addressed Brand's

²⁸ deCaires Narain points out that the practice of writing "through" the body engages with the work of "French theorists, chiefly Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous, and Luce Irigaray. Each of these writers has a particular focus, but all share a perception of patriarchal discourse as rigidly linear, clinical, abstracted, and tightly structured around a hierarchized series of binary oppositions" (154).

²⁹ I have made a similar argument about the body in the work of Jessie Georgina Sime. See, "Experiences of Modernity."

³⁰ Johanna Garvey, for example, reads the collection in terms of Brand's treatment of nation, diaspora, and exile, arguing that, "struggling with the consequences of a colonized past in the Caribbean as well as with the contemporary realities of global economics, [the] women [in Brand's fiction] express a repeated need to leave the place they occupy . . . and to find a space of empowerment" (486). Marlene Goldman examines how Brand's characters "leave the place they occupy" in terms of spirit possession, and argues that Brand's stories are "not solely informed by embodied experiences of trauma and dispossession," but rather that her "understanding of spirit possession . . . provides the foundation for her critique and transformation of the racist, classist, and sexist dimensions of Toronto's urban space" (5). Charlotte Sturgess addresses Brand's treatment of colonial history and subjectivity in *Sans Souci* by focusing on language and narration, and argues that the collection "directly addresses issues of race and class in a country which prides itself on its tolerance" (Sturgess 54). Others, such as Meredith Gadsby and Kara Goodwin, explore issues of language in relation to gender and race to show how Brand "alters the conceptualization of privilege to destabilize the power structures inherent in oppositional constructs of meaning" (Goodwin 120). Kathleen Renk has examined several stories in *Sans Souci* by exploring Brand's "focus on the ability of the mind to delve into memory and invoke images that destroy and illumine" (97); Renk specifically locates this focus in storytelling.

focus on the body in *Sans Souci*. While scholars such as Maria Casas³¹ and Gabrielle Civil have explored Brand's representation of the Black female body in her poetry, less has been written about the importance of the body in Brand's prose. Kevin Quashie touches on the role of the body in his discussion of subjectivity and language in Brand's prose work, while Simona Bertacco, in her short but insightful essay "Imagining Bodies in the Work of Dionne Brand," reads the "radicalized and sexed body in Brand's novels in the light of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the body" (13) and argues that, "when reading Brand's works, one is forced to enter embodied modes of perception" (16). Her essay does not, however, address the *Sans Souci* collection and neglects some of the more nuanced modes of embodiment and physicality in Brand's fiction that I attempt to address here. Candida Rifkind's excellent thesis, "The Burden of the Body: Selfhood and Representation in the Works of Dionne Brand," examines several of Brand's publications, including four stories from the *Sans Souci* collection, and argues that "Brand's representation of Black female subjectivity is a critique of the discursive limitations which regulate the Black female body, as well as a representation of the agency possible through various alternative bodily performances" (iii). Rifkind's focus on the body as "the locus of subject formation" (1) provides a foundation for my own approach to Brand's expression of embodied subjectivity and temporality. I am also indebted to Julia Grandison's work on Brand's novel *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (1999), in which Grandison contends that "Brand's text shows that even in the most debilitating moments of traumatic memory, agency may be expressed in language that references the future" (774). Grandison situates these verbal expressions in a temporal space between past and present. "[Moments] in which circumstances or memories of traumatic content occur," Grandison writes, "are presented as considered pauses in time rather than jarring, possessive intrusions" (765). I suggest that characters' bodies in *Sans Souci* play a major role in their working through of memories, and cannot be separated from "moments of anticipation, where past, present, and future converge" (Grandison 781).³²

³¹ In *Multimodality in Canadian Black Feminist Writing*, Casas explores Brand's focus on the body (in her poetic works) through the lens of semiotics and performance.

³² In her work on prophetic remembering in black writing, Erica Lynn Still argues that telling stories about the traumatic past "is an important aspect of the work of keeping the past in proper relation to the present—a relationship that avoids both denying the past and dwelling in it" (34). However, Brand's stories trouble the notion of a "proper" relationship between past and present and instead suggest that her characters' experience temporal relationships as volatile and protean.

In the collection's titular story, "Sans Souci," the bodily abuse that Claudine suffers not only has the effect of conflating present and past, but also causes her to wilfully evoke imagined alternatives for her future. As the instigating narrative, the story presents Claudine's experience of physical abuse within a Caribbean community and at the hands of a Black man as a specific kind of sexist violence that occurs in a local, even familial, setting. The story sets the stage for subsequent depictions of violence, sexism, and racism that shift the focus from the Caribbean to a North American setting to show the connections between the history of colonial Black oppression and slavery and localized, individual experiences of poverty and abuse. In this way, each story continually modifies "perceptions of pattern and theme" (Luscher 148) to create a diverse and rich tapestry of Black women's experiences of oppression. Claudine's body is immediately linked to her environment. Such connections between body and land suggest how women's bodies have been symbolically, and problematically, connected to the colonizing mission as "sites" to be penetrated, explored, and possessed.³³ While the people who live in Sans Souci are described as being "as rough as the grass" that Claudine "[rips] from its tendrilled roots," the grass is specifically connected to a very female experience; it keeps the women in a "protracted battle with its creeping," and although Claudine is "afraid of it covering her," her body is entwined with the grass, which "[hangs] like tattered clothing from her hips, her breasts, her whole large body" (Brand 1). Similarly, the "lush immortal trees with coarse vine spread among them [look] like women, with great bushy hair, embracing" (1). Johanna Garvey has read the fraught connection between place and body in Brand's short-story collection as an example of how the female body resembles "occupied territory," and argues that "these women express a repeated need to leave the place they occupy [in order to] find a space of empowerment" (486). Similarly, Meredith Gadsby, in her discussion of Brand's *No Language is Neutral*, suggests that the "battle with language is also a battle over space. Brand chronicles the violence to both body and landscape" (131). Claudine's repeated gesture of ripping up the encroaching grass might then be read as an effort to rip up time, or to uproot the colonial history that surrounds her, in order to create a temporal and physical space in which she can locate the empowerment to which

³³ Katherine McKittrick provides a thorough exploration of the relationship between the Black female body and space and landscape in *Demonic Grounds*.

Garvey refers. Also present, though, is the implication that the unstoppable growth of the grass and trees represents a resistance to uprooting and a movement into the future that is also manifest in the bodies of the women, especially in Claudine. The subtle interactions between time and the body, past subjugation and the evocation of a hopeful future, work to deconstruct and rewrite the trope of women's body as occupied land.

Claudine's own history is largely described in terms of the violence inflicted on her body, but it is a violence that she continues to confront through memory. The male body is presented throughout the story as a violent weapon: the man who "would come often" (Brand 2) has scars that show he is "afraid of nothing" and is friends with a famous criminal whose name, "Weapon" (3), literalizes the potential violence of the male body. Similarly, Claudine's Uncle Rami has eyes that "cut across [one's] face for the briefest of moments, like the knife that he intended to use" (6), and the man who rapes her has an "unusual body resembling the man who [slaughters] pigs for the village—so gnarled and horrible, the way he moved" (13). Describing the rape, the narrative voice asserts that "anyone would have seen that he [the rapist] was killing her" (12). Figured as dead, and compared to the hogs "that were strung on the limbs of trees and slit from the genitals to the throat," Claudine's body is reduced to a state of lifeless immobility (12). When Claudine tells Uncle Ranni—who is ambiguously positioned in the story as her possible rapist—about "her trouble," he reacts with a "lacerating look" that echoes the violence of the rape and causes Claudine to figuratively experience a series of bodily mutilations: a "look across her face as before, cutting her eyes away, cutting her lips, her head, slicing her" (8). The links between language, history, and the body that run throughout the collection are made explicit in this scene. Charlotte Sturgess expresses this quite eloquently when she writes that such language "re-members the mutilated body of an African genealogy, dislocated within the fragmented time/space of colonial history as it was, and is still lived by subjected peoples" (53). Even Claudine's pregnancy is described as a kind of bodily violence—"Her flesh all around it, forced to hang there protecting this green and angry thing. It reached into her throat, sending up bubbles and making her dizzy all the time" (Brand 7)—while the description of the rape and that of the birth of her first child are conflated by the near perfect repetition of the line, "that is how her first child was born" (12,14).

Claudine nonetheless attempts to imagine alternatives that confront her bodily restrictions and suffering. In doing so, Claudine creates a temporal space, or pause, in which she psychologically enacts an embodied experience that exists outside of historical or present time. After the rape she imagines diving into the sea to cleanse her body, but is restricted by her body: “The water would hit her face...; it would wash her limbs and everything would be as before and this would not have happened—a free fall, a dive, into the sea. No. Her body would hit tufts of grass before reaching the bottom and it would hurt even more” (12). Although we can read her repeatedly rehearsed dive into the sea as a desire to cleanse her body after the rape, it also appears in a broader sense as a desire to cleanse a history of violence in the same way as the violent act of ripping the roots of grass at the beginning of the story can be read on a metaphorical level as a struggle against the roots of history that continue to encroach on the female body. Rather than focusing on such symbolic readings, I suggest a focus on Claudine’s physical actions and responses. We might then read this re-enactment of trauma, Claudine’s memory of the rape, as one that involves “more than merely the resurgence of a disempowering past because the form of . . . expression sometimes equally depends upon the articulation, or willing, of a future” (Grandison 766). Claudine’s ability to escape the past and to pause the present in order to imagine alternative embodied experiences appears as the only mode of resistance to the physical and emotional suffering that she endures.

The story ends with a passage that merges the birth of her first child and her experience of rape and describes the oppressive “blades of grass and the coarse vines” that turn her cries into “dissonant and unconnected” notes that are “not like the sound of a killing” (14). Through this bleak conclusion, Brand forces the reader to confront the horrors of Claudine’s past. Yet, while the persistent violence in the story suggests that Claudine is physically possessed by a history of paralysing abuse, nuances in Brand’s writing complicate such a straightforward reading. This is perhaps most evident after the rape when Claudine feels “as if she [were] carrying his [the rapist’s] body around” and becomes both possession and possessor. By carrying this man’s body, she carries a history of abuse that becomes inscribed in her own body (Brand 13). In his discussion of spirit procession, Michael Lambek suggests “that our ability to symbolize means that we are never fully bound by present circumstances, that we can think about the past and anticipate the future, and therefore that we can always imagine alternatives” (722). Claudine’s wilful remembering of the past, her battle against the “roots” of history, and her continual

imagining of diving into the sea, are all agential endeavours that imply a willingness to own and overcome even the most violent memories. Indeed, it is through Claudine's attempt to "*know*" and "*remember*" the man who "would come often" that her body takes on a transformation; her body is described as "turning into a tree," with all the implications of being rooted to a history, but still growing into the future (2; emphasis added). In contrast, the man is reduced to the inanimate remnant of a tree, "a piece of wood" with "no memory" (4). By re-inscribing Claudine's symbolic relationship with the natural world as one that can be imagined as fluid and transformative, Brand offers an alternative discourse for Claudine's embodied experience.

In "No Rinsed Blue Sky, No Red Flower Fences," the unnamed protagonist appears, like Claudine, to be restricted by her surroundings; in this case, the "claustrophobic" city (87), the small apartment "that [tries] to kill her" (85), and her Black female body. This story, however, is set in urban North America, and so offers an alternative representation of such physical restrictions that builds upon and echoes Claudine's rural Caribbean experience in "Sans Souci." The woman, an illegal immigrant who struggles in poverty with the conditions of city life, experiences feelings of despair, emptiness, and depression in very physical ways:

A queasy feeling appeared in her chest, as if a passage had opened up between her throat and her heart and a fine and awful sound passed through, hurting the columns of arteries and the empty food cavity. The pain and the sound collapsed in her diaphragm. Her hand would reach to her soft stomach to assure the queasiness. But even her hands, as tender as they would have liked to have been, were frightened and upset by the order of things, inciting her face and head to sadness and then reproach for such weakness and then pity for her blackness and her woman's body, and hopelessness at how foolish she was in not even being able to pay the rent, or fix her teeth, which she dreamt nightly fell out in her hands, bloodless. (86)

Feeling "pity for her blackness and her woman's body," the protagonist suggests that she views her body as a reason for her emotional and financial distress. As a result, she moves through the city feeling "uncomfortable under . . . passing gazes" (87) and attempts to diminish her physical presence by "trying to appear thinner than she was" (88). As in "Sans Souci," such feelings of physical restriction and emotional pain are countered by a dream of diving into water. In both

cases, this imagined movement into water suggests a suspension of time, both past and present, that grants a space for alternative future possibilities. As with much of Brand's fiction, the sea "recalls the trauma of the Middle Passage and also provides a touchstone for characters who desire an escape from pain, a release from madness, a dissolution of the body, a contact with spirits and/or ancestor" (Garvey 486). Like Claudine, the woman in "No Rinsed Blue Sky" directly links her experience in water to her body: she imagines being in the ocean, "the blue and moving water, rushing past her ears and jostling her body, cleaning it, coming up a different person each time as she dove through a curling wave" (Brand 87). At other times she dreams that she can fly, [swooping] down like a pelican into the water and changing course upward," and thinks of herself as "female and male, neutral" (91). Sturgess links this kind of imagining, in which "subjective perception merges with the landscape in a gesture of renewal" and privileges an "I," to Rastifarian practice to suggest that the protagonist uses a language that is "pitted against Western, disembodied cultural discourse" (54). To expand on this point, the protagonist's imaginative focus on embodied experience not only opposes but displaces verbal language altogether, and allows her to experience her body as freeing rather than restrictive; indeed, the passage describing her dream of flying is preceded by a description of the callous discourse between herself and the bill collectors, creditors, and authorities that "[threaten] to blow everything to hell" (Brand 91).

The protagonist's relationship with her body in her dreams is so "limitless" that it "surprises her to awaken to her thin, unvoluptuous body, limited to the corner on the floor on which she slept" (91). Her imagined, liberating embodied experience engages with her memory of seeing, as a nine-year-old child, an old woman,

bathing herself on the edge of the sand and water, dipping a cup, lifting it to her head, rubbing the shade of her long flaccid breasts. How bold, she thought, then walked past and turned slightly to see her again, still there, her face sucked to her bones, her eyes watery from age, unblinking. The woman, the gesture, had stayed with her, marked her own breasts, her eyes. (90)

This old woman, defined by her respect for and confident engagement with her aged body, provides for the protagonist a model of courage and self confidence that marks her own body and

opposes her self-pity and feelings of weakness. Still, although she attains a more positive relationship with her body through imagination and dreaming, she awakens to find herself in a claustrophobic pose, “lying, still on the floor, now surrounded by her body and her heavy face,” with “a film of flesh and thought to remove before rising and trying to decide what to do next” (93). Although the story offers no apparent positive resolution, one might read the woman’s simultaneous focus on and rejection of the body as a “working through” of oppression and history, which leads to its imagined “cleansing.”

The woman’s embodied “thinking,” then, may prove productive by instigating and enabling cognitive change. While this change may not be overtly acted out, the woman’s relationship with her body does lead her to imagine an alternative existence that is temporarily freeing, and thus allows her to retain a degree of agency: “Evoking the future, even to reject that future, is *necessarily* an agential endeavour; thus Brand’s text shows that even in the most debilitating moments of traumatic memory, agency may be expressed in language that references the future” (Grandison 774). Writing about Brand’s *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, Bertacco locates a similar movement from past to future and shows how “the subject’s expression is carried out, again and again, by and through the body imagining its own redemption” (15). While, in “No Rinsed Blue Sky,” the narrator’s self-degradation of her body re-enacts a history of oppression and abuse, it also enables her to create an alternative reality or future, albeit fleeting.

Elsewhere, Brand’s stories offer disturbingly bleak portrayals of Black, female experience. During times when female characters suffer emotional and/or physical abuse, the body often plays a significant role in enabling the sufferer to survive adversity; as Ketu Katrak has argued in her work on the body as represented by third-world postcolonial women writers, “[d]espite tragic and negative conclusions—madness, death, suicide, other forms of social exclusion and unbelonging—in women’s texts, it is important to recognize the strategic use of those same female bodies, often the only avenue for resistance” (3). In “Train to Montreal,” for example, the female protagonist’s body and sexuality are the subjects of the verbal abuse she suffers, but also offer her comfort in the face of this abuse. “Train” presents a wholly verbal form of abuse and oppression, performed by white men, that differs from the physical violence of Claudine’s Black uncle in the preceding story, “Sans Souci,” and thus adds to the “cumulative thematic impact” (Luscher 149) of the various forms of oppression Brand presents. In this story, the protagonist

takes a train from Union Station in Toronto to visit her lover, Jay, in Montreal. During the journey, she feels acutely self-conscious of her presence as a Black woman among the other white passengers. Like the narrator in “I Used to Like the Dallas Cowboys,” the woman in “Train to Montreal” feels the memory of the traumatic history of oppression in her body, which contrasts the “calmness” she sees in the body of the white man with whom she converses: “In his look of firmness and belonging, she understood that she owed nothing. There would always be a sadness with her; a desire to have it destroyed. It seemed hundreds of years long. It was a plump, well-fed torturer. It smacked its lips, drinking her like water, distilling her. His face was clean of any such memory” (22). Although looking at this man makes “her feel temporary, volatile” (22), the narrator experiences an intense feeling of insecurity and fear when the man disembarks at Kingston. Listening to the voices of other passengers with “[fear], spreading fern-like through her” (25), she reflects on her body and sexuality as modes of empowerment.

The protagonist’s imagining of her lover, Jay, provides a source of comfort. She feels “gluttonous thinking of his body” (19) and ponders how “the outlines of her body [seem] larger, more voluptuous than her spare frame” when they make love (18). As her fear of being “alone” on the train increases, she is unable to reassure herself by imagining her lover or reviving the positive memory of her body as sexually potent and empowering: “She tried to think of Jay again, but she could not conjure his body, her sense of him; both slipped her. Using her tongue, her temples, for some memory of him. None stayed. Cold hung around him; his unimagined body, dry, unattached” (25). Instead, her feeling of carrying the “memory” of the past in her body becomes increasingly present until it is abruptly translated into a present experience when she becomes a victim of racist and sexist verbal abuse in the station at Montreal. One individual in a group of drunken white men addresses her:

“Hello, Darlin.” A gray suit, a white beefy shirt, an arm reaching out. Coming close to her, almost touching her face—the fat hand, hair on the back like a fat worm, dangling in her face. She quickened her pace instinctively. It didn’t have to be her, that he meant. There were other people there. She estimated the width of the platform and found herself close to the train again. There was laughter from the other men. Fright running through her chest and arms. She saw a face, close to her, but far, huge, white, red, rolling on a thick neck and a mouth, open and sour. She thought of running, but her legs felt spidery. To the escalator.

She would be safe among the other passengers. Finally, she met the escalator, then “Nigger whore!” a rough voice behind yelled hoarsely. She kept walking, slightly stumbling onto the clicking stairs. “Whore! Nigger! Whore!” His voice sounded as if he was cleaning phlegm from the bottom of his throat. “Nigger whore!” She placed herself among the others, climbing the escalator. They were silent. (26-27)

In this terrifying encounter, the protagonist’s body becomes simultaneously invisible and acutely noticeable to those around her. Similarly, her abusers assume that she is without a voice: their derisive calls to her do not expect an answer. The scene engages with how, as Jennifer Griffith articulates, “[h]istorically, bodies of color have entered the public space without voice and in body only. Their stories have been told by their displayed bodies, already marked as sexually and racially other within dominant cultural ideology” (94). In anger for her silence, and for the complacent reticence of those around her, the protagonist “[apologises] to her past for not striking [the abuser], for not hurting, wounding all of them standing on the escalator” (Brand 27). Feeling shock, humiliation, and shame, she is unable to speak to her lover when she meets him and instead reacts to his presence with her body: “Her arms, fingers, body felt far away from her, as a thing which she saw but did not. Sharp glassy coldness in her throat as she turned to her lover, taking his mouth, to break the hardness of her lips. *Kissing him to recover herself*. She saw herself looking from a distance. The iciness of it still reached to her legs. Only anger was close, at her mouth” (28-29; emphasis added). Although, in the shock of the moment, she is unable to verbalize a response to the group of drunken white men who abuse her, she finds a degree of release in the act of kissing her lover; indeed, the physical act of kissing becomes the sole redemptive feature of the story. This kiss appears as a small but nonetheless important act that allows her to reclaim her sexuality in a world where it has been transformed, very publically, into a weapon against her.³⁴ Even in this act, however, the feeling that her body has been usurped and made public domain persists, as her detached feeling of looking at her body “from a great distance” suggests. In this unflinching portrayal of a Black woman’s embodied experience of abuse, Brand acknowledges the importance of the body in the struggle against oppression, both

³⁴ As Simona Bertacco argues, sex and sexuality are “crucial themes” in Brand’s fiction (10).

past and present. The protagonist's bodily actions instigate a shift from the verbal language with which she is abused to the physical language she uses to communicate with her lover.

"I Used to Like the Dallas Cowboys" also foregrounds the body as both liberating and oppressive. As is the case with other stories in the collection that are set in North America and infused with the influences of Western culture, this story is informed by Caribbean experience, both within the immediate narrative and the narrative whole of the short-story cycle. Here, the narrator increasingly realizes a connection between the glamorized masculinity, violence, and heroism of American football and the U.S.A's militarized, imperial efforts. In the course of the story, the Dallas Cowboys, whom the narrator likes for being "the most emotionless" team (125), morph into American soldiers who invade Grenada and come down the street "pointing their M16 weapons, laden with grenade launchers" (129). Remembering her admiration for football and the players she supported, she experiences her past feelings through the lens of her present war-time experience. These two versions of conquest, sport and war, are linked by a corporeal mythology: the bodies of both the football players and the soldiers are associated with the strength and brutality of colonial rule. The tension between the narrator's body as vulnerable and the bodies of the Cowboys, or soldiers, as threatening is encapsulated in the reference to "the breakdown," a dance that the narrator does "every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday night at the Coq D'Or" (117). She compares this dance to the Cowboys' "threatening" bodily movement, "those sinewy backs rising and falling . . . like a dance" (117). Her past admiration for the Cowboys' powerful physicality is later mocked when she, and another woman, "hum and flinch to each crackkk [sic], each bomb" in a perverted version of the same dance: "We're dancing the breakdown," she asserts (129). Even the title of this dance—the breakdown—speaks to the narrator's experience of war, her feeling of bodily disintegration, and the collapse between her past and present experience.

The football players' bodies, which are threatening in the story's present time, appear to the narrator in memory as symbols of freedom and transcendence. She recalls the players being "slim, slender, while the others were hulking, brutish" (116), and remarks that one of Pittsburgh's players, Lynn Swann, "should have been with the Cowboys" as he "was as graceful as the rest of his teammates were piggish" (117). "Sometimes," she continues, "I think he flew. He was so lithe, I think everyone on the field stopped to watch him, this bird of beauty among

them, so tied to their squat bodies and the heavy ground” (117). The narrator’s youthful admiration of the players’ physical capabilities suggests her desire to transcend her own body, to leave the “heavy ground” of earthly experience to which she is tied, and foreshadows the desire she later articulates to pass through the war “as a spirit” (128). In the midst of the war, the narrator begins to experience the kind of psychological escape from her body that she desires:

The jets breaking the sound barrier keep rushing over the house. I’ve never heard a noise like that. Oh, my God! It’s a wonder I can remember anything. Remembering keeps the panic down. Remember your name, remember last week. . . . There’s a feeling somewhere in my body that’s so tender that I’m melting away, disintegrating with it. I’m actually going to die! (125)

In this passage, the narrator suggests that remembering her survival of past affliction helps her to confront the traumatic present. Despite this physical melting away, and her desire to escape her “useless” and “inefficient” body, her will to survive is embodied: “I feel like a glutton about how much my body wants to hang on and at the same time it does not want to be here, in this corridor, in this world where I’m about to die” (128). Although “the noise of war” is overwhelming and terrifying (128), “in the middle of the noise, through the gun fire, the bombs and the anti-aircraft guns” the narrator falls asleep (128); “Each time I hear the bombs approaching,” she reveals, “I yawn and my body begins to fall asleep” (128). Sleep, it seems, becomes a method of survival that is enacted by her body without conscious direction. Although the narrator’s “body is history, fossil, passé” (128), the story also suggests her body, and her effort to remember her past, helps her to “hang on,” to survive in the present.

In “Blossom, Priestess of Oya, Goddess of Winds, Storms and Waterfalls,” Blossom becomes powerful by claiming and confronting a history of suffering, which is figured as a literal battle between her body and a personification of Black history called Suffering. As the third story in the cycle, “Blossom” seems to confront the abuse, both physical and verbal, that the previous two stories present and unites the previously separate representations of the Caribbean and North

America. Written in the grammar of Trinidadian English,³⁵ the story is set in Toronto where Blossom works a series of unfulfilling jobs until she decides one day to “stay home and figure out she life, because a thirty-six-year-old woman shouldn’t feel so old and tired” (37). Writing about Brand’s prose poem *No Language Is Neutral*, Violetta Krakovsky argues that “[b]lack writers, such as Dionne Brand, find it impossible to talk about the experience of the enslaved and the colonized in the language of the colonizer, a language which is not their ancestral one” and so “reject the standard usage of English in their texts, a practice called ‘abrogation’ in postcolonial criticism, and speak in a form of language which reveals their cultural heritage” (52). In Brand’s writing, this language is not purely verbal, but also involves the body.³⁶ After a period of crying and sleeping, Blossom wakes up “feeling shaky and something like spiritual,” and she has the feeling “that she was holding she body around she heart, holding sheself together, tight, tight” (38). The implication here is that Blossom feels a fracturing of her body, a splitting of herself, which becomes fully realized when the Yoruba spirit Oya enters Blossom’s body and “she feel she body beating up and breaking up” until it becomes, in a way that recalls Claudine’s connection to the landscape, “part water and part tree” (39, 42). The battle between Blossom/Oya and Suffering is brutally violent and resonates with Frantz Fanon’s interpretation of possession as a “muscular orgy in which the most brutal aggressiveness and impulsive violence is channeled” (19). Oya, the goddess of wind, tornados, storms, and hurricanes, is associated with “the chaos that disrupts unjust social orders” (Brooks de Vita 784). A volatile force bringing turbulent change, Oya “appropriates traditionally masculine powers in the service of her own disturbance of rigid, oppressive, or ostracizing social orders” (734). For these reasons, Oya is often depicted as a defender of women, and was important to enslaved Africans who “relied heavily on the transformation and transcendence Oya’s Àjé promised” (Washington 48). Whether we choose to read Blossom’s encounter with Oya as spiritual possession or as the loss of reason and sanity (the latter of which, as Lambek points out, is the reading most likely to be adopted in the Western world), the event allows Blossom to exchange a way of life that is dependent on patriarchy, marriage, and a Western system of wage slavery, for one in which she is powerful and autonomous; as Lambek writes, possession suggests a “shift from an account in

³⁵ Brand considers “Blossom” as her “first attempt at formally practising [the demotic]” (*Poets Talk* 73).

³⁶ As Barbara Korte suggests in *Body Language in Literature*, “although body language in literature is necessarily conveyed with the use of words, it may still imply the ‘unspeakable’ elements of many emotions” (41).

which people merely submit to an *altered* state of mind to one that offers people an *alternative* state of mind,” or, I would argue, state of body (723; emphasis in original).

Shifting its “state,” Blossom’s physical body becomes paradoxically both redundant and essential. At times “she feel as if she don’t have no hand, no foot, and she don’t need them,” but she also feels her “body come hard like steel and supple like water when she say Oya” (“Blossom” 39). By giving her body to Oya, Blossom is able to overcome a history of slavery.³⁷ In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Brand asserts that “Black experience in any modern city or town in the Americas is a haunting. . . . Where one stands in a society seems always related to this historical experience” (25).³⁸ Blossom articulates the impact of these historical experiences through her body.

The suffering of Black people that Oya forces Blossom to confront appears as a terrifying, “old and hoary” face that enacts incredible violence on Blossom’s own body. Suffering makes Blossom vomit in fear and makes her “fingernails and hairs fall out” (39), leading Blossom to fear “she dead” (40). In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva explains the kind of fear that Blossom experiences in terms of abjection: the alarm caused by the loss of distinction between self and Other, “the place where meaning collapses” (2). Blossom is effectively forced to battle herself, her own body, and to undertake the truly terrifying task of warring against her own history of suffering. Having failed to find fulfilment in her marriage, to locate satisfactory employment, or to connect to the outside world at large, Blossom turns to face herself and, in doing so, experiences self-abjection. “[One] can understand that [the abject] is experienced at the peak of its strength,” writes Kristeva, “when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible

³⁷ The dynamic between Blossom and Oya resonates with the relationship between Elizete and Verlia in Brand’s novel, *In Another Place, Not Here* (1996). “[B]y wilfully opening her body to Verlia” writes Simona Bertacco, “Elizete—standing for the Black body forced open by centuries of slavery and sexual exploitation—finds a way out of the history of the body that she has inherited” (13).

³⁸ In her exploration of Blossom’s transformation, Goldman argues that, although “Blossom might never be able to articulate the impact of slavery, racism, sexism, or the deprivations instigated by the state’s bureaucratic control...her experience of possession demonstrates the haunting way these forces and other ‘systematic compulsions work on and through people in everyday life’” (7; qtg. Avery Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological*, p. 197).

constitutes its very *being*, that it *is* none other than the abject” (5). However, it is by facing suffering, or the history of her body, that Blossom is able to survive and gain “the power to see and the power to fight; . . . the power to feel pain and the power to heal” (Brand 40).

As Brand suggests in “Sans Souci,” it is only when one has the power to feel pain, to confront a violent and oppressive history, that one can gain the power to heal; indeed, only “those who see the hoary face of Suffering and feel she violent slap could come to dance with Oya” (42). The blurred boundary between the apparent death Blossom approaches and the subsequent rebirth she undergoes perhaps references how “Oya’s connection to the unborn and newborns is closely tied to her relationship to death and the ancestors” (Washington 50). Regardless, the battle results in Blossom’s experience of freedom and her triumph over a history of suffering:

Blossom was never a woman to stop, even before she start to dream. So she roll and dance she grain-self into a hate so hard , she chisel herself into a sharp, hot prickle and fly in Suffering face. Suffering howl like a beast and back back. Blossom spin and chew on that nut of hate, right in Suffering eyeball. The more Blossom spin and dance, the more Suffering back back, the bigger Blossom get, until Blossom was Oya with warrior knife, advancing. In the cold light of Suffering, with Oya hot and advancing, Suffering slam a door and disappear. Blossom climb into Oya lovely womb of strength and fearlessness. Full of joy when Oya show she the warrior dance where heart and blood burst open. Freeness, Oya call that dance; and the colour of the dance was red and it was a dance to dance high up in the air. (40)

The collapse of past and present, as well as the hopefulness of Blossom’s future, stands as an example of how what Grandison terms Brand’s temporal “pause” has a very physical grounding. Blossom’s body, having fought the history of violence and oppression, becomes aligned with the powerful, spiritual aspects of an alternative Afro-Caribbean history.³⁹ Facing the suffering of the body, Blossom learns to fight the war against it spiritually, in what the narrator of “I Used to Like the Dallas Cowboys” asserts is “the only way to fight a war” (Brand 127). This shift to

³⁹ “In effect, Brand’s portrayal of possession effects a re-possession of women’s bodies and geographic spaces that were previously understood as patriarchal and colonial possessions” (Goldman 17).

spiritualism, or to imagination and memory as occurs in “Sans Souci,” “No Rinsed Blue Sky,” and “St. Mary’s Estate” does not, as I have attempted to show, mean that the body is rejected, but rather that it undergoes a corresponding transformation that makes it powerful in the face of history.

In “At the Lisbon Plate,” the narrator undergoes an experience of self-abjection similar to that which Blossom suffers. Mirroring the position of “Blossom” in the cycle, “At the Lisbon Plate,” which appears as the third from last story, also presents the protagonist’s reformulation of her body in connection with her confrontation of history and oppression. Given their strategic positions in the cycle, both stories draw attention to the explicit connections between past and present, North American living and Caribbean history, which are less overt in other stories; in doing so, both “Blossom” and “At the Lisbon Plate” weave a subtle network between apparently unrelated stories to alert the reader to their thematic unity. Sitting in a “bar on Kensington,” the narrator is unable to experience her present situation without considering her personal past and colonial history (95). Recognizing the effects of that history in the relationship between herself and the white bar owner, Rosa, the narrator reflects on how their relationship would have operated in the past: “It has struck me more than once that a little more than a century ago I may have been Rosa’s slave and not more than twenty-five years ago, her maid” (97). Indeed, the narrator feels that Rosa looks at her “colonially,” and that their regular conversation “informs [the narrator] of her status in [the] relationship” (95). As she considers the power dynamics in their relationship and her reasons for frequenting the bar, the narrator reveals how she “has often looked at [herself] from the third floor window of the furniture store across from the bar” (96-97), and describes seeing

A Black woman, legs apart, chin resting in the palm of her hand, amusement and revulsion travelling across her face in uneasy companionship. The years have taken a lot of the tightness out of my skin but the expression has not changed, searching and uneasy, haunted like a plantation house. Surrounded by Rosa and her compadres. A woman in enemy territory. (97)

Moving between a first- and third-person description, the narrator suggests her feeling of dissociation from her Black body and the “enemy territory” she occupies, as well as her

awareness of the oppressive past of slave ownership that haunts her. Such recognition of the links between past and present propels the narrator backward into a recollection of her past where she remembers a naked woman, as “old as dirt” who ambiguously waits at a roadside (98), and her elderly aunt attempting to “scrub the black out of [her skin]” as a child (100). As history is personified for Blossom in the form of an old face, so the narrator in “At the Lisbon Plate,” who keeps getting “mixed up with old ladies” (99), confronts her history in the form of an old woman who tells her stories and invades her “like a spirit” (104) in order that the narrator might see something she “will recognize” (98). As history and present time merge, the voice of the narrator, the old woman, and that of a captive slave woman from the old woman’s stories amalgamate, creating the sort of temporal pause between past and present that Grandison locates in *At the Full and Change of the Moon*. Kathleen Renk elaborates:

The story makes the past and present contiguous and allows women to participate in both the pain and strength of the past. The old woman, then, becomes an emblem for the unrecorded and painful past, and just as she is present in the narrator, she and her story are buried within the lives of each Caribbean woman past and present. (103)

Although the narrator tells her own “stories about [her] family” (99), she also voices the history of her ancestral past. Speaking as the captive slave woman, the narrator describes her experience aboard a slave ship: “That hell-hole stank of my own flesh before I left it, its walls mottled with my spittle and waste. For days I lived with my body rotting and the glare of those eyes keeping me alive, as I begged to die and follow my carcass” (107). “Living” the past as her own current experience, the narrator is forced to physically and emotionally experience the trauma of her history.

However, occupying the rotting body of her history also enables the narrator to think through her past in a way that gives rise to a form of imaginative escape. Indeed, Alison Crawford, in her work on body mapping and trauma theory, promotes “recognition of the importance of the body, as a site for registering and continuing to register traumatic experience” (708). The narrator’s experience certainly appears to be what Crawford terms a severe case of “sensory and bodily re-living of traumatic events,” in which the individual is “entirely dissociated from conscious awareness and [is] mentally ‘pulled-back’ into the physical and sensory dimensions of the

traumatic event” (707). The narrator’s experience, however, reflects the enduring legacy of trauma that is portrayed throughout Brand’s corpus, as opposed to the kind of single instance of first-hand trauma that Crawford addresses. In the process of being “pulled back” into the past in such an extreme way, the narrator views her *present* body as an empty space: “I lift up my camisole and I have a look. It’s hardly me there anymore. There’s a hole like a cave with an echo” (Brand 102). It is inviting to read the narrator’s self-description as an erasure of self: what Kara Goodwin has termed (in her reading of several other stories in the *Sans Souci* collection) an “absence left by the legacy of colonialism and racialism” (121). However, it is possible to read the hole in the narrator’s body as a kind of physical embodiment of Grandison’s “pause,” as another “feature of Brand’s writing” that similarly “[complicates] the encounter of the traumatic past with the present in moments of pause that also evoke the future” (774). By this I mean that, in experiencing such abjection—both as corpse and as empty body—the narrator, like Blossom, suggests that it is necessary to confront the past in the attempt to overcome it. The hole in the narrator’s body may then be read as an absence left by history, but also as a space where the future may be evoked. Indeed, the old woman promises the narrator “her memories, her maps, and her flight plans when it is over” (102). An ambiguous but suggestive passage in Brand’s *A Map to the Door of No Return* suggests a similar reading:

Transform us into being. That one door transformed us into bodies emptied of being, bodies empty of self-interpretation, into which new interpretations could be placed. . . . I am, we are, in the Diaspora, bodies occupied. If we return to the door it is to retrieve what was left, to look at it—even if it is an old sack, threadbare with time, empty itself of meaning. (94)

While the narrator’s body is “emptied of meaning” and “occupied” by history, she chooses to return to look at that history in an attempt to retrieve what is left; as the narrator reveals, “it was one of [the old woman’s] stories that led me here, in search of something I will recognize, once I see it” (“At the Lisbon Plate” 98).

In doing so, rather than having interpretations placed into her empty body, the narrator creates her own imagined interpretation in which she re-claims and rewrites her history. Additionally, this space in the body also evokes connections between the corps (body) and the corpus of

western writing, suggesting that the hole in the body is also a hole in a tradition of writing that Brand confronts and fills with an account of the Black experience. Although while at the Kensington bar the narrator and the old woman must listen “with sadness” to “the old-timers [boast] about how many *piezas de indias* they could pack into a ship for a bauble or a gun [and the] young soldiers [talk] about the joys of filling a Black with bullets and stuffing a Black cunt with dynamite,” the narrator views her experience there as her “greatest opportunity” (105):

The old woman has given the go-ahead. Now that they’re all gathered—Rosa, the big white boy, the professor, the moneychangers and the skin dealers, the whip handlers, the coffle makers and the boatswains, the old timers and the young soldiers. I’m going to kill them. I’ll tell them I have something to sell. That’ll get them going; it always has. Then we’ll strangle them. It’ll be a night for the old woman to remember. That’ll make up for it. Then that’ll be the end of it. (113)

After the narrator and the old woman make their captives “call out everything that they had done over and over again” (114), the story ends with an imagined violent killing (an erasing) of the “oppressors,” and the intimate revelation that the narrator’s “new love and companion [is the] the old hag of a banyan tree” (114). This imagined alternative, which, as is the case in “Blossom,” can only be achieved after the narrator has confronted the sadness, suffering, and hatred of the past, gives way to a hopeful future in which love is the dominant emotion.

Imagining a new future or outcome is a feature of many stories in the *Sans Souci* collection and is frequently linked to the body. By imagining the body as liberated from constraints and historical implications, characters are able to counter situations in which they feel physically oppressed, as is the case for Claudine in “Sans Souci” or the protagonist in “No Rinsed Blue Sky.” In his work on the role of imagination in coping with individual trauma, Robert Bosnak argues that imagination, particularly in dreams, plays “with reality in order to dissolve hard-to-digest chunks of living” (41). Bosnak refers to this process as “the *metabolizing work of imagination*” (41; italics in original). For many of Brand’s characters, imagination serves a similarly “metabolizing” force, which helps them to both confront the past and move toward the future. Take, for example, the narrator in “St. Mary’s Estate” who travels with her sister and a driver to see the plantation where she grew up. Like many of the women in Brand’s collection,

the narrator chooses to psychologically return to the past, or to an environment that provokes painful memories of suffering. “Just as the narrative explores the brutality of plantation life,” writes Sturgess, “it also reveals the tenacity of colonial representations, and the lasting damage done to the Black Caribbean psyche” (58). The narrator remembers the house and surrounding area so clearly that she feels the “trees and stones have been preserved in [her] head” (43), and as she looks upon the estate she feels like she is “watching the past” (45). As she moves through the environment, her memories of the past become increasingly present until, when she reaches the slave owner’s house, the temporal gap between her childhood and adult experience is completely closed.

Seeing the house, the narrator experiences an embodied reaction to the memory of slavery and her family’s subjugation:

For two months, this wasn’t our place. For two months papa bowed and scraped, visibly. And mama warned us grandchildren not to misbehave or embarrass the family. And still after this long, the imperative of habit and station causes my legs to stand where they are. Do not go near the house. It is the white people’s house. It is their place and we are “niggers.” Reaching back into me, thirty four years, a command, visceral, fresh as the first day it was given. It still had the power of starvation, whip and . . . blood. (49)

Re-experiencing the “visceral” trauma of starvation and whipping as she looks at the house, the narrator is unable to move her body; the memory of movement and posture during a traumatic event is retained in memory and can be reexperienced if the individual is confronted by a situation that causes them to remember the original trauma (Rothschild 50-56). The repetition of the line, “this is where I was born” (“St. Mary’s Estate” 49) translates the narrator’s physical stasis into language, which itself becomes “stuck in the groove” of the colonial legacy (Sturgess 58). This stasis also becomes part of a temporal pause between past and present as the narrator recognizes the relationship between her present experience at the plantation and the past that it evokes. The phrase also evokes the repeated lines from “Sans Souci” that describe Claudine’s experience of childbirth, “[that] is how her first child was born” (12, 14), which suggests a harkening back to the first story that links both protagonists’ experiences of oppression while recognizing how they are different; in creating such links, the cycle encourages the reader to

draw comparisons between the stories and the modes of oppression they present that illuminate and nuance the overarching collective Black female experience that Brand presents. As is the case elsewhere in the collection, the narrator in “St. Marys Estate” experiences not only her personal past, but an entire history of colonial oppression: “To sleep beneath the raw stench of copra, night after night, for two hundred years is not easy; to hear tired breathing, breathless fucking, children screaming for five hundred years is not easy” (“St. Mary’s Estate” 50). However, like the narrator in “At the Lisbon Plate,” the narrator in “St. Mary’s Estate” is able to counter her experience of the traumatic past by imagining the destruction of the physical place that represents colonial history and the personal trauma it has left behind: “The jeep hobbles up the gravel road past the quiet barracks. The boy on the roof doesn’t stop his work this time to look at us. We get to the sign post. ‘St. Mary’s Estate,’ it says once again, judiciously. Red-eyed, I have a picture of the green house in my head, ablaze” (51). By imagining the house being consumed by fire,⁴⁰ the narrator claims a sense of control over her history by rewriting its outcome and imaginatively eliminating the barrier that prevents her physical movement and freedom. Although this imagined outcome does not grant the narrator any real political agency, it does allow her to creatively control her subjective experience of the past and to reconfigure her place within a historical narrative.

Such active remembering of the past is central to the story “Photograph,” in which the narrator recalls the hardships of her childhood. Here, the female body is both feared and desired, and therefore appears ultimately uncanny. As Goldman demonstrates in her work on “Blossom,” the “uncanny,” which concerns the “*heim*” or home, and “typically surfaces in conjunction with crises concerning matters of possession and inheritance” (2), appears a relevant and productive concept with which to examine a collection pervaded by issues of diaspora, belonging, place, and history. Not only is the female body the maternal home, but it is also connected to concepts of home as “domestic space, and nation—sites that, as Brand’s fiction demonstrates, are capable of being possessed, dispossessed, and repossessed” (17). In “Photograph,” while both the mother and grandmother beat the children, the Grandmother’s body is also a homely place of refuge:

⁴⁰ Charlotte Sturgess reads the act of setting fire to the house as a resurfacing of “that legendary figure of the repressed Victorian imaginary” in its echoing of Bertha Mason’s destruction of Rochester’s estate in *Jane Eyre* (59).

We Jockeyed with each other, lied to each other, quarrelled with each other and with her for the boon of lying close to her, sculpting ourselves around the roundness of her back. Braiding her hair and oiling her feet. We dreamed in my grandmother and we woke up in her, bleary-eyed and gesturing for her lap, her arms, her elbows, her smell, the fat flesh of her arms. We fought each other for the crook between her thighs and calves. (75)

The narrator, who dreams and wakes “in” her grandmother, suggests her possession of the grandmother’s body as “home.” While the single remaining picture of her grandmother is “gray and creased and distant,” the narrator’s detailed recollection of her overrides the faded image and replaces it with one that is vivid and vibrant: the narrator’s detailed description of her grandmother is, in effect, a “written” photograph (56). Indeed, the grandmother’s body is intimately connected with language and storytelling.

The children listen to the grandmother’s “tongue lapping over a new story or embellishing an old one” (71), while their own words are learned from their grandmother, and described in such a way that connects them to the aforementioned description of the grandmother’s body: “All of the words which we knew belonged to my grandmother. All of them, a voluptuous body of endearment, dependence, comfort, and infinite knowing” (74). Building on Minh-ha’s work in her own writing on “Photograph,” Kathleen Renk asserts that “the story becomes a sensual pleasure that draws the initiate into the world of story magic” (107). Even when stories are not being told, the grandmother’s silent body offers the children comfort and relief from the “gnawing pain” of hunger (63). In these moments, the grandmother’s body replaces verbal language and provides a physical source of comfort to the starving children:

We stared at my grandmother hungrily, while she avoided our eyes. We all sat around her as she lay in bed, leaning against her or sitting on the floor beside the bed, all in silence. We devoted these silences to hope—hope that something would appear to deliver us, perhaps my grandfather, with provisions from the country—and to wild imagination that we would be rich some day and able to buy pounds of sugar and milk.” (63)

This world of sensual pleasure, then, is intimately tied to an embodied engagement with remembering the tribulations of the past.

Conversely, the narrator's relationship with her mother holds no such comfort. She recalls being harshly beaten by and estranged from her mother, whose violence is attributed to a rage that stems from the hardships and oppressions she has suffered in order to financially support her family: "My mother had walked the streets of London . . . with one dress on her back for years, in order to send those brown envelopes. . . . But her years of estrangement had left her angry and us cold to her sacrifice. She settled into fits of fury. Rage which raised welts on our backs, faces, and legs" (75). If one reads the narrator's relationship with her mother and grandmother as one that exemplifies the hardships of oppression and the violence of Black history (embodied in the mother), and the embracing of the Black female body as "home" (exemplified by the grandmother), then "Photograph" suggests that—like many of the stories in *Sans Souci*—living in the Black female body also means to live with the violent history of Black oppression; as the grandmother warns the narrator as a child, "[laugh] and cry live in the same house" (61). Still, the narrator's privileging of her grandmother's body elevates it to a powerful position in the narrative.

By writing about her experiences of violence, abuse, and hunger, as well as about her grandmother, the narrator suggests that she has re-possessed her own body and assumed a similar power to that which she represents in her grandmother's language and body: "We were all full of my grandmother," the narrator asserts; "she had left us full and empty of her" (74-75). As Renk argues, the "grandmother's stories . . . are associated with the fullness of the grandmother's body, and are transformed into material objects that float in the air around the children and create a way to control and manipulate the world" (107). The narrator is able to use this learned imaginative and embodied control to tell her own story; she demonstrates a willed desire to remember and think her past, which appears as a potentially enabling act.

The possible power of the body, which the narrator of "Photograph" locates in her grandmother, and which Blossom ultimately achieves, is fully realized in "Madame Alaird's Breasts," perhaps Brand's most hopeful and celebratory story about the Black female body. This sequential and thematic progression ("Madame Alaird's Breasts" follows "Photograph") suggests the way that

the cycle builds upon particular ideas—in this case, the powerful connection between the Black female body and storytelling and the protagonists’ impact on a younger generation—to show the accumulative power of each story’s focus. “Madame Alaird’s Breasts,” which appears in a central position in the cycle, functions to alleviate the pattern of oppression and abuse that surrounds it. By offering a temporary pause in the thematic trend, the story creates a heightened sense of the celebrated power and intergenerational influence of the protagonist that makes the depiction of oppression in subsequent stories all the more poignant.

As a French teacher, Madame Alaird is imbued with a powerful command of language, but—as in “Photograph” where the grandmother’s body and words are linked—it is a power that is inseparable from her body: “Her voice resonated through her breasts, deep and rich and Black” (79). Madame Alaird’s body, her breasts and “full lips,” assumes a power and presence in this story that overwrites a history of trauma and suggests a hopeful embracing of the Black female body, particularly for the young generation of girls she teaches: “Madame Alaird’s breast’s gave us imagination beyond our years or possibilities,” recalls the narrator (80). Indeed, Elsa Luciano Feal, who reads the Black female body in terms of the “Caribbean erotic and how it has been textualized in Dionne Brand’s fiction,” asserts that in “Madame Alaird,” Brand presents the “body of the black woman [as] beautiful and desirable, the site of social agency and change” (193-94). Indeed, the children excitedly watch the teacher’s breasts rise and fall as she announces the conjugation of verbs (79), and look forward to “having Madame Alaird’s breasts to gawk at, all of French period” (80). The children are so invested in this Black woman’s body that they are “jealous of Madame Alaird’s husband” and watch him “cut-eyed” (83). When Madame Alaird goes through a “gloomy period,” the children create a narrative of explanation around her body that centres on male violence: “It must be she husband, oui! Madam Alaird don’t need he. . . . So he have Madame Alaird catching hell, or what? Cheupss! You don’t see he could use a beating!” (82). Although Madame Alaird is an embodiment of liberation, power, and success for Black women, the children’s story inscribes a violent past onto her body, a reminder of a history of oppression. However, the mere presence of Madame Alaird’s body powerfully rejects the story and any dependence on her husband, making the children wonder, “[h]ow could she need he?” (82).

The children's embracing of Madame Alaird's sexuality is also an embracing of future possibilities, and engages with bell hooks's argument on behalf of black women: "We must confront the old painful representations of our sexuality as a burden we must suffer, representations still haunting the present. We must take the oppositional space where our sexuality can be named and represented, where we are sexual subjects—no longer bound and trapped" (128). For the children in the story, Madame Alaird's body provides, like the grandmother's body in "Photograph," an inspirational model of Black female power. The children wonder if they too will "have breasts like Madame Alaird" (80), and consider her female body to be so powerful that they believe she "could feed the whole world with them breasts" (81). As Feal asserts, Brand "endows her female characters with the power to redirect their lives. For the girls in 'Madame Alaird' the erotic, and its promise, becomes a force to aspire to" (198-99). The power of Madame's body does indeed inspire the children to embrace their own bodies and to work hard in the class: their teacher's breasts drive them to "extremes," making Madame Alaird "delighted with [their] conjugations, rapturous about [their] attentiveness" (83). Ultimately, the children's hope for the future is not isolated from the body as purely imaginative or spiritual, but is directly linked to the Black female body: Madame Alaird's voice *is* Black, and she appears to the children as "a vision, a promise of the dark-red fleshiness of real life" (82).

The final two stories in Brand's collection, "Sketches in Transit...Going Home" and "...Seen," provide an encapsulating exploration of the issues of belonging, racism, sexism, and subjectivity that run throughout *Sans Souci*. In "Sketches in Transit" a group of travellers fly "home," away from Toronto and toward the Caribbean (132). The men and women on the plane are caught in a liminal space, in which they are suspended not only between the Caribbean and Toronto, but also between past, present, and future: the home that embodies the past and the place that promises a future. The in-betweenness of their situation is literalized in their journey between places as it is in the ellipses that divide the story's title into two parts. The various characters that Brand "sketches" in this story discuss their experiences in Canada using the "new idiosyncrasies" that they have adopted since immigrating in the hope of being able to "forget their past" (132-3). Yet, the impossibility of doing so leaves these characters without a clear sense of belonging to either place or of what their future holds. They remain caught between the myth of future promise that Canada offered and the false hope that their return "home" will result in a feeling of belonging:

“[the] irrevocable loss of their home ‘there’ is paired with no home ‘here’ (Maver 75). One woman, Jasmine, considers the “endless dirty floors” she cleans in Toronto (Brand 132) in contrast to the false excuses about being unable “stand the heat” in Trinidad that she will make up in order to cover up her lack of time and money and the six months of starvation and “back bending” work that she must suffer through as a result of her trip. Similarly, the Trinidadian passengers’ time away has “dulled their taste and criticalness about a good carnival” (139). The passengers’ in-between status is also apparent in their bodies. A female passenger, Ayo, considers how those who returned to the Craibbean with “M.D.’s or LL.B.’s in hand...had been elevated to brown-skin status; not like the rest of them ‘nigger people’” (134). There is a sense in this story that the collection of Caribbean characters who appear on the plane, and their very different lives and experiences as Canadian immigrants, mirror the various characters who appear in other stories throughout *Sans Souci*. “Sketches”—like the plane, which acts as a rhetorical device that holds characters and hovers between places and times—brings together an array of subjects and thematic threads to unify the previous stories.

Although much neglected in scholarly criticism, the final story, “...Seen,” appears (as the ellipses in the title suggest) as a continuation of the previous story. The movement from the concluding lines in the previous story, in which Ayo sees the island through the window of the plane and considers the remaining leg of her journey (145) seems to flow directly into “...Seen,” which describes a woman’s experience of living on a Caribbean island. I read the unnamed protagonist in “...Seen” as Ayo from “Sketches in Transit” who travels to Grenada in order to go “back for good” (“Sketches” 134), to “end the ambiguity,” and to participate in the revolution (145). Igor Mavin understands Ayo’s decision to participate in the revolution in “Sketches” as coming “close to suicide” and sees her death as “the only means for Ayo to assume agency and control of her life....Ayo jumps into sure death in Grenada” (76). For Mavin, Ayo’s “sure death” represents “a home, empowerment, and self identification” (76). Yet, although Ayo asserts that she wishes to participate in the revolution and “own some place, before she [dies]” (Brand 145), the story’s open ending seems to offer a segue into “..Seen,” which, when read as a sequel to the previous story, challenges this reading.

“..Seen,” I argue, suggests a different kind of revolution, one in which the unnamed female protagonist returns home to overcome her past and to locate a sense of self, power, and

belonging through an embodied relationship with her environment. In this sense, “..Seen” suggests a revolution of the self. The protagonist, “looking at the faces passing her [, recognizes] the excuses for her continual thoughts of flight” (excuses bandied between passengers on the plane in the previous story) and instead faces the challenge of returning to her past, both physically and psychologically: “The island threw her, them, into a battle against fear and hope” (148). In the powerful, embodied relationship between the protagonist and her environment, the “inevitable conflict [is] with the sky” (148) and the island is “[insistent] on a life where difficulty marked the body and finally the face. Every morning, facing the sky and the earth was a present challenge” (147). The overwhelmingly abundant natural imagery contrasts with descriptions of the inertness of urban Toronto found elsewhere in *Sans Souci* and suggests the forcefulness of life as the protagonist reconnects with the island and becomes used to “the custom of everyone living by the day and night and not by the wealth and artifice of wealth or superiority” (148). The story also recalls “Sans Souci” in its focus on the Caribbean environment—indeed, the cycle is framed by stories that take place on lush Caribbean islands—but suggests a movement away from the abuse and violence in the opening story and towards agency and selfhood. Although the narrator finds her nights confusing, and sometimes frightening, she is surrounded by the vitality of nature, which echoes her own experience of return: “Frogs and crickets and indescribably green and crawling, flying beasts” are described, like her, as “coming home” (149). The ambiguity of her return—she recalls that she “had come home to work” (149) but later questions what she is “doing on the island, why had she come?” (149)—is clarified in the final lines of the story: “She had come home. A year now. To live here, *to understand this*” (150; emphasis added). The energy that surrounds the protagonist and her purposeful desire to understand her subjective experiences by returning to the place she left allow her, as the title suggests, to “see”: just as she sees the details of the “amazing” island (147) that surrounds her, she also sees the excuses she made previously to leave, and thus sees, or begins to understand, her own past.

Although it is tempting to read “Blossom” or “Madame Alaird’s Breasts” as central stories in the cycle because of the hopeful future possibilities they present, Brand juxtaposes her more hopeful stories with unflinching accounts of trauma and struggle. Even “Sketches,” a story that figuratively and literally hovers between North America and the Caribbean and through its collection of diverse characters seems to unify the various subjective accounts in the cycle, does not offer a resolute or conclusive idea about Black female experience that anchors the sequence

of stories. I read Brand's resistance to a teleological account of her characters' experiences as intentional: by using the short-story cycle to present a range of diverse individual experiences, Brand refuses to offer a single, defining, or conclusive story and thus rejects the idea of a single or defining Black female experience.

Thinking and living through history, Brand's characters demonstrate the fundamental importance of the body in confronting the past, surviving in the present, and in imagining the future. Rather than offering her characters a way to fully transcend the body and its history, Brand shows that an embodied engagement with the past is central to her characters' lived, embodied experiences in the present as well as their movement into the future. As a result, these experiences are often unflinchingly disturbing; Brand does not mitigate the trauma of Black women's history, but shows how such trauma impacts her characters' present experiences and offers a discourse that draws attention to the potential value of surviving oppression and confronting the past. Brand's writing in *Sans Souci*, then, supports Crawford's assertion that if "the body cannot be allowed or encouraged to add to the narrative of experience or to add its own form of narrative, to be brought into autobiographical memory, then traumatized subjects and their experiences are at risk of being left outside of meaning, outside of making-sense" (718). Brand ensures that the body is always present in her narratives, and, in doing so, she resists perpetuating dualities of body and mind that threaten to ignore the complexities of such a relationship: the physical and psychological navigation of space and time. As Simona Bertacco argues of Brand's novels, "[the] interpretation of the fictional world is carried through mostly through [sic] the characters' reactions to, and perceptions of, their own bodies. These reactions and perceptions are creative, personal and plural and constitute...an important step towards a renewed understanding and theorizing of the sexed and racialized body for our time" (16). Whether recollecting the past, struggling to live in the present, or imagining or living an alternative future, Brand's characters are repeatedly, and often violently, engaged in a passionate relationship with the body. By making the bodies of Black women sites of inscription for past, present, and possible future events, these bodies ultimately assume an overwhelming presence and power in Brand's writing, a power that is potentially liberatory for Black women.

Chapter 3

Aging in Time: (Re)Visualizing the Life Review in Jeff Lemire's "Ghost Stories"

“Perhaps it’s not the events of the past which shaped my character, but the way my memory shapes my life, the unsettling way it keeps returning me to the body”

-- David Mura

Meditating upon his waking experience in an unknown room in the overture to Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way*, the narrator recalls how his body, “still too heavy with sleep to move, would endeavour to construe from the patterns of its tiredness the position of its various limbs, in order to deduce therefrom the direction of the wall, the location of the furniture, to piece together and give a name to the house in which it lay” (6). He continues:

Its memory, the composite memory of its ribs, its knees, its shoulder-blades, offered it a whole series of rooms in which it had at one time or another slept, while the unseen walls, shifting and adapting themselves to the shape of each successive room that it remembered, whirled round it in the dark. And even before my brain, lingering in cogitation over when things had happened and what they looked like, had assembled the circumstances sufficiently to identify the room, it, my body, would recall from each room in succession the style of the bed, the position of the doors, the angle at which the daylight came in at the windows, whether there was a passage outside, what I had had in my mind when I went to sleep and found there when I awoke. (6)

This passage exemplifies the connections between time, memory, and the body for which Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913-27) is so well known. Proust points to how he experiences memory as stored within his body rather than only in the mind, and how his sensory experiences trigger memories from his past. As Julia Kristeva has argued of this work, memory is “grafted in the actual body of the narrator” (*Proust* 82).

Almost one hundred years on from the publication of *Remembrance of Things Past*, new forms of literature have emerged that build upon the Proustian exploration of body and memory. In this contemporary arena, comics, or graphic narrative, engage with time and with memory-body relationships in ways that are equally, if not more, emotionally powerful and stylistically complex. In the visually focused medium of graphic narrative, lengthy descriptions of bodily appearance, movement, and expression, as appear in Proust's masterpiece, are largely redundant; instead, we are constantly confronted with images of the body that, if we read them carefully, supply this information in abundance. The techniques that Proust uses to explore memory are translated from verbal to visual terms and require a mode of reading that considers the details of images and their interconnectedness to each other and to the textual components of the narrative: comics panels are not presented in isolation, but rather work in sequence with text and other panels in order to tell a story. As Hilary Chute explains: "In comics people and events are positioned in space on the page. The most basic procedure of comics is that it expresses temporal development—or retracking—in spatial terms" ("The Changing Profession" 133). If readers are not to miss in graphic narrative the intricacies of body-mind relations that Proust makes so explicit in text, then it is important to pay particular attention to the visual narrative of the body and to the visual construction of time, a task that requires actively reading images rather than passively observing them. Examining how time and the body interact in graphic narrative, then, involves decoding the interplay between textual, visual, and spatial (the ways in which visual elements are formatted in the space of the page) representations of subjective experience.

This chapter focuses on Jeff Lemire's graphic novel trilogy, *Essex County*, and its representation of the body in connection with memory and storytelling. Although I address aspects of the trilogy as a complete work, I concentrate on the experiences and memories of Lou Lebeuf in Book Two, "Ghost Stories." A once successful hockey player, Lou finds himself alone in old age and estranged from his younger brother Vince, with whom he once shared a close relationship. Elderly, deaf, and suffering from alcoholism and dementia, Lou recalls his earlier life in fragments of memory that emerge sometimes from triggers (photographs or places, for example) and sometimes spontaneously. Just as Proustian memory is "predicated on a struggle and has as much power to problematize and disrupt identity as to affirm it" (Whitehead 111), Lou's effort to remember his past and tell his personal story is similarly fraught. In addressing this struggle I explore how the narrative's visual rhetoric and complex spatial configuration of time work to

express Lou's recourse to memory and his relationship to the past, as well as the vital role of the body within the process of remembering and storytelling.

My central thesis in this chapter is that the relationship between memory and the body that enables Lou to tell his story both highlights the multiplicity of selfhood and helps Lou experience fleeting but positive moments of engagement with his present embodied experience and the external world. Lou's experience of isolation and alienation is a central issue in the narrative. His retreat into memory frequently involves a rejection of his aging body and he struggles to reconcile his sense of self with the reality of his present experience. The very title of Book Two, "Ghost Stories," introduces the idea of the past as a form of haunting, and suggests the narrative's interest in depicting the struggles of embodiment: it simultaneously points to Lou's experience of feeling haunted by his body and of rejecting his body as a ghostly presence, his isolating feeling of being a "no-body." Through the process of telling his story and actively engaging with his aging body in the narrative's present time, Lou is able to confront his painful past and counter his sense of isolation by locating moments of meaning in his present embodied experience. Rather than obscuring or relegating the aging body, "Ghost Stories" insists on its presence. As such, the narrative offers a model of aging that ascribes significance to the aging body by suggesting that embodied experiences are inseparable from processes of remembering and the formation of positive, life-affirming connections between the self and what lies beyond the self. Lou's subtle movement away from a negative experience of alienation and towards moments of embodied pleasure involves a gradual acceptance of otherness, the otherness of his own aging body and of the world around him.

My use of the term "otherness" draws on Julia Kristeva's notion of inner alterity or the other within the self. In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Kristeva argues for an ethics that embraces difference. This ethics is founded on the notion that we experience an otherness in our own minds and that embracing this otherness, or strangeness, may provide the foundation for embracing difference in other subjects: "Living with the other, with the foreigner, confronts us with the possibility or not of *being an other*. It is not simply—humanistically—a matter of our being able to accept the other, but of *being in his place*, and this means to imagine and make oneself other for oneself" (13; emphasis in original). For Kristeva, this strangeness, which she calls "the foreigner," is "the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and

affinity founder” (1). Lou experiences his sense of isolation as a result of his alienation from family and friends and his rejection of the external world, but also because of his experience of aging. Aging is, to borrow Kristeva’s terminology, Lou’s inner stranger or his “foreigner” within. It is, however, by confronting and accepting this strangeness—work that Lou does through the process of remembering and telling his story—that he is able to connect with what lies beyond his sense of self and to experience positive moments of engagement with his aging body and the world around him.

In *Essex County*, memory and storytelling—and, therefore, imagination—cannot be separated: Lou remembers in order to tell his story and as he tells his story he remembers. “Storytelling and remembering rely on similar practices,” asserts Hanne Bewernick, “they both arrange images in an ordered structure” (9). To encourage the reader to focus on the intricacies of Lou’s story, Lemire creates narrative pauses that highlight specific moments in Lou’s life—both past and present—and detain the reader and invite him or her to be actively involved in the process of decoding visual cues with minimal textual explanation. While remembering is a very private and subjective experience for Lou, the story he tells about his memories suggests his engagement with the social sphere. The interaction between memory and storytelling, private and social or public space, informs the tension that runs throughout the narrative between Lou’s experience of isolation and his confrontation of his aging process and otherness. As part of this approach, I consider how Lemire plays with the notion of “ordered structure,” to which Bewernick refers. I also address the ways that visual tropes work to suggest links between Lou’s bodily experience and the past. The figure of the crow, for example, joins various narrative and temporal threads, while images of trees work to convey symbolically Lou’s embodied experience of aging and the progression of time. The overt visual juxtaposition of youthful and aging bodies also highlights the effects of time on the body, and foregrounds Lou’s experience of aging and his struggle to maintain a sense of his identity; this struggle unavoidably engages with and subverts notions of masculinity and the male experience.⁴¹

⁴¹ Although I (briefly) attend to issues of masculinity in “Ghost Stories,” future work on *Essex County* might take up this focus, which is a central preoccupation in the trilogy, in a more detailed and sustained way.

My reasons for exploring these issues in a graphic novel are twofold. I am interested in probing the ways that experiences of the body and remembering are visually recorded, but also in the medium's ability to convey moments of time—past, present, and future—on the same page and the recursive effects that result from such (almost) concurrent temporality. In an interview with Hillary Chute, comics artist and theorist Scott McCloud states that “comics is [sic] the only form in which past, present, and future are visible simultaneously” (“Scott McCloud”). In her own work on trauma and autobiographical comics, Chute suggests that the effect of this is to cause the reader to “look, and then look again,” and thus the work “builds a productive recursivity into its narrative scaffolding” (*Graphic Women* 8). The interaction between text and image, which requires the reader to read back and forth between both, also works to this effect. Such recursivity becomes crucial to the work of confronting issues of subjectivity and selfhood, and thus to my focus on the body in relation to time and remembering/storytelling, as it avoids reducing experience to a linear or structured discourse and instead suggests its multiplicity and circularity. Comics' depiction of time, therefore, enables an exploration of memory and the body that has led scholars to argue that to attend ethically to memories of trauma, violence, and war, “it is necessary to consider anew visuality and visual-verbal conjunctions in literature and in the visual arts more generally” (Whitlock 965). Graphic narrative may also offer fresh perspectives on the ways we represent and read other ethical issues, such as the process of aging and memory loss.

Comics have a unique relationship to the process of remembering. The Canadian comics historian and artist Seth argues that “the action of cartooning seems intricately woven with the processes of how the memory works” (“Q and A: Seth”), while Hilary Chute argues that there is a “peculiar connection between comics and memory” (*Graphic Women* 133). Memory, argues Seth, which produces mental pictures of things that “are almost reduced to symbols,” is integral to both the creation and reading of comics:

Perhaps you can't draw a field of grass that truly replicates the real field but you can create these high contrast images (or iconified images) that replicate the memory of viewing such a field. It's a symbol or a series of symbols. The viewer fills in the details of the drawings with their own memory...piecing together the past with a series of picture symbols that replicate the feeling of things. (“Q and A: Seth”)

Seth's statement also points to the role of imagination in memory, which plays an important part in Lou's experience of telling and remembering his story. Through its visual focus and ability "to spatially juxtapose (and overlay) past and present and future moments on the page" (Chute "The Changing Profession" 452-453), graphic narrative is able to install and legitimise various models of remembering and link them to imaginative processes such as storytelling. Indeed, comics' ability to simultaneously represent various times and events means that the reader can more easily see connections in form and theme between different times and memories and the body.

"Ghost Stories" might, in fact, be read as a form of fictional autobiography or even confessional narrative, in which remembering and storytelling emerge as somewhat redemptive modes of communication. Although *Essex County* portrays a fiction of the workings of the mind and the embodied experience of an aging man, it operates, as Martha Nussbaum has argued of other fictional works,⁴² to help readers understand the complexity of Lou's experience and his humanness. Lou's careful retelling of his story and his statement in the final pages, "So that's my story. At least that's as best as I remember it" (331.1), suggests that he may address an unspecified narratee throughout Book Two. The intentionality suggested by Lou's comment engages with larger theoretical arguments about narrative and storytelling. James Phelan's theory of the Rhetorical Approach to narrative, in which he asserts that "narrative is not just story but also action, *the telling of a story by someone to someone on some occasion for some purpose*" (8; italics in original), might provide one way to read Lou's storytelling as an assertive, communicative, and agential act that counters his negative experiences of aging. This idea of action in storytelling is also put forward by Michael Jackson, who, in his work on storytelling and subjectivity, asserts that, "[as] with other forms of labour, storytelling is a modality of working with others to transform what is given, or what simply befalls us, into forms of life, experience, and meaning that are collectively viable" (252). Although Lou frequently experiences a lack of control over the aging process of his body and his experience of the past,

⁴² In *Poetic Justice*, Nussbaum argues: "I defend the literary imagination precisely because it seems to me an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own" (xvi). Perhaps one reason for the recent popularity of graphic narrative is the very human experience that the medium is able to communicate: the multiplicity of time and experience and the attempt to find meaning within the chaos.

his imagination and creativity gives him a certain command over the story he tells about such experiences. In telling his story, Lou actively transforms his personal experience into a collective, or shared, experience, one that is necessarily interactive.

Lou's reflection on his life through confessional storytelling in old age is also a form of life review. Kathleen Woodward, who has written extensively on the aging process, summarizes psychiatrist and geriatrician Robert Butler's seminal definition of the life review as "a psychological process, undertaken under the pressure of the coming ending of one's life, in which one strives to see one's life as a whole, as if it were a coherent narrative" ("Telling Stories" 10). By using graphic narrative to tell a confessional story, or life review, Lemire is able to layer events from the past and present visually, in ways that convey both the confusion and significance of Lou's experiences and relations between different temporalities.

Lou's memories constantly collapse the temporal space between past and present. Indeed, the visual arrangement of Lou's story motions toward the impossibility of creating a coherent life narrative and of locating a fixed notion of self. Instead, Lemire presents a model of remembering in which Lou confronts the aging process by engaging with a variety of past experiences and different temporalities. Correspondingly, this temporal collapse occurs in the formal aspects of the narrative. Panels on the same page move irregularly between past and present scenes and sometimes amalgamate both, creating an effect in which time moves forward but simultaneously remains in the past; as Chute argues, "[placement] within memory is also a placement within space" (*Graphic Women* 133). This chronological disorder mirrors the confusion of dementia that Lou experiences, but also posits his past as an ongoing experience. Lou's episodic re-experiencing of the past challenges the notion of the life review as the creation of a totalizing and coherent narrative that serenely captures and relays the past.

Some theorists, such as Harry Moody, suggest that this idea of the "coherent" life review plays into a "collective myth that inspires a hopeful view of old age and its possibilities" ("Twenty-Five Years" 10). While engaging with such a myth may be comforting and even considered noble or therapeutic, its notions of evaluation and achievement problematically suggest that self-worth should be judged in relation to ideas of societal success. Additionally, this approach risks leaving the aging body, which may not conform to ideals of "successful" aging, outside of the

narrative. In a recent interview with me, Lemire expressed his desire to depict a more honest portrayal of aging:

Elderly people are so often portrayed in film and television as these wise and content old totems. Like they've seen so much that they are at peace with the world around them. I think to a large degree that is bullshit. We want to think we will be content and happy as our lives wind down, but why wouldn't we have the same worries and fears about death as we do now?" (Personal Interview)

Indeed, "Ghost Stories" depicts, unflinchingly, the embodied experience of the trauma, fear, and confusion of approaching death and remembering youth.

By making Lou's body a central feature of his story, Lemire is able to show the somatic aspects of Lou's experience of aging and the role of the body in Lou's process of remembering and storytelling. Jackson argues that "the critical vitality of storytelling springs not from body imagery alone, but from a direct, lived relationship between personal and social bodies" (28). The tension between Lou's private and social experiences and memories, a point to which I will return shortly, does indeed drive much of the story. The frequently juxtaposed images of Lou's young and old self, as well as his private and public self, suggest that it is storytelling that allows Lou to work through his varied and multiple temporal experiences and to confront his changing body and approaching mortality.

In facing such experiences, Lou frequently rejects his aging body, and struggles to reconcile his sense of self with the reality of his present experience. In doing so, however, the narrative bombards us with Lou's embodied experiences to show the physical grounding of his remembering and storytelling. "In exploring the ways in which storytelling contrives to blur and cross the line between different subjectivities, or between the space we call private and the space of the world," argues Jackson, "we must remember that these infringements are seldom simply conceptual or abstract. They are experienced and enacted in and through the body" (28). Although it cannot be argued that there is nothing beneficial about Lou's remembering or storytelling, it is as a complicated and painful process that challenges Lou's sense of self as much as it helps him to locate it.

The embodied engagement with the external world to which Jackson refers, like Seth's aforementioned "field" example, also points to the role of environment, or place, in the recollection of past events. In *Essex County*, Lou frequently re-experiences the past by visiting a specific place. The notion of environment as a trigger of memory has roots in ancient Rome. During this period, memory was considered an art and a part of rhetoric. In the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, the only surviving full treatise on memory from this time, the anonymous author explains the method of Ioci, or the "place system": a mnemonic procedure through which an individual attaches images that relate to what needs to be remembered to physical landmarks in order that they may be collected when the individual envisions the physical space.⁴³ In literature, the Romantic poets engage with this method by physically or mentally revisiting a specific place to remember an emotional experience. For such writers, memory is "concerned with the personal and is inherently bound to identity" (Whitehead 7). In William Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," for example, the speaker looks at the abbey to recall and compare to the present the experience of his initial visit to the same location five years earlier.⁴⁴ In current memory studies, place remains an important factor in the recollection of the past: "repressed memory can be retrieved by visual clues, and . . . *place*, more than anything else, remains attached to highly emotional episodic memory (*Graphic Women* 114; emphasis in original). Similarly, in *The Brain and Emotion*, British neuroscientist Edmund Rolls writes, "it is suggested that whenever memories are stored, part of the context is stored with the memory" (144). By illustrating Lou's interaction with his environment, Lemire is able to show the extent to which Lou's embodied experiences contribute to his remembering and the telling of his story.

Essex County has received much critical attention: the trilogy has won the Joe Shuster Award, awards from the American Library Association, and was also one of Canada Reads' top five selections in 2010, although it was eliminated in the early stages of the competition. It has also been nominated for two Eisner Awards, an Ignatz, and a Harvey Award. *Essex County's* focus on rural Canada and individual isolation connects it to a variety of canonical Canadian literary

⁴³ See Yates's *The Art of Memory*

⁴⁴ See Salvesen's *The Landscape of Memory; a study of Wordsworth's Poetry*.

works that forefront rural Canadian experience, such as, for instance, Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House* (1941) or Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* (1959).⁴⁵

In particular, Lou's story resonates with that of the protagonist, David Canaan, in Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley* (1952). Like *Essex County*, Buckler's narrative centres on the experiences of an ambitious male protagonist growing up in rural Canada who desires to move away from the family farm. Both protagonists battle with conflicting ideas of selfhood and, as a result, are unable to communicate with others and experience profound loneliness and isolation. In both narratives, time is given a forceful presence that highlights the slow pace of rural life and the movement between the past and the present. Andrew T. Seaman mirrors my own reading of *Essex County*'s formal structure when he asserts that Buckler's poetically descriptive prose "slows the pace of the already ruminative *The Mountain and the Valley* to a near standstill at times" (30). This temporal stasis takes on a particular importance in the final scene of *The Mountain and the Valley*: as is periodically the case for Lou in *Essex County*, the slowing of time allows David to "see," for the first time, the external world and thus to experience otherness. Buckler's text also uses a third-person omniscient narrative voice, which is similar to the frequently detached point of view in "Ghost Stories" (the reader watches Lou remember rather than seeing through Lou's eyes). When David makes his final climb to the top of the mountain, upon which he dies, his desire to capture experience in language gives way to what Natalie Taylor describes as "an overwhelming awareness of and responsiveness to an abundance of energies and possibilities that he cannot begin to encompass" as well as "part of that movement toward communion and communication to which the narrator has been concerned to draw readers' attention, those momentary encounters with what is other than the self, with what both is and is not 'you'" (184). This concern with narrative progression and with relating to what is within and other than the self, and with communication, is central to *Essex County*.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Lemire's work also demonstrates an engagement with other literary traditions: his ongoing comic series, *Sweet Tooth*, is firmly set in the tradition of post-apocalyptic literature, while his graphic novel *The Nobody* (2009) is inspired by and references H.G. Wells' *The Invisible Man*.

⁴⁶ Such engagement with Canada's cultural and artistic traditions is perhaps especially important given Lemire's interest in transience, identity, and time. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," T.S. Eliot writes that a "historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer acutely conscious of his place in

The trilogy is also situated within a North American independent comics tradition that has in recent years developed a particular interest in the past. Canadian comics creators such as Walter Ball, Doug Wright, David Sim, Chester Brown, Mariko and Jillian Tamaki, Julie Doucet, Jeff Lemire, and Seth produce works that explore subjects largely marginalized in mainstream comics publications: personal identity struggles, women's experiences, trauma, and complex familial relationships, for example. The work of Seth, arguably Canada's most prolific cartoonist, Lemire, and Brown displays a noticeable tendency to engage with history, either personal or cultural, on some level. Seth, in particular, is recognized for his depiction of nostalgia, both in style and theme. In a recent interview, Lemire declared: "I am hugely influenced by the generation of Canadian cartoonists who came before me, especially Chester Brown and Seth. Seth's ability to capture the romantic ideal of small town Canadian life in the mid to late period of the last century was a particular draw to me" (Personal Interview). In American comics, Chris Ware's work revolves around issues of nostalgia while "[acknowledging] that the past for which the nostalgic craves is always imaginary and impossible: history viewed through a lens of fantasy" (Tinker 254). Joe Sacco's *Palestine* and *Safe Area Gorazde* have been recognized for addressing traumatic personal and collective memory, while Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* is perhaps the most famous example of a graphic narrative that explores harrowing memories and historical atrocities.⁴⁷ As a result, *Maus* "demonstrates the validity of comics as a means of testimonial representation and of expressing memory" (Merino). Although Lemire's subject is quite different from Spiegelman's, *Essex County* conveys a similar interest in depicting personal memories and the relationship between past and present.

The opening three pages of "Ghost Stories" introduce the complexity of the relationship between time, body, and remembering that constitute the focus of this chapter. In these pages, as is the

time, of his own contemporaneity" (38). Whether or not such artistic parallels are intentional, they help situate *Essex County* in a Canadian context and work to create a sense of its position in time and in relation to the issues of memory it explores. Unlike a work of prose fiction such as *The Mountain and the Valley*, *Essex County*, as graphic narrative, engages with this "historical sense" pictorially as well as textually.

⁴⁷ Many other comics creators have addressed issues of memory through graphic narrative and could be included here; I refer to Sacco, Ware, and Spiegelman as some of the most notable examples.

case in much of the narrative, Lou's experience of aging and the passing of time is conveyed not textually, but visually, through representations of his body. The first image of Lou appears on the "Ghost Stories" title page (113). He is depicted as a young man wearing hockey attire, standing beside his brother, Vince.⁴⁸ Both men's faces are cast in shadow. Positioned outside of the narrative proper, the image takes on a timeless quality and signifies the importance of the relationship between Lou and his brother, Vince, who stand closely together and whose hockey sticks are crossed. The strong chiaroscuro in this image, the contrast between light and dark, erases the details of the figures' faces and thus not only makes them appear more symbolic than realistic, but also makes their bodies the focus of the image. As I have discussed elsewhere ("Women and Autocritique"), paratexts can point to central issues in the narrative proper. That this lone image on the title page of this section draws attention to the physicality of these characters—their apparent youth, strength, and sporting ability—provides a cue for our reading of Book Two as a whole. The quotation about hockey, by Stephen Leacock, that appears on the verso also supports the idea that the body has an important role in the narrative and serves as an example of the important interplay between verbal and visual narrative. "Hockey," asserts Leacock, "captures the essence of the Canadian experience in the New World. In a land so inescapably and inhospitably cold, hockey is the chance of life, and an affirmation that despite the deathly chill of winter we are alive" (112). As well as suggesting the life-affirming physicality and movement of the game, the quotation, with its conscious use of the pronoun "we," also heralds the importance of community and team work, of interaction with others, and of claiming a national identity. This initial emphasis on communication and community establishes a counter to Lou's experience of loneliness in old age, and suggests the tension that runs throughout the narrative between self and other, private and public, isolation and communication.

The illustration that follows the title page, which marks the beginning of Section One ("Ghost Stories" is split into three parts), appears in stark contrast to the physical strength and the sense

⁴⁸ At this point in the narrative, the reader does not know the identity or significance of these characters, but the movement between past and present invites the reader to turn back, to reexamine and re-read scenes, in order to make meaning.

of amity represented in the opening image. Here, Lou appears as an old man. His body is thin and his face, which is clearly visible, is hollow and drawn (114; fig. 1).

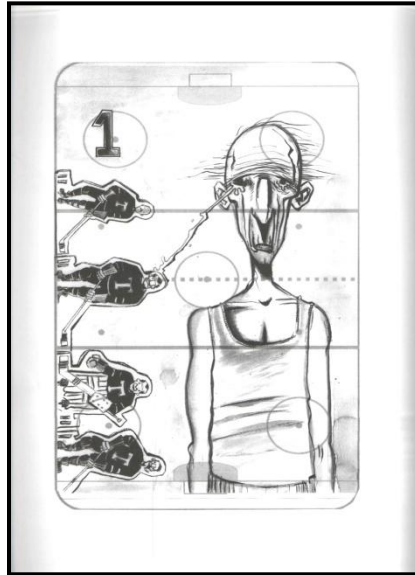


Fig. 1. Jeff Lemire, *Essex County: Collected* (Atlanta: Top Shelf, 2009) 114. Print.

Unlike the image on the “Ghost Stories” title page, Lou is drawn using more subtle gradations within the greyscale, and with a thinner, more faltering line, which reflects his apparently weakened physical and mental state. Lou is crying, and the trail of one of his tears joins his body to an image of Vince. As Vince appears the same as he does on the previous page—as a young man dressed in hockey gear—it becomes clear that this image of Vince is a depiction of Lou’s memory of him. On page 114, Vince and the other figures from Lou’s old hockey team are roughly outlined in ink, appearing as table-top hockey game figures, and the much larger image of Lou dominates the space. Although each figure is contained within the same panel, the reader must separate those that exist in Lou’s memory, or the past, from the image of Lou that exists in the narrative’s present time; in doing so, the reader is also separating the temporal threads of “Ghost Stories.” Costuming also plays an important role in the narrative’s conveyance of time and of the contrast between public and private experience, the collective group of hockey players and the solitary old man: the bold, ceremonial costumes of the players contrast with Lou’s simple, informal undershirt. To add to the complexity of temporal play in this panel, this image of Lou does not correspond with his appearance on the next few pages, where he is dressed in a shirt and slacks and sits on the front porch of his house. Instead, his costuming links page 114 to a depiction of Lou over twenty pages later in which he lies in bed, wearing what appears to be

the same undershirt, “thinking of things [he] shouldn’t be” (153.3). Lemire’s costuming helps to separate characters in time by dressing them according to the era. Lou, for example, wears three main costumes to indicate three periods of his life: his youth as a hockey player, his middle age, during which time he works for Toronto transit and wears the issued uniform, and old age, where he wears casual undershirts. The erratic movement through time that this scene depicts forces the reader to relate to the kind of temporal confusion that Lou experiences.

The story’s juxtaposition of youthful and aging bodies highlights the story’s polytemporality, but also demonstrates its interest in the subjective experience of time in relation to the body, particularly in terms of the male experience. As a male character, Lou’s struggle to reconcile his past and present experience is inseparable from implicit concerns regarding masculinity and what it means to be an aging male. That hockey is visually prevalent throughout “Ghost Stories” compounds and highlights this anxiety. The spatial configuration of the full-page panel, or splash page, on 114 not only underlines the relationship between the past and the present, but also foregrounds the body within this dialectic. The panel appears as a hockey rink, marked with clear division lines and face-off circles, over which Lou’s body is superimposed. Rink markings run over his body, dividing it into three sections, while the circles over his head, abdomen, and arm seem to spotlight these areas. The resulting impression is one of dissection: it is difficult to focus on the image of Lou as a whole without being visually drawn to specific features—his thin left arm or his wrinkled forehead and wisps of hair—that emphasize the agedness of his body. The fragmentation of Lou’s body in the panel’s visual construction also reflects the fragmentation of his memory process and his identity as a whole. Lou frequently dissociates from his old body and connects his notion of self to his remembered, youthful appearance. The Section Two title page highlights the body’s aging process and Lou’s divided sense of self in a similar way: here, the elderly Lou holds four small figures of himself, each one appearing progressively older (217). In both cases, the frailness of Lou’s body and the almost phallic projections of bone that protrude from under his skin subvert notions of an ideal masculine body as one that is virile, strong, and youthful.

Such an ideal masculine body is represented by the bodies of the hockey players that juxtapose Lou’s physique. In her study of masculinity in Canadian hockey, Kristi Allain writes that the game, and the media who promote it, tend to “celebrate notions of masculinity that privilege

aggression; violence; playing with pain; and a rough, Canadian style of play” (464). This physical ideal is also a “social” body. In his discussion of dialogical perspectives of the body, Eric Silverman differentiates the “individual” body from the “social” body, arguing that the latter is “cultural, inhibited, bounded, clean, and obedient,” and “privileges the maintenance of collective life over the dissonant, individualistic, and concupiscent aspects of human experience” (5). Such social bodies, argues Silverman, are “particularly evident during communal ritual when the norms and categories of social order are painted, incised, and otherwise marked on the potentially rebellious bodies of individuals” (5). Hockey, then, might be read as one such form of communal ritual; on page 114, the hockey players—dressed in uniform clothing and appearing to spectators as part of a collective—appear as social, rather than individual, bodies. As Leacock’s opening quotation suggests, hockey appears as symbolic of community and nation building, and thus contrasts Lou’s individualism and isolation.

This contrast between social and individual life also informs the story Lou tells, and is emblemized by Lou’s scrapbook. Lou’s experience of isolation in old age and the narrative’s focus on his personal memories and experiences are countered by his storytelling and his past career as a hockey player: the instances of communication and/or an appreciation of otherness (both within and external to the self), which I argue are vital features of “Ghost Stories,” are often representative of a movement between the private and the social. The scrapbook that documents the time Lou spends with Vince in Toronto, and which includes personal letters from Vince to his mother, family photographs, and newspaper clippings of Vince’s success as a hockey player, explicitly juxtaposes public and private worlds. It suggests what Jackson describes as “the energy that both motivates and structures storytelling . . . —a tension between being for oneself and being for another” (30). The scrapbook, therefore, echoes the tension between private and social experience, personal and shared memory, which plays out in the central story; Lou’s personal experience is frequently set against the social.

The opening scene initiates the sense of isolation that pervades the narrative, and connects Lou’s physical experience to his psychological confusion. In doing so, the narrative sets up a counterpoint between private and social experience, personal memory and storytelling. In the top panel on page 115, which offers the first depiction of Essex County and Lou’s farm, Lou sits on the front porch of his house, looking at the surrounding countryside while a bird flies overhead.

However, the idyllic scene is immediately undercut by the subsequent panels, which show Lou’s confusion and emotional discomfort (Fig. 2). Beginning by contemplating the innocent question, “What time is it?” (115.2)—which, as the instigating text, also appears as a self-reflexive allusion to the narrative’s manipulation of time—Lou ponders a torrent of questions, all presented in thought bubbles to show that his reflections are silent and introspective: “Why am I just sitting around?” (116.1); “Why is my hand so shaky and wrinkled?” (116.2); “And where’s Beth? Where’s my wife?” (116.3); “Who the hell is this woman?!” (116.7).



Fig. 2. Jeff Lemire, *Essex County: Collected* (Atlanta: Top Shelf, 2009) 116. Print.

The panel in which he questions the condition of his hand draws attention back to the body and suggests the dislocation Lou experiences between his sense of self and his physical state and exemplifies Lou’s experience of the kind of internal strangeness or otherness to which Kristeva refers. As Woodward argues, “[as] we age we increasingly separate what we take to be our real selves from our bodies” (“The Mirror Stage of Old Age” 104). The layout of this panel depicts Lou’s hand as isolated from the rest of his body, suggesting that he is distanced from and objectifying his physical self (116.2). In their seminal work “The Mask of Ageing and the Post-Modern Life Course” (1991), Featherstone and Hepworth point out that many people retain a sense of self that remains separate from the external appearance, or mask, of the body that others perceive: “Changes in outward physical appearance are seen as separate from the self, which is considered to be more enduring” (381). This “mask of aging,” which hides “inner feelings,

motives, attitudes or beliefs” (378), can create a sense of fragmentation and alienation. This is true for Lou, whose sense of fragmentation is depicted through visual techniques (as is the case in the panel that shows his body dissected by the lines of the hockey rink), and whose experience of alienation results from his tendency to reject his present experience. But the narrative also pushes beyond this by showing Lou’s confrontation of the aging mask and the negotiations of self that he undergoes in order to prevent his experiences of alienation and fragmentation from being wholly destructive.

As well as portraying his sense of confusion (Beth, we learn, is not Lou’s wife but his sister-in-law) and alcoholism, the opening scene depicts Lou’s focus on his individual and past experience at the expense of communicating with others and experiencing the present. The first instance of human interaction in Book Two occurs between Lou and the nurse, Mrs. Quenneville, and ends abruptly when Mrs. Quenneville refuses Lou’s request for whiskey and Lou angrily responds with a message on his notepad: “I’m a grown man, not some damn child! I want a drink!” (118.9). Although Lou’s outburst may be sympathetically read as a proud retaliation to his perceived lack of agency or control, he nonetheless declines the companionship that Mrs. Quenneville offers, and instead chooses to be alone with his memories. However, that Lou later chooses to tell his personal story, which begins on page 120, suggests a desire to share his experience, which works powerfully against his detachment from his present embodied experience. Storytelling, then, appears as a way to hold together fragmented and contradictory images of the self.

The instigating narrative in “Ghost Stories” also serves as a good illustration of Lemire’s illustrative and compositional techniques; indeed, the narrative’s formal structure is integral to conveying the mood of isolation in this first scene, and to expressing the passing of and/or collapse of time that is vital to Lou’s embodied experience as he tells his story. In particular, form plays a crucial role in slowing or pausing narrative time, which, I argue, allows space for Lou’s memories to occur and encourages the reader to recognize their significance. The slowing of time creates a focus on subjective experience rather than narrative events or progression. In these instances, as is the case in the opening scene where Lou sits on the porch, our attention is turned to Lou’s inward experience and feeling, and “the nuances of perception” (Bal 106). The

limited text also contributes to the slow pacing of the story by creating a mood of silence and by shifting the focus to visual rather than textual detail.⁴⁹ Unlike text, graphic narrative is able to express this temporal suspension spatially, in a way that allows present and past to be viewed almost simultaneously. In this narrative, which confronts issues of aging and remembering and operates as a form of life review, formal strategies express the multiplicity of time and experience and thus unsettle the notion of locating a fixed subjectivity in the life review.

Lemire orchestrates panel transitions, perspective, and settings to convey Lou's experience of time. Although the mechanisms of comics and film⁵⁰ are quite different, Lemire credits cinematic influence in his creation of the trilogy: "On a pacing and storytelling level, [*Essex County's*] silent, visual transitions were really influenced a lot by cinema and particularly filmmakers like Wim Wenders, Kubrick and Terrence Malick" (qtd. in Manning). Following Scott McCloud's categorization of transitions in comics, *Essex County* most commonly uses three transition types: moment-to-moment, in which relatively little happens between panels (see, for instance, the movement between panels 4 and 5 on page 116), scene-to-scene, in which "significant distances of time and space" are bridged (McCloud 71.2), and aspect-to-aspect, which are "often used to create a mood or a sense of place" (79). Aspect-to-aspect transitions, in particular, such as the transition between panels 1 and 2 on page 115 of *Essex County*, have the effect of slowing down time and creating a mood of stillness and isolation: "time seems to stand still in these quiet, contemplative combinations" (79). Moment-to-moment transitions create a similar effect in that the minimal changes between panels slow time and cause the reader to pay attention to the significance of scene. "[The] wide-open landscape of the [*Essex County*] setting," Lemire remarks, "demands quiet moments" (qtd. in Manning). These "quiet moments" are often more emotionally affecting than sequences involving text. In her discussion of the absence of verbal language in graphic novels, Silvia Adler argues that silence is a "vehicle of a large variety of emotions and mental states connected to the protagonists" (2278) and "coincides with those instances where the showing takes over the telling" (2279). In such moments, the

⁴⁹ In fact, Lemire credits the slow narrative pace that appears in much of his later work to *Essex County*: "I think it started with *Essex County*, that quiet style, and then it became part of how I tell stories" (qtd. in Ford 43).

⁵⁰ See Ian Gordon, Mark Jancovich, and Matthew McAllister's *Film and Comic Books* for a detailed examination of comparisons and differences between the two forms.

reader is actively involved in creating meaning by observing and decoding the visual, and “responds with an intense emotional, intellectual and/or critical reaction to what is not articulated explicitly and therefore restored through his/her own understandings” (2279). Take, for instance, the scene on page 215 when Lou is moved from his farm to the nursing home (fig.3).

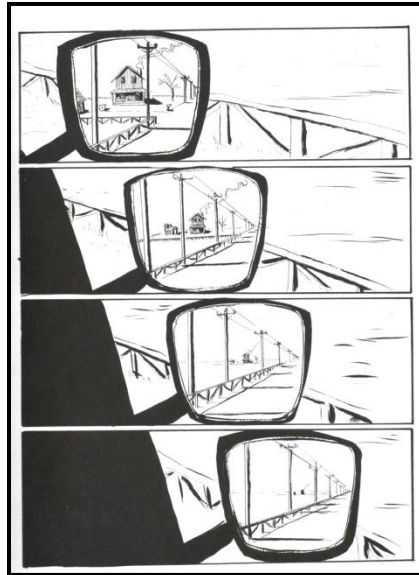


Fig. 3. Jeff Lemire, *Essex County: Collected* (Atlanta: Top Shelf, 2009) 215. Print.

The page contains no text, but a series of four panels showing a car side-mirror in which appears a reflection of Lou’s farm that becomes smaller as the panels progress. Looking at the mirror as though from the passenger seat of a car, the reader shares Lou’s perspective as he travels away from his home. That the left side of the car becomes increasingly visible across the panels suggests that Lou leans closer to the mirror at the beginning of the journey and then moves back into his seat as the car moves further and further away. This small detail suggests Lou’s hopeless resignation to change as he presumably sits back in his seat. The silence of these panels, the slow progression away from the farm, and Lou’s apparently unwavering focus on his former home creates a mood of silent reflection and poignancy. Not only does this effect contribute to the sense of Lou’s alienation, but it suggests his focus on the past, figured here in a literal sense, and the painful experience of remembering or reviewing his life.

In text, intricate and detailed description and shifts in tense, such as might be found in Proust’s writings, have the effect of slowing time, and take on particular significance in a work that

privileges the process of remembering. In Vladimir Nabokov's autobiography *Invitation of a Memory* (1951), for example, detailed descriptions serve to suspend time and thus allow Nabokov to freeze certain remembered moments. Contemplating the childhood security of his schoolroom in Vyra, Nabokov provides a descriptive tableau of the scene he recalls:

the blue roses of the wallpaper, the open window. Its reflection fills the oval mirror above the leathern couch where my uncle sits, gloating over a tattered book. A sense of security, of well-being, of summer warmth pervades my memory. The robust reality makes a ghost of the present. The mirror brims with brightness; a bumblebee has entered the room and bumps against the ceiling. Everything is as is should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die. (62)

Although Roland Barthes argues that this kind of cataloguing of realistic detail is not important to narrative progression other than to create a believable world for the reader, the focus on minute detail that appears in this passage and the use of present tense allow Nabokov to achieve a moment of temporal suspension: the sun will never stop shining, the bumblebee will continuously bump against the ceiling, and, most importantly, nobody will die. It seems, then, that contrary to Barthes's claim, that an abundance of detailed description is integral to the progression or stasis of narrative flow. In graphic narrative, scenes that contain little or no action, and which include the kinds of moment-to-moment or aspect-to-aspect transitions between panels that appear throughout "Ghost Stories," achieve a similar effect. To read such panels, one is forced to slow down and to accept a pause in narrative events, which grants a sense of timelessness to the scene being depicted.

Just as Nabokov suspends time in order to remember a moment before death, Lemire slows time to depict Lou's process of remembering, especially in scenes where this remembering is, like Nabokov's, voluntary. In these instances, the relationship between Lou's physical positioning in the narrative's present time and in his memory plays an important role in his recollection. By expressing these connections visually on the same page, Lemire is able to demonstrate in ways unavailable in text the compression of time and the instantaneous movement between past and present. Recalling his own encounter with death, for example, Lou considers the events that took place around the time of his mother's funeral (248). The panels transition between a funeral

scene in the summer and one in the winter while Lou ponders, “When was that again? Spring?/ No...no, it was the winter” (248.2-3). The visual images on the page—which, presumably, Lou sees in his mind—help him to remember and correct details of his story in the process of his narration, but also allow us to follow his process of remembering (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Jeff Lemire, *Essex County: Collected* (Atlanta: Top Shelf, 2009) 248. Print.

Similarly, when Lou forgets where he was in his telling of the story, in this case, the day of his mother’s funeral, he is prompted to remember by watching a woman in the present time of the narrative greeting her mother in the nursing home: “Mom! That’s right...Mom’s funeral” (248.7). In this sequence, Lou remembers himself at the funeral wearing a suit and a tie, which blows in the wind (248.4). This image is repeated in the final panel in the sequence, but in this frame, although he wears the same clothing and appears in an identical pose, Lou is drawn as an old man (248.7). Between these panels is an image of Lou in the nursing home, leaning against the wall in a posture that mirrors his positioning at the funeral (248.5). In all three panels, Lou’s physical stance remains the same. Although these images show how, like Nabokov, Lou experiences the “robust reality” of his past in the present, they also demonstrate how Lou’s body—his posture and position in space—translates into his memory.

The same physical engagement and collapse of time is also apparent in Lou's experiencing of his most traumatic, involuntary memories. The idea that a sense of physical position or posture in space is "one of the last things to leave in repressed traumatic memory and one of the first aspects to return" (Terr 20) can be uniquely expressed in comics. When Lou recalls hearing the news of the car accident in which Beth and his granddaughter are killed and Vince is seriously injured, his body reacts as though he experiences the trauma for the first time.⁵¹ Although Lou recalls speaking the line "Wha—what did you say?" (287.4) at the time of the accident, the panels transition through time to show Lou in the nursing home, looking shocked and slumped against the wall of the corridor, repeating the same line (287). Unlike the previous example, in which Lou's body position is echoed throughout various time periods, Lou's memory of the traumatizing phone call in the narrative's present time causes him to sit against the wall on the corridor floor while the final panel on page 288 shows Lou standing and facing the wall. This different technique perhaps suggests Lou's weakened physical state in the present time—Lou's reduced mobility and use of a walking stick imply he may not be able to stand as he once did—but also implies, in conjunction with the previous example of Lou's memory of his mother's funeral, that we are seeing a repeat of the reaction that occurs after the final panel of the original event on 288. In other words, we might infer that the younger Lou, upon hearing about the car accident, eventually slumped to the ground and was left sitting, bewildered and shocked, against the wall. By expressing this embodied experience of remembered trauma through graphic narrative, Lemire is able to visually depict the amalgamation of multiple temporalities in order to convey Lou's confusion and search for selfhood as he tells his story.

Such slowing of narrative time also frequently pulls Lou into a perceptive state of communication with both what is outside of the self and with his embodied experience of aging. In these moments of remembering, Lou recognizes and engages with his body and his experience as an old man. Lou's initial encounter with the crow and his childhood memory of skating with his brother exemplify this kind of narrative pause. As Lou walks through woods toward a river

⁵¹ The idea that physical movement is connected to remembering trauma is well established. Therapists who work to include the body in their approach to treating patients who have suffered from traumatic experiences note the importance of the body in the remembering and healing process: "Clients suffering from unresolved trauma nearly always report unregulated body experience; an uncontrollable cascade of strong emotions and physical sensations, triggered by reminders of the trauma, replays endlessly in the body" (Ogden et. al xxviii).

upon which he and his brother used to skate, he considers the Toronto Maple Leafs and their recent hockey games (122). In contrast to the confusion Lou exhibits in the opening scene of Book Two, his experiences and memories of the past often contain great detail and lucidity, as is the case here. He explains: “It’s sort of like drifting in and out of a nap.../Moments of clarity still come.../My mind will snap to attention and I’ll know who I am, and where I am, just as clear as I ever did” (120.1-3). Lou’s experience of clarity is echoed in the formal presentation of his words, which appear either in text boxes or uncontained within the panel rather than in the thought bubbles that often enclose his more confused reflections. When he pauses in a clearing, a panel shows a side view of his face, which, in the next panel, zooms in to an extreme close-up of his ear, followed by a panel that depicts a crow flying away from an overhead branch (123). The accompanying text reads: “[as] quickly as these moments of clarity come/.../...they can go” (123.2, 4). Lou’s physical pause is echoed by a narrative pause: the closure between these panels, or the length of time that Lou stops, listens to, and watches the bird leave is not specified, but the focus on details—first on Lou’s face and then on his ear—suggests that this pause is substantial. The absence of text in the panel illustrating Lou’s ear and the ellipses at the end and beginning of the divided sentence appearing either side of this panel add to the sense of stillness, stasis, and quiet contemplation before the movement of the bird. The page also draws specific attention to Lou’s perception and his sensory capabilities. Although the narrative later reveals Lou to be partially deaf, the third panel emphasizes his ear, while the panel that follows shows his head turned toward the departing bird (fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Jeff Lemire, *Essex County: Collected* (Atlanta: Top Shelf, 2009) 123. Print.

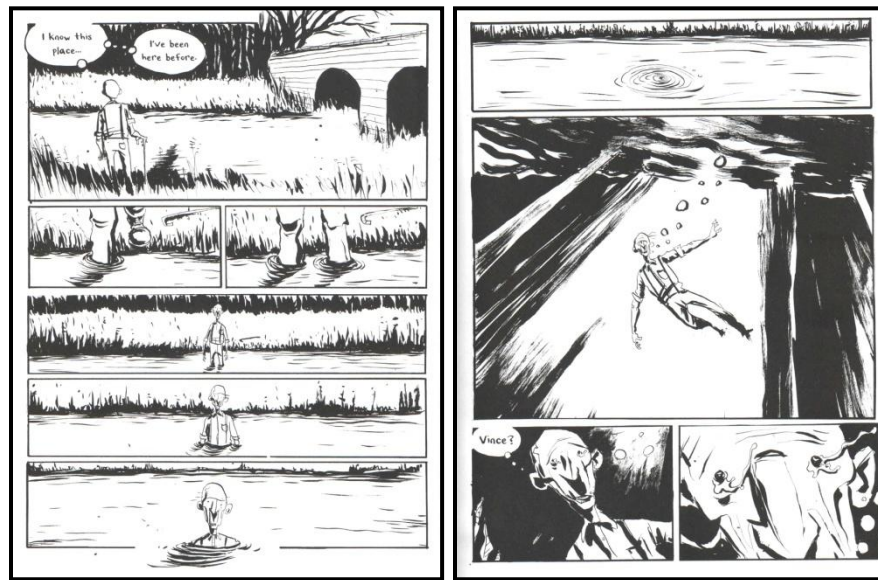
Although this “moment of clarity” is brief, the visual implication is that Lou hears and/or sees the bird leaving the tree, and that his sensory capabilities pull him out of his solitary reflections and into an experience with the outside world: Lou’s head, which is tilted down as he walks, is raised in these panels and his content expression in the second panel suggests that he finds some enjoyment in this appreciation of his surroundings. By “playing with time” in this way (Lemire qtd. in Ford 44), Lemire is able to suggest the significance of this specific experience in which Lou not only appreciates what is outside of himself, but engages, in this moment, with the embodied experience of his present self. The crow, to which I will return, seems to symbolize this otherness and externalizes Lou’s engagement with his body and self. The struggle to connect with otherness, both internal and external, is, I argue, one of the most important issues in the narrative. This kind of subtle pause in narrative time, which allows Lou to experience otherness, gives way to instances of complete temporal collapse in which the present time of the novel is completely suspended as Lou’s memories of the past consume and overtake his present experience, as is the case when Lou hears about the car crash.

When Lou reaches the river, his memory of skating with his brother not only merges past and present time, but also shows the importance of Lou’s physical experience and his embodied relationship to place. Lou’s experience, here and elsewhere in Book Two, exemplifies long-term episodic memory which is, as Suzanne Nalbantian explains, “characterized by a richness of phenomenological detail, a sense of reliving the experience, a sense of a travel through time, and a feeling of exact reproduction of the past. The setting or place as well as the emotional state would be included in such retrieval” (137). In this scene, it is the experience of “place” that triggers Lou’s memory.⁵²

A similar relationship between place and memory to that written about by Wordsworth in “Tintern Abbey” is evident in “Ghost Stories,” but, unlike Wordsworth’s experience at Tintern,

⁵² Drawing on the studies of psychiatrist and memory researcher Lenore Terr, Chute points out that comics enable the relationship between memory and space or place to be mapped onto a page: the form of comics “both evokes and provokes memory” and the positioning of characters in space “may forcefully convey the shifting layers of memory and create a peculiar entry point for representing experience” (*Graphic Women* 114).

Lou is unable to fully recall his memory by merely looking at the scene. It is only when Lou engages his body in the process of remembering, when he physically steps *into* the context of his memory, that he clearly recalls his experience with Vince. This relationship between environment and the body suggests a model of dynamic, embodied remembering that is depicted by the visual and spatial structure of graphic narrative. Standing by the edge of the river, Lou thinks that he “[knows] this place” and has “been here before” (Lemire 124.1), but is unable to recall the specific memory. In fact, “Tintern Abbey” might be read as a subtle intertext to this scene: both Wordsworth and Lou contemplate a view from the past from the bank of a river. The panels depicting Lou’s movement include no text, and move in aspect-to-aspect and moment-to-moment transitions to show the gradual process of Lou stepping into and moving forward in the water until only his head appears above the surface (124; fig. 6 and fig.7).



Figs. 6 and 7. Jeff Lemire, *Essex County: Collected* (Atlanta: Top Shelf, 2009) 124-125. Print.

What follows is a shift from a realistic to a fantastic depiction of Lou’s experience: the recto illustrations show Lou falling far beneath the surface of the water and calling Vince’s name until, on the next splash page, he looks up from under the water and “sees” himself and Vince as children playing on the iced surface of the river (126). It is important to note here that the point of view is not Lou’s. We do not see the scene through Lou’s eyes, but, instead, the reader looks at Lou, who in turn looks at his past experience. By placing images of both past and present within the same illustration, this panel shows how Lou’s memory of the past is fully incorporated

into his present experience. The fantastic elements of the panels seem to mediate between past and present times.

Lou's experience of remembering cannot be separated from his body. The panels indicate that he feels himself physically drawn to this memory, or toward the river into which he steps, and that the memory he experiences is one into which he physically descends. The illustrations showing Lou in the river visually privilege his body to show the extent to which his remembered experience is embodied. In the aforementioned splash page on 126, tears stream from Lou's eyes and link his body to the scene he remembers. Like the close-up of his ear a few pages earlier, the focus on his eyes underlines the importance of his body in his experience of remembering. Following the pages that depict Lou's childhood interaction with Vince are panels that show a close-up of Lou's face and then a view of him standing in shallow water before walking back to the farm (Lemire 129). This page suggests that while Lou stands in the river, he is at no point completely submerged in it; indeed, the shadowing that appears on his lower legs as he walks back to the house indicates that he recalls this memory while standing in the water, close to the river bank.⁵³ It seems, then, that the image of Lou's drowning is a figural one. It suggests both the submerged memories that physically and mentally flood him, but also his embodied experience of complete submersion within them.

On the other hand, these panels might be read to suggest the role of imagination in Lou's remembering: that he imagines his submersion in the river as he remembers, or perhaps partly imagines, the past. Certainly, Lemire has stated his interest in "drawing a link between the sometimes drifting, surreal mindset of an elderly person with Alzheimer's, and the wonder of childhood imagination" (Personal Interview). Because graphic narrative can externalize imagined scenes through illustration, we are provided with a detailed view of the scenes in Lou's mind. Certainly, Lou's memories are so woven into intricately detailed scenes and environments

⁵³ The scene also evokes the saying, frequently attributed to Heraclitus, that one "cannot step into the same river twice" (Engel 32), which comments on the passing of time and the impossibility of repeating experience. See Morris Engel's *The Study of Philosophy*.

that it seems likely that many particulars may be imagined.⁵⁴ As a fictional narrative Lou's memories are, of course, not real, but the interplay between Lou's imagination and his remembering does seem to suggest, perhaps unintentionally, the productive role of fiction and imagination in approaching issues of aging and memory and in telling a story about such experiences.

When Lou is in the nursing home, this link between imagination, memory, and storytelling takes on a particular significance in his negotiation between self and other. Shortly before Lou remembers the car accident, there occurs a scene in which Lou asks to join a group of other elderly residents for a game of cards (277). Sitting among the group, Lou joins in the conversation and appears to be content and comfortable in the company of others. As this one-page scene appears somewhat detached from the rest of the narrative, it is unclear where in the time of the story it occurs and for how long the card game lasts. The text in the final panel on the page—in which the group of men, including Lou, appear silhouetted—continues Lou's story in the first-person narrative mode that appears throughout "Ghost Stories," but the fact that this text is positioned alongside a silhouetted image of Lou surrounded by a group of others implies that he has an audience for this story. Furthermore, the recognition that Lou receives—two other residents enthusiastically call Lou's name as he approaches the table—suggests that Lou is known and liked in the community (277.1). However, this scene of communication is contradicted a few pages later when one of the care givers in the nursing home, Forest Glade, remarks: "He just seems to be in his own world lately./ He barely talks to anyone anymore, and when he does its often nonsense" (298.1-2). The implication here is that Lou imagines having an audience for his story.

Imagined or not, the scene suggests Lou's desire to share his story with others and plays into aforementioned theoretical ideas (as put forward by critics such as James Phelan and Michael Jackson) about storytelling as an agential and interactive form of engagement with others. Lou's storytelling is a process of purposive communication that contrasts his apparent solitariness and

⁵⁴ In her reflection on memory and imagination in life writing, Janina Bauman writes that imagination is necessary in order to piece fragments of memory together and argues that it is sometimes necessary to "resort to fiction to tell the truth" (34).

which allows him to manipulate his past experiences. When eating breakfast in the nursing home, for instance, Lou faces a bowl of food while recalling that he always orders “two eggs, sausage, homefries, and brown toast” (221.3). The next panel shows Lou’s arm and hand in the same position as before, but the bowl has been replaced by a plate of food matching the preceding description and Lou’s exclamation: “That’s more like it!” (221.4).

The transition between panels mixes memory with imagination as Lou remembers what he ate and then imagines it in front of him. This imagining leads him to recall an entire scene from memory, which begins with him eating breakfast before leaving for work to drive the streetcar in Toronto. Although this imagining appears as a strategy that Lou uses to cope with his present situation, it also suggests his reluctance to accept his aging body and his present experience. In their essay on memory and bodily experience, Jean Goodwin and Reina Attias argue that in certain traumatic situations, the individual copes by “leaving behind both the traumatic circumstance and the bodily container of physical and emotional pain. An imaginary or idealized body is often substituted in fantasy. Complications here result from the denial of the real body and include sensory loss, depersonalization, overwork, neglect of self-care tasks, and accident-proneness” (224). Indeed, Lou’s tendency to deny and “other” his aging body contributes to the loneliness he experiences in the narrative’s present time. These examples, therefore, exemplify the symbiotic relationship between memory, storytelling, and imagination, but also show how Lou uses imagination as an escape from his embodied present experience.

Links between memory and imagination are also highlighted in the general appearance of the narrative, as well as in the artistic style. This style seems to play into Lou’s reluctance to confront change, both in himself and in the external world, and to experience the present. Furthermore, the depictions of an idealized, often rural, version of Canada implicate the reader in Lou’s fixation with the past. The landscape and rural lifestyle of Essex County are romanticized in a way that seems to draw upon traditional, literary ideas of Canadian experience as being necessarily shaped by the natural environment. Lemire’s invocation of the pastoral places the narrative in a particularly Canadian tradition; Northrop Frye argues that the pastoral myth is central to Canadian literature (244), and that the greatest Canadian writers’ work “is marked by the imminence of the natural world” (249). Lemire is certainly conscious of creating a pastoral ideal in *Essex County*:

visually, I took the things I loved the most about the Essex County landscape—old rusty farm equipment, tattered wooden barns, vast open fields, endless telephone lines running off into the horizon—and focused on these, almost creating an idealized, almost timeless visual shorthand for the setting. I ignored many things I didn't find particularly appealing: like the suburban sprawl and big box retail that is slowly creeping in. (qtd. in Manning P. 8)

Lou's memories of his youth in the Essex County countryside might be seen to mirror Lemire's idealization of the environment. The illustrations in *Essex County* are also reminiscent of the black and white pen and ink drawings by Canadian artist Thoreau MacDonald (b. 1901). Although his style is more controlled than Lemire's, MacDonald's use of tonal contrast and his focus on rural Ontario is strikingly similar to Lemire's approach in *Essex County*.⁵⁵ Seth argues that there is a specific engagement with memory in this artistic style:

Thoreau mentioned in an interview that he never drew his pen and ink drawings of the rural landscape while actually out in the field. Instead he would go for a walk and look about and then, when he came home later, he would sit down and draw the scenes from memory. Thoreau understood that he couldn't capture the reality of the natural world in black and white ink drawings but he could replicate *the memory of* being there. This struck me. I recognized in it what I naturally felt about cartooning and memory. (“Q and A: Seth”)

Although Seth does not articulate the specific link between memory and cartooning, creativity and imagination, I argue, emerge as common factors: one *creates* a memory, or a story about a memory, just as an artist or writer might create a scene. In many ways, Essex County appears to Lou as an Edenic place into which he projects his desire to return to a state of youth, innocence, and moral perfection. Of course, such a place is an imagined creation. Indeed, Lou recalls that when his hockey career ended all he wanted to do was “go home” (244.4), but that when this happened it was “not the way [he had] imagined” (246.2). Still, Lou's idealized relationship with

⁵⁵ See George W.J. Duncan's *Thoreau MacDonald's Sketches of Rural Ontario*.

the landscape of Essex County enables his imaginative escape from the city, in which he feels “trapped” (244.3), and “part of its system” (242.4). In the splash page on 243, Lou is drawn spread-eagled over a map of the city while two text boxes read: “And, the longer I stayed, the less I felt like myself.../My hearing wasn’t the only thing I was losing” (243). In this illustration, his fingers morph into streets on the map, suggesting that Lou feels as though his body is no longer his own, but rather is part of the system within which he operates. The sense of losing his individual self leads Lou to imagine himself back on the farm: as Lou drives the streetcar in Toronto, the surrounding environment of the city transforms into the Essex County countryside (244-245). The bottom panel on page 245 shows Lou driving the streetcar not down a street, but through an open field. Although Lou does not explicitly state that he imagines himself in Essex County, the illustrations show that his imagination transports him to an idealized idea of “home.” In a narrative that revolves around a sense of loss, Lou’s imagination works with his memory to recreate scenes and retell his life story in a way that, at least to some extent, restores his agency.

However, Lemire’s illustrations subvert Lou’s, and Frye’s, pastoral ideal as much as they affirm it. The drawings depict tranquil rural scenes, but Lemire’s use of heavy black ink and his depiction of eerily vast southern Ontario landscapes recall the Southern Ontario Gothic: a sub-genre of gothic literature that refers to works written by southern Ontario authors—including Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Barbara Gowdy, and Jane Urquhart—that examine social situations in southern Ontario, but contain foreboding elements in plot and/or setting.⁵⁶ The aforementioned quotation by Stephen Leacock at the beginning of Book Two works to this effect. The description of Canada’s “deathly” winters and “inescapably and inhospitably cold” land suggests the dangers of the Canadian landscape. As previously mentioned, the very title of Book Two, “Ghost Stories,” introduces the idea of the past as a form of haunting, while Lemire’s depiction of vast, primordial rural spaces and personal experiences of isolation suggests the trilogy’s gothic overtones.⁵⁷ This connection to the gothic also supports the idea of Lou’s struggle to face his own otherness: his distinction between his “true,” young, remembered self and his aging body, which he denounces as other. As many critics—including Maria Beville,

⁵⁶ See Graeme Gibson’s *Eleven Canadian Novelists*, in which the term “Southern Ontario Gothic” first appeared.

⁵⁷ See Cynthia Sugars’s “The Canadian Gothic” for a detailed discussion of Gothic expression in Canadian Literature.

Tabish Khair, Fred Botting, and Dale Townshend—have noted, the fear of the gothic other is always a fear of what lies within the self.

The trilogy uses recurring, symbolic images—illustrations of trees and the aforementioned crow—to form a visual rhetoric that links history and the past to the narrative’s present time and to underline Lou’s embodied experiences with what is other than the self. The crow appears in each book of *Essex County* as a rhetorical device that connects the past to the present, and links the various narrative threads and characters. The crow’s connection to various characters and its appearance in different time periods suggests that it operates as a symbol of the past, of the historical people and events that influence the lives of those in the narrative’s present time. As Lemire asserts, the crow is “the soul of the town. He sits above and sees it all. He sees all the connections between our various cast members and generations on a scope that the characters themselves struggle to grasp” (Personal Interview). The crow is also a mythic guardian figure that watches over, protects, and comforts *Essex County* characters in times of adversity.⁵⁸ In Book One, “Tales From the Farm,” the crow watches over the young boy Lester as he grieves for the loss of his mother and makes the transition from childhood to adulthood, while in the final story, “The Country Nurse,” the crow occupies a central role. Book Three focuses on Mrs. Quenneville, whose work as a country nurse involves her in the lives of both Lou, for whom she cares, and Lester, whose mother she nurses. Like the crow, the nurse works to suture together separate narratives and the lives of different characters; this shared function is illustrated on the Book Three title page, which shows the crow perched upon Mrs. Quenneville’s head with a needle and thread in its beak.⁵⁹ The final book also includes a historical subplot that tells the story of Mrs. Quenneville’s grandmother, Sister Margaret, who ran a rural orphanage in 1917. In this story-within-a-story, Charles Gerrard, who helps run the orphanage and is revealed to be the father of Sister Margaret’s unborn child (Mrs. Quenneville’s mother), has a pet crow that warns

⁵⁸ In her essay on the figure of the crow in Jane Urquhart’s *Away*, Marlene Goldman points out that in both Celtic mythology and in the narrative traditions of Native peoples “the raven and the crow are portrayed as creators and tricksters whose presences trouble and vitalize the landscape” (134). Although there is no explicit aboriginal presence in *Essex County*, the crow seems to operate within a similar mythology as a spirit, or totem, of the Essex County landscape.

⁵⁹ Elsewhere, Mrs. Quenneville is shown quilting (see pages 340-342). As a craft that requires the stitching together of various materials to make a unified whole, it metaphorically suggests her ability to bring together disparate people or events.

him of a fire in the orphanage and enables him to save everyone at the cost of his own life. As Sister Margaret leads the children through the freezing landscape in the hope of finding help, the crow appears and leads them to safety in Essex County: “It was as if he was watching over us,” she explains, “It stayed with us the rest of the way, flying ahead.../guiding us” (444.1-3). In “Ghost Stories,” the crow watches over and guides Lou not toward a physical location, but towards an engagement with otherness and with himself in the narrative’s present time. This is the case, for example, when Lou pauses in the woods to watch the crow take flight. If we read this crow as a representative of the past and of the people to whom Lou, knowingly or otherwise, is connected, then Lou’s interaction with the crow also suggests his engagement with his own otherness, or, to borrow Kristeva’s terms, his stranger within—his aging self that he had formally rejected. In such instances, characters gain awareness of their present, embodied experiences, and find comfort in communicating with what lies outside of the self.

Like the crow, trees appear as iconic features in the Essex county landscape, but are also featured on title pages to indicate their emblematic role in the narrative; repeated images of tree roots suggest the narrative’s concern with ancestry, heritage, and interconnected relationships. The table of contents page, which links title sections of the collection in a tree diagram that stems from the base of an illustrated tree, overtly introduces Lemire’s use of the tree as symbolic of interpersonal and historical connections (3). But in “Ghost Stories,” the image of the tree takes on a greater significance that directly links history to Lou’s body. In their work on trauma, body image, and art, Barry Cohen and Anne Mills argue that the physical structure of a tree corresponds to the human body: “the skin/bark, the torso/trunk/ the arms/limbs, and the crown/head. Additionally, trees have roots that grow down into the soil, suggesting the unseen, hidden and unknown—qualities that are typically associated with the psyche” (208). For this reason, clients in art therapy are sometimes encouraged to draw trees rather than human bodies to express feelings about their physical and psychological experience. In Book Two, Lemire’s tree drawings assume a similar connection to the body and express Lou’s embodied experience in relation to the external world, which complicates images of trees in the narrative as being purely symbolic of ancestry. Take, for example, the aforementioned Section Two title page (217). Lou appears beneath the ground while leafy branches protrude from his ears and grow on the surface. Although tree drawings cannot, as Cohen and Mills argue, be used to firmly diagnose or categorize a client’s condition, they do “externalize imagery from within clients’ psyches in

ways that are otherwise impossible for the clients to communicate” (218). Similarly, while the tree drawings in *Essex County* are associated with a fictional character, they might be read to convey Lou’s internal emotions and thoughts about his body. Art therapy theory, then, offers a lens through which to read such illustrations: the image on page 217 suggests that Lou feels his aged body does not exist within the external world and that he is submerged in memories experienced by his past “selves.” The drawing, in fact, reverses the tree image in that the leaves and branches appearing above the surface look more like roots, while Lou’s body—the trunk of the tree—is below the ground. In art therapy this kind of drawing “may reflect the client’s propensity for depersonalization” (213). Such a reading supports the feeling of detachment from his aging body and the environment that Lou seems to experience throughout the narrative. Similarly, the tree illustration on the title page of Section Three (269) contains a distorted image of Lou’s face in the tree trunk and an empty wheelchair suspended in one of many branches. Read as representative of Lou’s body, the “chaotic mass of branches” might indicate Lou’s belief that his “body is out of control” (Cohen and Mills), while the wheelchair not only references his memory of Vince after the car accident, but also suggests his own physical decline and feeling of detachment—manifested here in the physical space between the tree trunk/Lou’s body and the wheelchair—from the aging process.

Lou’s experience of his body as both an adversary and ally in his confrontation of the past is akin to the other/self dynamic with which he engages. When he is told he must move to the nursing home, the prospect of leaving the family farm mirrors the trauma he experiences when forced to give up his hockey career because of injury; in both cases, Lou sees his body as the cause of his problems. He recalls that after his injury he had “never felt so far from home” (212.2), a statement that is followed in the next panel by an image of Lou leaving his farm and the caption, “[until] now” (213.1). Lou’s body is, in many ways, at the centre of his story. The injury he sustains to his knee is the reason he is forced to give up hockey and is left feeling “completely alone” (212.2), while he views his aged body—his deafness, dementia, and wrinkled skin—as the cause of his unhappiness and isolation in later life.

Lou’s past and present experiences are contrasted throughout the narrative and establish dichotomies between youth/aging and communication/isolation that are part of the conflict he

experiences between what is self and other. Through such contrasts, Lou's experience of isolation is especially emphasized. Indeed, it is only while participating in hockey that Lou feels connected to those around him. After suffering the injury that halts his hockey career, he admits: "In a city of over a million people, I felt completely alone" (212.2). Confessing that the routine of driving the streetcar "helps to hide loneliness" (228.1), Lou declares: "You know, there are only two ways to be alone in this world . . . lost in a crowd . . . /or in total isolation" (229.1-2). The text is accompanied with separate images of Lou driving a streetcar down a crowded city street and Vince plowing an empty field. The contrast between the brothers' lives is highlighted on the following pages, which depict Vince eating and watching television with his family, while Lou does the same things alone. Lou's memory of this period in his life is interrupted by the nurse, who scolds him for lying in bed all day and demands that he get up and go to dinner (233-234). She also expresses concern about Lou's self-imposed isolation and his lack of communication with others: "when you do manage to go downstairs you sit alone. You don't even try to talk to anybody. You won't play cards or anything" (233.8). As Bertram Cohler writes in his work on aging and narrative, "[t]he loss through death of a spouse or close friends, problems in moving about, and limitations on personal energy all contribute to an increased preference in the elderly for the memory of past satisfactions at being with others rather than actually being with them" (121). Yet, Lou's isolated remembering facilitates a form of communication with others by helping him to construct his life-story.

Connections between Lou's body and the environment demonstrate the active re-experiencing of the past through memory to highlight contrasts between Lou's current and past experience. In his memory of Vince and Beth's initial visit to the city, Toronto appears as a place of opportunity and excitement. The illustrations of Lou's memory of playing hockey with Vince for the Toronto Grizzlies, an involvement that he hopes might lead them into the National Hockey League, convey the energy and action of hockey and use frequent action-to-action transitions, which have the effect of speeding up the narrative pace (139-152). In these panels the bodies of all the players, including the young Lou, appear as agile and explosively energetic. This section also includes one of the narrative's two-page spreads, which depicts Lou, Vince, and the rest of the hockey team exchanging lively banter in the changing room (140-141). The sense of camaraderie and movement of bodies in the memory is juxtaposed by the images of Lou that follow the scene, and show him lying motionless and alone in his bed (153). When Lou gets up to pour himself a

drink, his isolation is highlighted by another memory of communicating with others. After opening a door into a darkened room, Lou appears, in the next panel, to be standing on a street, presumably in Toronto, and looking at the window of a bar called “Fuel Station” (156). The perspective immediately shifts to show the interior of the bar, where a youthful Lou sits surrounded by his friends and family. The scene continues to another moment of physical movement, in which Lou dances with Beth. It is at this point in the memory that Lou, as an old man, appears in his memory of himself as a younger man (162-163). The dialogue ceases as the elderly Lou watches himself interact with Beth. Again, the end of this sequence, which concludes with the nurse returning to the farm to find Lou alone and asleep in a kitchen chair, confirms that Lou has remained in his kitchen throughout the duration of this memory.⁶⁰

This memory, in which Lou moves from being a spectator to actively re-experiencing the remembered event, exemplifies the relationship between time and the body and the disconnection Lou feels between his aging body and his sense of self. On page 162 and 163, Lou sits at the bar watching himself dancing with Beth. The panel transitions on this page move from aspect-to-aspect, switching from views of Lou sitting alone at the bar to the images of he and Beth dancing: in viewing the images of Lou’s youthful experience, the reader sees the same scene Lou “sees,” or remembers. Not only does this technique help the reader sympathize with Lou, but by sharing his perspective the reader is more actively “involved” in his process of remembering. This also occurs when Lou looks through the aforementioned scrapbook and the reader views these pages through Lou’s eyes. Such direct focalization in which the reader sees through Lou’s eyes stand out as important moments because they contrast the dominant point of view in the narrative. In fact, the scrapbook seems to emblemize the narrative’s focalization as a whole: Lou is always looking at a scrapbook of his experiences—whether real photographs or remembered images. The panels that depict Lou looking, somewhat sadly, at his brother (163.3-4) while his younger self dances foreshadow Lou’s brief affair with Beth and his resulting estrangement from his brother. Lou’s regret over his relationship with his brother’s wife, which is not explicitly revealed until later in the narrative, but also his sincere attachment to her is further implied by the text on the following page: “My God! All these years I swore I’d do

⁶⁰ It is not clear whether Lou experiences this memory while awake or while sleeping. It is possible that this memory may occur as a dream; as George Christos argues, “dreams involve our memories and our emotions” (7).

anything to take it all back . . . / . . . But seeing us like this again . . . / . . . seeing you again . . .” (164.1,3,4). That Lou’s thoughts are in the present tense implies that he actively experiences this memory in the present and views himself as the same young man in the memory, even though he is visually drawn as elderly. Lou’s experience here reflects Kathleen Woodward’s thoughts on old age and perception: “We may feel ourselves to be young,” she argues, “but others perceive us as old, perhaps even ancient” (“The Mirror Stage of Old Age” 104). As Lou’s memory reaches its climax, he moves closer and closer to Beth until he takes the position formally occupied his young self (fig. 7 and fig.8). Lou’s view of himself as young adds to his sense of disconnection from his aged body.



Figs. 7 and 8. Jeff Lemire, *Essex County: Collected* (Atlanta: Top Shelf, 2009) 164-165. Print.

Although this memory is emotionally important to Lou, its transience suggests the futility and loneliness of maintaining a notion of self that exists in the past. It is only when Lou reaches out to touch Beth that the memory, presented in a series of panels that gradually break the scene into a few thin lines, disappears. The same lines into which the memory dissolves appear on the following page, which shows the crow flying over Lou’s farm. That the memory translates into a scene of the farm indicates that Lou’s memory, his youthfulness, and his connection to the farm are all part of the past. However, the movement of the flying crow, which seems to parallel Lou’s fleeing memory of Beth, also invigorates the landscape and suggests a positive movement from the past to the present.

Memories such as this are painful experiences for Lou, but they constitute psychological spaces that allow him to confront and navigate internal conflicts between his ideas of self, his embodied experience of the present, and his past experiences. These emotionally difficult experiences also help him to construct the story he tells. They allow him an opportunity to confront his past and, arguably, suggest that remembering need not lead to a rational or coherent understanding of life or self, but instead may affirm the often overlooked value of simply surviving such “affliction.” Lou’s involuntary memories⁶¹ are not always emotionally traumatic. For example, when Lou drinks alcohol at the farm he remembers the aforementioned night in the bar with Vince and Beth, and when he eats dinner in the nursing home he is psychologically transported to a memory of eating dinner with Vince (297-300). When Lou dresses for dinner at the nurse’s request, he experiences an involuntary memory that transports him from the nursing home to his job as a streetcar driver. This memory is prompted by the physical action of dressing. Lou’s embarrassment about having his private space invaded and having to dress in front of the nurse is suggested when the nurse tells Lou he “ain’t got anything [she has not] seen before” (235.3) and Lou imagines her disgust at his naked body. Although in some ways the memory that follows serves to reassert the agency and independence that Lou feels he has lost—he independently dresses himself and goes to work—the content of the memory mirrors the present situation in that he recalls his body causing him embarrassment and preventing him from living as he wishes. In the memory, Lou misses one of the stops on his driving route because of his hearing problems and, later, cannot hear the commentary of a hockey game on television. Contemplating his predicament, Lou bemoans: “Only two ways to be alone in the world, eh?/ Looks like I went and found another” (241.2-3). Again, the statement posits Lou’s body as the cause of his loneliness, and suggests how his detachment from his body is connected to his detachment from the external world, both of which he views as other.

Yet, the narrative counters the idea of Lou’s body as wholly restrictive and disabling by including moments in which he experiences pleasure through his body and communication with

⁶¹ Such involuntary autobiographical memories involve “the retrieval of a specific personal episode that is brought to consciousness with apparent spontaneity, and not the result of a preceding, deliberate search of memory for that experience” (Mace 116).

others. Indeed, when Lou plays on the hockey team, his memory of pleasurable physical experiences overwhelms any negative experience. Similarly, the scene in which Lou recalls the period of his life when he starts coaching a children's hockey club emphasizes positive bodily experiences over negative experiences. In both cases, the pleasurable experience of the body translates into social experiences, in which Lou feels part of a group. As Lou recalls his return to skating he admits he was "stiff" and that his "knee hurt like hell" but the liberating *feeling* of his physical movement overrides these concerns: "...but GODDAMN did it feel good!" he exclaims (281.4). Lou's memories of movement, of dancing and of playing hockey, incite a pleasure that works against the depiction of Lou's body as the cause of his suffering and instead show how his engagement with his embodied experience can be productive and enjoyable.⁶²

That the narrative consistently problematizes the possibility of a purely positive outcome and that it boldly depicts the painful moments in Lou's relationship with his body just as it shows experiences of pleasure demonstrate that Lou's remembering and storytelling—although it may help him to confront and own his personal past—does not result in his achieving a unified sense of self, nor in his ability to construct a coherent narrative about his life. Instead, his story shows the complexity of his embodied experience. The final section of the narrative demonstrates some of the most overt examples of this complexity, and confronts the tensions between Lou's experience of otherness as both internal and external. His memory of Vince's death, which is recalled as the final memory in the narrative and thus is the climax of the story Lou tells, is especially significant. This memory occurs at a point in the narrative after Lou secretly leaves the nursing home during the night and walks back to the farm; watching a hockey game and recalling a memory of doing the same thing with Vince causes Lou to feel "tired of sitting around [and] doing nothing" (308.4). This scene signals Lou's desire to reassert his agency, which appears in stark contrast to the aforementioned immobility and lack of energy he exhibits when he first comes to Forest Glade. During his walk to the farm, Lou passes Jim, his great nephew, working in the Esso station and also meets Jim's son Lester Papineau, the protagonist in Book One, who tells Lou that he is "running away" (319.6). That Lou and Lester are both

⁶² In her work on Alzheimer's and memory loss, Anne Basting argues that bodily movement, in her example, dance, allows one to "reclaim the aging body, which can be a source of stigma and of physical and emotional pain, as a means of self-expression and a purveyor of pleasure" (114).

running away, and that they are both visually represented with similar expressions, suggests a certain doubling between the two characters that highlights connections between age and youth, past and present. Although it seems that Lou does not recognize or know his relatives, the connections that occur between the characters serve as a poignant reminder of the complex family ties that bind them together. Lou recalls a series of fragmented memories until he reaches the front porch of the farm house, and sits on the porch in the same physical position—with his legs apart and hands held together—as he appears in the narrative’s opening scene. The visual echo of his positioning at start and end also suggests the circular nature of remembering and re-experiencing the past, as well as the narrative’s interest in depicting experience as multiple and recursive rather than teleological. The rhetorical question that Lou considers as he sits on the chair in the concluding scene, “But I’m not done yet am I?” (323.3), implies that he is aware he must recall this final memory, that of Vince’s death.

Just as standing by the river bank reminds him of skating there with his brother, Vince’s death, perhaps Lou’s most distressing memory, is connected to the physical place where Vince dies. Sitting on the porch in this particular position seems to revive for Lou the memory of Vince calling to him from inside the house, and leads him to move, in memory, into the room to find Vince has fallen on the floor and is unable to get up. In his memory of Vince’s death, Lou tells his brother: “I just don’t want to be alone again./I’ve spent too much of my damn life alone...” (326.5). As Lou holds his dying brother, he is surrounded by the men from their hockey team who look solemnly at the Lou and Vince and tap their hockey sticks on the floor in a gesture of solidarity (328-329). In format and visual composition, this scene echoes the previous two-page spread that depicts the hockey team in the changing room. The location serves as an implicit pun on the inevitability of changing bodies and shifts in masculinity, as is the case in earlier scenes where Lou’s aging body is contrasted with the youthful bodies of the hockey players. Although the memory may be read as a false, or “screen” memory—a memory that elides the trauma of the actual event⁶³—the connection between the two scenes, and Lou’s remark on the following page, “Thanks Boys” (330.1), suggests that although Lou fears loneliness, his

⁶³ Lenore Terr notes that Freud postulated the notion of “‘screen memories,’ hiding significant events behind trivialities” (223). However, as Terr suggests, and I agree, these screen memories “are parts of the traumas....They are memories of traumatic events which were laid down at the same time as the events” (223) and, therefore, are as important as the memory of the trauma itself.

memories and his past relationships with others offer him a vital form of companionship. As Cohler argues, “[over] time, memory increasingly serves the functions previously realized by being with others” (120). Symbolically, the hockey players also signify the life-affirming sense of community that Leacock describes in the opening quotation and which counters the loneliness that Lou fears.

Despite the fact that the memory of Vince’s death causes Lou to return to the present and find himself “alone again” (332. 1), the visual narrative creates a counterpoint to Lou’s final statement. As Lou sits alone on the farmhouse porch, the crow flies down, stands before him, and caws. Again, this scene emphasizes the importance of communication and sensory experience. Unlike the opening of “Ghost Stories,” in which Lou’s focus is inward and he refuses to communicate with the nurse or appreciate what lies outside of himself, Lou silently watches the bird and, in the final panel, smiles back at the crow as it looks at him (Fig. 8). The focalization of these final panels presents the reader with Lou’s point of view. Unlike the majority of the narrative, in which we watch Lou remembering his past, the concluding scene emphasizes Lou’s own perspective to suggest the intensity of his engagement with the crow: we see what Lou sees.



Fig. 8. Jeff Lemire, *Essex County: Collected* (Atlanta: Top Shelf, 2009) 333. Print.

If, as I have previously suggested, we read this crow as a representative of the past and of the people to which Lou, knowingly or otherwise, is connected, then Lou’s interaction with the crow suggests his engagement with his own otherness—his aging self that he had formally rejected—

as well as that of the external world.⁶⁴ Additionally, Lou's communication with the crow, as symbolic of the past, suggests that he finds some comfort in the agential process of remembering his personal history and telling his story.

This is not to say that reviving the traumatic past cures Lou's experience of isolation or dissociation from his aging body and the external world, but rather, as Goodwin and Attias argue in their discussion of trauma therapy, that it can work "toward regaining both the self's capacity to connect with the real body and with others in the experience of pleasure and pain, which can then be part of the self's own story" (236). By remembering and telling his story, and by foregrounding his bodily experience within that story, Lou connects with his "real body" and thus confronts what is other while sharing his experiences. In his argument about the value of life review and reminiscence in old age, Harry Moody argues that this value may not be located in "our private worlds" but in the "structure of the stories themselves" and in "the story of the human journey from birth until death. It is a journey through the public world, the waking world restored by the act of remembrance" ("Reminiscence" 158). For Lou, the waking world, and the physical and often painful experience of living within it, is restored by his act of remembering and telling his story. If, as Moody suggests, the "structure" of the story is part of the value of the life review process, then the models of remembering in *Essex County* are especially important: by visually and spatially depicting Lou's embodied experience, Lemire is able to demonstrate the importance of the body in Lou's engagement with imagination, memory, and multiple temporalities. Lou's reflection on his past and embodied experience in the present is often traumatic, and his story does not create a coherent narrative that helps him locate a stable concept of selfhood; instead, "Ghost Stories" presents a version of the life review that, rather than presenting a linear narrative that depicts a cohesive notion of self and temporal experience, recognizes multiple subjectivities and struggles with otherness.

⁶⁴ This scene might be read as a subtle intertext to Edgar Allan Poe's lyrical poem "The Raven," in which a man, while lamenting his lost love, is confronted by a raven that repeats the word "Nevermore" in response to each of the man's questions. Although Lou, like Poe's character, encounters the bird after recalling the loss of a loved one, the outcome is very different: whereas Poe's student falls into a state of grief-stricken madness in reaction to the bird's insistence of finality, Lou smiles contentedly at the bird in a gesture of acceptance.

Chapter 4

Making Memory: Art, Gesture, and the Thinking Body in David Cronenberg's *Spider*

I admire the spider, his control classic,
 His eight legs finicky,
 Making lines out of the juice in his abdomen.
 A kind of writer I suppose.
 He thinks a path and travels
 the emptiness that was there
 leaves his bridge behind
 looking back saying Jeez
 did I do that?

--Michael Ondaatje, "Spider Blues," (63-64)

David Cronenberg's *Spider* (2002) offers an intimate study of embodied experience in relation to time. This claim may at first appear surprising as missing from the film is the overt attention to the body for which Cronenberg is so well known. Indeed, the apparent focus on the protagonist's psychology makes it tempting to concentrate on the film's depiction of inner processes at the expense of considering its representation of the body and embodied experience.⁶⁵ By suggesting that the film focuses on an agential body, a protagonist who is both victim and victimizer, this chapter departs from previous chapters which have primarily explored embodied experiences of victimization; the reading I offer may contribute to contemporary trauma theory by suggesting an

⁶⁵ Many of the critical responses to the film reflect the tendency to focus on psychology. Jonathan Sklar and Andrea Sabbadini's article, "David Cronenberg's *Spider*: Between Confusion and Fragmentation," does not pay particular attention to *Spider*'s body or his embodied experience beyond observations of how his movement may be read as symptomatic of his mental condition, while Tomáš Pospíšil, in his article "Attractive Ambiguities: Epistemological Uncertainty of the Films of David Cronenberg," asserts that Cronenberg's "obsessive focus on the body, its transformation and destruction, is absent" in *Spider* and that Cronenberg's "sole focus is the main protagonist's schizophrenic mind" (219). In his review of the film, Wayne Egers claims that *Spider* is interested in the splitting of mind and body and argues that instead of showing us a body that is somehow changed or altered by external forces, Cronenberg presents a body whose transformation has failed: "Stripped of the usual special effects of body-horror, *Spider* presents its failed metamorphosis through the nonverbal communication of schizophrenia. Ralph Fiennes' body language—stumbling, mumbling, dreary catatonia—is a touchstone and context for all the film's other nonverbal strategies" ("Spider").

approach to traumatic experience in which the body not only acts in response to traumatic situations or memories, but performs, provokes, and alters such experiences. This chapter also offers a new reading of *Spider*, and, perhaps, of Cronenberg's oeuvre more generally, in its argument that the body appears as a medium for rather than an object of transformation. I will clarify and expand these claims in the upcoming pages.

Adapted from Patrick McGrath's 1990 novel,⁶⁶ *Spider* traces the story of Dennis Cleg (Ralph Fiennes), who is addressed throughout the film as "Spider." Spider works to piece together the memories of his past and reconstruct his life after having been recently released from an institute for the criminally insane to live in a halfway house under the supervision of Mrs. Wilkinson (Lynn Redgrave). Unable to reconcile the notion of his mother, Mrs. Cleg (Miranda Richardson), as both homely parent and sexual being, Spider psychologically recreates his childhood and imagines that his mother, whom he believes his father has killed and buried in the family allotment, has been replaced by another woman, Yvonne (also played by Miranda Richardson). This Oedipal plot, signified through the verbal play between insect/incest, culminates in the discovery that Spider, as a child, murdered his own mother. Although the film concludes with Spider being taken back to a psychiatric institution and so has a circular plot progression that begins and ends with Spider's journey from and to the "asylum," it also forefronts Spider's subtle process of transformation within what may be read as a repeated cycle. In doing so, *Spider* establishes through its protagonist a drive toward a future even in the bleakest moments. This tension between Spider's movement forward and the pattern of repetition in which he appears trapped (a complex problem to which I will return shortly) perhaps exemplifies Cronenberg's theory about the dilemma of embodiment: "To me, the central fact of human existence is the human body, and much of what we do is a flight from that fact, because it also includes death and a finite consciousness—things that are very difficult to accept. I think most art and technology, religion, civilization and society are all attempts to evade and transcend or transform that basic fact" (*StudioDaily*). Spider's transformative powers lie not within the realm of transcendence or physical alteration, but in his present-time experience of embodied movement

⁶⁶ For a comparison of McGrath's novel and Cronenberg's film see Mark Browning's chapter "The Child in Time: Time and Space in Cronenberg's *Spider*" in *David Cronenberg: Author or Filmmaker?* and William Beard's *The Artist as Monster: The Cinema of David Cronenberg*.

and thinking, the artistic and physical performance of constructing a story about the past and the self. In this way, and in a departure from previous works by Cronenberg that exhibit an overtly shifting body, *Spider*'s body is not so much the product of transformation, but rather becomes the medium through which ideas and memories are navigated and constructed as it instigates and expresses modes of transformative thought.⁶⁷ Although a story of physical transformation, the implicit intertext of Ovid's myth of Arachne—the master mortal weaver who was transformed into a spider—suggests the film's interest in altered states and the shifting boundaries in the relationship between self and world. This construction is deeply connected to somatic motion and sensory perception.

This chapter explores how *Spider* exemplifies the importance of the body and gesture to instigating mental processes and thinking through past trauma, navigating physical and psychological spaces, and re-formulating the present and possible future outcomes. In what follows I suggest that the film offers a model for the reconsideration of bodily expression and communication in the absence of verbal language; the film demonstrates that paying attention to the body and to gesture is crucial to an understanding or, at the very least, an interpretation of *Spider*'s subjective experience. *Spider* also offers a model of bodily “thinking” in response to the protagonist's repeated struggle with memory blocks—occasions during which he is unable to remember a particular part of the story that is necessary to the reconstruction of his past. Cronenberg does not present these blocks as purely psychological impediments, but provides a counterpart in *Spider*'s physical working through of the events. For instance, in a sequence when *Spider* is unable to complete part of the narrative about his past—an effort that is symbolized by his act of piecing together a jigsaw puzzle—his inability to remember/construct, and thus to move forward in his story, translates into a moment of physical incapacity during which he is unable to move his feet. On several occasions in the film, blocks in memory and personal narrative construction translate into moments of physical immobility for which the solution is frequently a “freeing up” of both thinking and the physical through bodily movement, or through

⁶⁷ Wayne Egers's aforementioned claim about *Spider*'s lack of change stems from the need to locate a tangible model of physical transformation, like the one that is offered in, for example, *The Fly*. This approach leads him to overlook the subtle transformative processes that occur in *Spider* through the protagonist's reconstruction of the past and his own identity.

the artistic gestures of writing or sculpting.⁶⁸ On the most obvious level, the webs that Spider creates indicate, as Wayne Egers argues, the non-verbal communication of “his desire for stable relationships and connections with others” (“Spider”), yet their importance lies perhaps not as much in what they present as completed and finalized products, but in Spider’s embodied experience in and control over the process of their construction. To return to an argument I made in my earlier chapter on Brand, the body—its sensations, actions, and gestures—might be considered as part of what Allison Crawford terms the “narrative of experience”: the ways in which the body should be included in and acknowledged as contributing to the individual’s narration of traumatic events (718). Indeed, Crawford’s assertion that trauma cannot always be put into language also holds true for Spider, whose expression, in order to be recognized, must be read as a different kind of “language,” one that is articulated through movement, gesture, and creation. His fervent creativity suggests his position as a “crypto-artist figure,” whose passionate creations are not understood by the rest of the world (Cronenberg qtd. in Blair). Like Lou in *Essex County*, Spider’s experience of alienation is coupled with his desire to construct a narrative, to tell a story about his past. Unlike Lou, however, Spider’s storytelling remains a wholly solitary endeavour, a lone pursuit for self understanding in which he is both storyteller and audience. Spider’s incomprehensible writing and speech adds to this sense of isolation; for most of the film his voice is barely audible. The film thus suggests that without the benefit of external interlocutors, bodily movement and gestural interactions with environments might offer ways to read and interpret our lives, an apparently simplistic idea that nonetheless challenges traditional notions of trauma therapy that rely on interpersonal verbal communication.

This approach leads me to argue that Spider is not entirely a helpless victim of memory, but rather a frequently self-reliant protagonist who consciously works, physically and psychologically, to create a narrative about his past. Spider therefore complicates clear-cut boundaries between victim and victimizer, self-agency and helplessness. This is not to say that Spider is always fully conscious of his cognitive processes or of his bodily experiences in relation to his thinking, but rather that his experience—far from being abstract, symbolic, and

⁶⁸ As Claudia Liebrand points out in her essay on narration and trauma in *Spider*, the protagonist’s “string configurations echo a string installation by Marcel Duchamp from the art exhibition *First Papers of Surrealism* from 1942 and could be viewed as visual art objects, referring back to one of the oldest topics for narration—for every text is a textum, a fabric, sometimes even an unconventional one like the three-dimensional webs of Spider” (1).

disconnected from his body—is deeply grounded in his physical relation to the world. He desires to create a narrative about his past in the hope of better understanding his present and possible future, an effort evinced by his compulsive need to weave webs and write about and remember his childhood.

It is, perhaps, fitting that this study is framed by chapters on the work of David Cronenberg and Michael Ondaatje; whether or not intentional, Cronenberg's *Spider* channels the theme of Ondaatje's poem "Spider Blues" (from his 1973 collection *Rat Jelly*) in its casting of Spider as an artist. Moreover, the poem emphasizes the role of the body, the Spider's "finicky legs" and his abdomen, in the creative process. Indeed, Sam Solecki's reading of the poet in "Spider Blues" as "an admirable, because ruthlessly dextrous, spider" who "brings back a message about some essential or primal reality" by "separating himself from that reality" (99) could well be applied to Cronenberg's protagonist. The poem emphasizes the spider's "control" even as it suggests his surprise at what he has created. Like the film, the spider creates a new world or a transformative experience through an engagement with his real environment. Like Ondaatje's poem, the film is less about the unravelling or decline of the protagonist's psyche or sense of self than it is about the construction and creation of the self; mirroring its trope of building a self-supporting framework or web, *Spider* offers a narrative progression in which the protagonist psychologically reassembles his past and constructs a narrative with the aim of better understanding and confronting his fears in the present. This process is as painful and traumatic for Spider as it is enlightening. Spider's artistry and his physicality suggest an alternative narrative approach that asks viewers to interpret movement and gesture as part of the storytelling process.

I begin by addressing how *Spider* offers a mode of transformation that differs from the focus on shifting or transforming bodies in Cronenberg's body-horror films. Within this discussion I address the film's temporal movement: how Spider might be seen to transform or progress within what appears to be a circular and repetitive plot. From here, I expound the chapter's theoretical apparatus before moving into my discussion of *Spider's* focus on the body. Within this section I examine how Spider uses his body to cope with stressful or traumatic situations/experiences. I also suggest that the film's treatment of mental illness suggests the inadequacy of verbal language in communicating such experiences. Spider's body is highlighted as crucial to the

organization/reconstruction of his memories as well as an important mode of expression for his inner feelings. Although the bodily processes of instigating change and expressing feeling are very different, they are often linked: Spider expresses his desire for connection and understanding by creating webs and writing, but both physical processes simultaneously assist in his mental navigation of his past and present experiences. His habits and repetitive gestures point to how his body is involved in the process of acting-out and working-through trauma, but they also suggest that he maintains a degree of agency. For instance, Spider's habit of smoking and carefully rolling his own cigarettes offers him a small sense of comfort and suggests the important role of Spider's body in registering and responding to environments. In the chapter's next section I examine the relation between Spider's body and his environment, which leads me to suggest that Spider often understands his body as a threat *to* others rather than as being threatened *by* others. This reading of his embodied experience is crucial to my argument that Spider is often an agent, and is as much a victimizer as he is a victim. As Spider begins the task of actively reconstructing his past, his body plays an increasingly crucial role; his gestures and movements in the creative processes of writing and creating sculptures often directly influence his remembering and construction of past events, and ultimately prevent him from repeating his past crime. By attending to his body, I identify crucial strategies of coping with and responding to trauma and examine how his body helps him to remember and construct his past.

Although *Spider* does not indulge in the kind of "body horror"⁶⁹ for which Cronenberg is so known, I argue that the film offers one of his most complex representations of embodied experience and a new approach to the relation between physicality and transformation. Spider's movements are so central to both the movement of the narrative plot and the film's temporal progression that they feel almost choreographed in their execution. The film's sparse dialogue emphasizes this focus on the physical: the viewer is made acutely aware of Spider's gestures and expressions, so much so that these become a cipher for his non-verbalized thought processes and internal meditations. In doing so, the film encourages "spectators to 'read' not only with their rational-cognitive skills but with their embodied experience as well, which includes emotional

⁶⁹ Cronenberg is recognized as instrumental in the creation of "body horror," a horror film sub-genre unique to contemporary film. As Philip Brophy points out, "[the] contemporary horror film tends to play not so much on the broad fear of Death, but more precisely on the fear of one's own body, of how one controls and relates to it (8).

and sensory memories and fantasies” (Egers, “David Cronenberg’s Body-Horror Films” 9). The focus on non-verbal communication and body language in Cronenberg’s films not only presents a visual challenge to the Western cultural tendency to separate body and mind, but also, as Egers points out, encourages “the spectator to experience their own psyche-soma as fully integrated” through his or her active interpretation of such body language⁷⁰ (9). My approach to viewing *Spider* as a film about embodied experience mirrors Cronenberg’s own interest, as director, in examining the mind-body relationship: “I am healing the Cartesian rift. When you’re studying the human mind, you can’t take the mind out of it; you have to put it back into the brain. For me, it’s all body” (Cronenberg, *IndieWire*). The medium of film also plays an important role in this attention to observing bodies and embodied experience. Certainly, *Spider* is careful to draw attention to the importance of reading visual clues and cues, aspects of the film that arguably progress the narrative more than dialogue. In the opening credits, for instance, the flaking paint on the walls that assumes the shape of Rorschach inkblot images immediately suggests the film’s interest in the psychological and calls attention to the subjective interpretation of what is being shown. However, these images also provide a model for how we might more generally interpret the visual aspects of the film. The images point to Spider’s unreliable memory, but, as a form of tactile art that invites different modes of interpretation, they also suggest that we should pay particular attention to the material, to the visual shapes and icons that are presented throughout the film.⁷¹

Through his gestures and his creative artistry—his web weaving and writing—Spider is able to reconstruct his past and in doing so alters his present experience and perhaps, to some extent, his future trajectory. Although he returns to the asylum at the end of the film, Spider’s gradual remembering of his past suggests, as previously mentioned, a transformation in self knowledge. Within the circular plot, Spider simultaneously moves into the past to alter his future and prevent

⁷⁰ Although not central to my chapter, this focus on viewers’ embodied experiences of the film might be taken up in future work. The images also help to set the tone for the film. Cronenberg’s choice to use interiors “that look like they belong to the exteriors,” and to use an earthy color palette help produce the film’s sense of age and decay: “Then you get into the wallpaper and the palette of browns and yellows and ochres, and all that was very important to me. I wanted that damp, peeling, English-period wallpaper that we all know and love” (qtd. in Blair).

⁷¹ Browning makes a similar argument when he suggests that the credit sequence “encourages the viewer to look closely and find meaning in the Rorschach-style images” (“The Child”185).

himself from repeating his childhood crime. While this circularly suggests a repeated cycle, then, it also suggests new possibilities by virtue of its casting of Spider as a child, with the potential for growth and development, in the closing sequence. As film critic Mark Browning observes, the film “does not close either with suicide or with boredom but with a return to beginnings” (192).

Although on the surface it may appear to be dominated by the effects of the past, *Spider* is, I argue, equally concerned with the individual’s relation to the present and the future. The film’s apparent focus on the past is in fact part of an effort to comprehend the present and to explore the connections between notions of creation and its inherent links to change or as yet unseen possibilities. In his discussion of Cronenberg’s interest in depicting how the past informs the present, Browning asserts that the “writers who have exercised the greatest influence over Cronenberg, including Nabokov and Ballard, focus almost unremittingly on a drive towards the present” (180). In Cronenberg’s films, “more than rejecting a sense of the past, from Max Renn’s ‘New Flesh’ in *Videodrome* [1982] to Bill Lee’s Interzone adventures in *Naked Lunch* [1991] to Vaughan’s ‘project’ in *Crash*, Cronenberg’s films are centrally concerned with embracing a future, in which change is in the hands of the individual” (180). In this respect, Cronenberg’s approach in *Spider* differs from that of his acknowledged influence for the film, Samuel Beckett.⁷² While Beckett’s own work is deeply interested in the repetition, time, and the materiality of bodies—as Linda Ben-Zvi argues, “Nowhere is Beckett more the modernist writer

⁷² Cronenberg’s acknowledgement that the film was inspired by the work of Samuel Beckett also plays into the film’s interest in the manipulation of time and the focus on the body, as well as adding another level to the notion of Spider as artist. In an interview for *Film Freak Central*, Cronenberg asserts:

Beckett was one of our touchstones. I really thought that Spider was more of a Beckett character—the Beckett as you say, of the prose or the novels more than the plays—I saw a vagrant or a tramp. Someone who has divested himself of almost everything except for the clothes that he wears and maybe one or two things like tobacco for his cigarettes.... We even did Ralph’s hair so that it was a little bit like Samuel Beckett’s.

Spider’s emphasis on repeated actions or movements, such as Spider’s cigarette smoking or compulsive writing, might too be linked to Beckett’s interest in the kind of performances of repetition that appear, for example, in “Waiting for Godot.” Also like Cronenberg, Beckett’s work often engages with connections between humans and technology or media. Of most importance to this study, however, is Beckett’s preoccupation with the experience of time. As Thomas Postlewait points out, “for Beckett’s characters the awareness of time is *ever-present*—as daily routine and habit, as daily rot (‘the body’s long madness’), and as isolated consciousness (‘the sealed jar of the self’). Time is the heavy medium through which the body and mind move and most of Beckett’s characters move through it with difficulty, hence the crawling and increasing immobility” (475).

of the quotidian than in his somatic descriptions” (682); he frequently presents the impossibility of progression, physical or psychological. However, Spider’s ability to instigate change by psychologically reconstructing the past (even the small change in his awareness of the difference between present-time reality and the past) and his ability to bridge the gap between self and world through creative movement suggests a model of transformative progression within the circular plot that differentiates the film from much of Beckett’s work.

My approach builds on the work of critics who have examined how narrative accounts of bodily experience may be read as examples of subjective expression but also, in some cases, of embodied thinking or remembering. The following section engages with theoretical models that explore relationships between trauma, psychosis, and embodiment. To understand Spider’s apparently circular relationship to the past and what I read as his transformation within that relationship, it is useful to consider Dominick LaCapra’s theories of repetition, process, and the distinctions and links between “working-through” and “acting-out” the past. Acting-out, argues LaCapra, “is related to repetition, and even the repetition compulsion—the tendency to repeat something compulsively. This is very clear in the case of people who undergo a trauma. They have a tendency to relive the past, to be haunted by ghosts or even to exist in the present as if one were still fully in the past” (2). In working-through, however, “the person tries to gain critical distance on a problem, to be able to distinguish between past, present and future” (2). Despite the apparent differences between these processes, LaCapra argues that working-through and acting-out are “a distinction, in that one may never be totally separate from the other, and the two may always be implicated in each other” (6). Indeed, Spider’s recreation of his past, and the plot as a whole, might be read as part of the film’s focus on the process of repetition and reiteration and the ways that repeated habits, movements, and gestures may be modified to redirect an outcome. Even the film’s trajectory and ambiguous ending (Spider’s gradual remembering of his childhood crime brings him perilously close to re-enacting a version of the original matricide) suggests that this may not be the first time he has remembered his past, but rather only one occasion in a repeated cycle of forgetting, reconstructing, and remembering his past. However, and as I have previously suggested, the fact that Spider moves from a position of non-remembering to remembering, and that this process necessitates a reformulation rather than a dismantling of his identity, suggests that Spider’s psychological movement backward and into the past is simultaneously a movement forward and into the future and towards a new

understanding of himself and his personal history. Although Spider's remembering might best be described as an acting-out—a repetitive process that returns him to the past and in which he literally acts out and directs scenes from his childhood—it also involves a working-through, a gradual recognition of the differences between past and present. It is this remembering and recognition that prevents him from repeating murder.

The critical tendency to overlook how the film challenges the separation of body and mind may be due to the assumption that *Spider* presents a study of schizophrenia. Although the presentation of psychosis is central to the viewer's experience, my reading of the film resists the temptation to focus on/speculate about Spider's mental condition at the expense of analysing the film's depiction of his physicality. Instead, I argue that *Spider* draws attention to the significance of embodied agency within traumatic psychological experiences. *Spider* repeatedly contests the theory that schizophrenics experience a dissociation of body and mind, an argument based on the psychiatric approach to the illness,⁷³ by suggesting that the protagonist's embodied experiences—his sense of smell, his interaction with his physical location, and his frequently creative movements—inform and reflect his psychological processes and trigger or even alter his memories. Cronenberg's interest in the subjective, unstable borders between reality and unreality, truth and fiction, past and present, as well as the film's disorienting temporal play, has the effect of presenting Spider as a character who portrays, albeit in an exaggerated fashion, the common experience of psychological fragmentation and the struggle to locate a sense of self. As my own approach to the film stands in opposition to the separation of mind and body, I wish to

⁷³ In his seminal work on schizophrenia, R.D. Laing argues that the schizophrenic may experience him or herself as, more or less divorced or detached from his body. *The body is felt more as one object among other objects in the world than as the core of the individual's own being.* Instead of being the core of his true self, the body is felt as the core of a *false self*, which a detached, disembodied, 'inner,' 'true' self looks on at with tenderness, amusement, or hatred, as the case may be. Such a divorce of self from body deprives the unembodied self from direct participation in any aspect of the life of the world, which is mediated exclusively through the body's perceptions, feelings, and movements (expressions, gestures, words, actions, etc.). (*The Divided Self* 71; emphasis in original)

Little has changed in more recent thinking on the relationship between schizophrenia and embodied experience. Indeed, in his 2009 article, "Embodiment and Schizophrenia," Giovanni Stanghellini echoes Laing's earlier assertions: The essential feature of schizophrenic existence is its being disembodied. This is the feature that unifies the varied dimensions of schizophrenic existence. The disembodiment of the self, of the self-object relation and of interpersonal relationships all lead back to a kind of world in which the schizophrenic person lives and behaves like a soulless body or a disembodied spirit (58).

first briefly address the slipperiness in defining schizophrenia and its application in *Spider* in order to provide some background for my own contentions. As Simon Riches points out, “Cronenberg’s work raises issues over the contingency of the category of mental disorder by blurring the boundaries between apparent distinctions like minds and machines, and appearance and reality, and suggests that thinking of hallucinations as ‘disorders’ is not as straightforward as it first seems” (96). “[Our] understanding of multiple personality disorder,” Riches argues, “is predicated on what [Daniel C. Dennett] takes to be the mistaken notion that we have a unified ‘self’ in the first place” (104). Indeed, Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking argues that schizophrenia is not a disease but rather a fluid condition of varying degrees of severity and interpretation, and that we should, therefore, be aware of how such conditions are culturally and socially encoded (11). Hacking’s approach to schizophrenia echoes the ideas of existential philosopher and psychiatrist R.D. Laing, who argues that schizophrenia may in fact be read as a progressive retreat into an imagined existence that is preferable to a particular reality. For Laing, imagination and creativity become coping strategies that offer the subject an alternative existence, but eventually create a sense of loneliness and alienation if the subject withdraws from real-world relationships. Laing connects this imaginative withdrawal to a temporal experience: “It is an attempt to live outside time by living in a part of time, to live timelessly in the past, or in the future. The present is never realized” (*Self and Others* 33).

Spider, however, challenges this idea in that his present is realized through his attempt to live outside of time and in the (often imagined) past. This is the case, for instance, when he re-imagines the asylum as an idyllic rural excursion. For *Spider*, the present (and, therefore, the possibility of a future) is only realized *through* an engagement with the past—an engagement that frequently involves the body in the present time. *Spider*’s imagining allows him to experience moments of timelessness, some of which have positive effects, but his gestures and movements in the present enable him to develop his story, to recognize his past experiences, and to reconsider his future actions.

The film's interest in privileging Spider's bodily gestures and movements over linguistic communication draws on current theories of post-traumatic disorders.⁷⁴ Spider might be said to experience what Bessel van der Kolk refers to as a "speechless terror," an inability to "capture the experience in words or symbols" that leads to the "organization of memory on a somatosensory or iconic level (such as somatic sensations, behavioral enactments, nightmares and flashbacks)" (258). That Spider uses little to no verbal language to communicate his emotional states suggests a version of this kind of verbal paralysis, or alexithymia, a "difficulty describing his emotions and internal states" (Crawford 704). In his article on schizophrenia and embodiment, Giovanni Stanghellini links certain schizophrenic embodied experiences to the inadequacy of language: "a key feature of schizophrenic bodily disesthesias is that they challenge the ordinary capacity for linguistic representation: in our language, the expressive possibilities and adequate categories concerning these peculiar bodily sensations are completely lacking" (58). Although Cronenberg's film does not provide elaborate insight into Spider's *feeling* about his body, it does suggest that the kinds of expressive possibilities to which Stanghellini refers might be best conveyed physically and visually rather than verbally. Spider works to make sense of his incoherent past and reorganize his memories through his sensory experiences and physical gestures instead of using verbal language. As Hovdestad & Kristiansen argue in their work on memory and the body, traumatic memories that are not verbally articulated often "reappear implicitly via the Sensorimotor systems as kinaesthetic sensations, smells or tastes, or visual images, flashbacks and nightmares" (38). For Spider, it is the sight of childhood haunts in his hometown, or the smell of gas, for instance, that initiates his re-experiencing of the past.

Spider pushes the relationship between body and mind beyond notions of unwanted or intrusive traumatic memories to suggest how Spider's experience is embodied, rather than only psychological, and how his body enables a mode of purposeful "thinking" that allows the

⁷⁴ For a discussion of trauma in *Spider* see Claudia Liebrand's "Trauma and Narration in David Cronenberg's *Spider*."

protagonist to work through complex cognitive problems.⁷⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty's ideas provide an approach to psychiatric disorders that counters the kind of Cartesian dualism found in many neurologically-focused approaches in psychiatry and “offers the possibility of combining a humanistic approach to mental disorder with recognition of the important role of pharmacological and other ‘physical’ treatments in helping psychiatric patients. It does so by seeing human beings neither as disembodied minds nor as complex machines, but as living organisms whose mental life is embedded in their biological existence” (Matthews198). Using the example of a person with schizophrenia having a delusional belief, Matthews asserts that delusions cannot be classed as neurological disorders because “there is nothing wrong with them *as* neurological processes. The person suffers from a disorder because of the effect that such delusions have on his whole relation to the world and other people.” In order to understand such delusions, argues Matthews, “we need to treat him [the patient] as a human being with existential problems, rather than as a piece of neurological machinery that happens to have gone wrong.” Matthews's approach elaborates, albeit in a radically different arena, Cronenberg's own intentions in making *Spider*; indeed, Cronenberg is careful not to diagnose his protagonist and has stated in interviews that the film is an “existential study rather than...a psychological study” (*Film Freak Central*) and “a study of the human condition—not schizophrenia, not a neurological disorder” (*IndieWire*). While I acknowledge the difficulty in defining mental health and Spider's condition, I suggest that *Spider* offers an approach to mental illness that foregrounds embodiment, and embodied modes of agency, within traumatic psychological experiences. My own approach to the film extends this philosophy by examining Spider's present-time embodied experience in the world.

In his work on phenomenology and the body, Merleau-Ponty explicates the apparently simple idea that one does not think about the movements and actions necessary in order to, for instance, raise a hand, but rather does so intuitively because such actions have become habitual. This leads Merleau-Ponty to argue that the body's intelligence is not separate from thinking, and that consciousness is inevitably embodied (Crossley 120-121). Arguing that the body is “not an

⁷⁵ While I recognize the potentially problematic issue that the theories with which I engage present normative models that I am applying to a non-normative character, such theories are useful in considering how a character like Spider expresses himself within the world, interacts with his environment, and navigates psychological problems.

object for an ‘I think,’ it is a grouping of lived-through meanings which moves towards its equilibrium” (177), Merleau-Ponty suggests how the body may respond to an unfamiliar environment or situation with habitual movements or gestures that operate as coping mechanisms, or ways to move one closer to a position of comfort. Philosopher Andy Clark builds upon Merleau-Ponty’s ideas by arguing that the body plays a crucial role in cognition; as philosopher Lawrence Shapiro argues, Clark’s ideas about embodied cognition mark “a shift away from thinking of the body as a mere container for the brain, or, slightly better, a contributor to the brain’s activities, and toward recognizing the body as the brain’s partner in the production of cognition” (66). Clark, for instance, argues that bodily gestures and interactions with the environment can influence cognition: “*the presence of an active, self-controlled, sensing body allows an agent to create or elicit appropriate inputs, generating good data (for oneself and for others) by actively conjuring flows of multimodal, correlated, time-locked stimulation*” (21; emphasis in original). In other words, bodies play an integral role in the structuring, or restructuring, of information. Furthermore, Clark’s syntactical emphasis on active agency also suggests how such embodied thinking may be, at least to some extent, controlled. Clark’s argument articulates a key idea in the philosophical arena of *embodied cognition*, an area of cognitive theory that is, as Shapiro points out, widely contested and constantly shifting.

In my discussion of how Spider’s body instigates and influences his psychological processes I do not attempt to reduce the idea of embodied cognition to a singular meaning or reading, but rather to explore the how *Spider*, as a fictional work, presents the thinking body as crucial to the navigation of psychological processes. Moreover, and as I have previously suggested, the film offers a model of embodied thinking that might be read as a form of autonomous self-therapy that occurs without an interlocutor. Melba Cuddy-Keane, for example, draws upon recent developments in neuroscience to argue that representations of bodily thinking in literature may contribute to conversations about the links between cognitive processes and embodied experiences. Indeed, through Spider’s physical, artistic gestures, *Spider* offers an excellent example of how, “deflecting immediate confrontation, the body embarks on a detour which makes temporal and spatial ‘room’ for the play of nonconscious thought” (689). If, as Cuddy-Keane argues, embodied cognition “is a crucial component in human spatial navigation, or ‘way-finding’” (685), then Spider’s tracing of the past through gesture, movement, and an engagement with specific places might also be read as part of his project to navigate through his childhood

memories as much as through his present and possible future embodied experiences as a grown man:

finding our way through and about places involves the body's exploratory navigation of its environment, in addition to the conscious learning of landmarks and signs. While the moving body thus contributes directly to conscious knowledge, it may also be devising nonconscious strategies for spatial navigation that indirectly activate similar schema for the navigation of mental space. Bodies may instigate the shifts we make between way-finding strategies, enabling cognitive change. (Cuddy-Keane 685)

This kind of navigation of both physical and mental space is crucial to Spider's own project of way-finding. Spider's sculpting of giant string webs might be read as the kind of schema Cuddy-Keane identifies in that the physical movement and creation of the webs assists in his process of mental "weaving," or navigation, and his construction of the past. Similarly, Spider's nonsensical writing is also presented as a physical schema for his internal thought processes.

In *Spider*, this way-finding process is a simultaneous navigation of the present and the past: Spider's present-time bodily movement is also intimately tied to processes of remembering.⁷⁶ His physical acts of writing and creating webs—both of which rely on very particular corporeal movements and bodily engagements—prompt particular memories for Spider, that ultimately allow him to reconstruct the story of his past. Although not engaging directly with such theories, Cronenberg suggests his interest in exploring mind-body connections and the role of the body as an instigator of thought: "*Spider* is a very tactile role. It's not very cerebral in a weird way—of course he's not speaking very much and speech is an abstracting thing—so Spider is a very visceral, immediate role. Its physical things that trigger all the mental things" (Cronenberg, *Film*

⁷⁶ In their recent work on memory retrieval and bodily movement, Daniel Casasanto and Katinka Dijkstra locate a direct link between motor actions and the "retrieval and retelling of autobiographical memories with emotional content" and found that even the most simple of bodily actions (smiling or frowning, for example) may trigger past recollections (182). In an experiment in which participants were asked to use both hands to move marbles upwards or downwards into two different boxes while reading prompts that asked them to recollect a positive or negative memory. The results showed that positive memories were recollected at greater speed when participants moved the marbles in an upward motion, while memories associated with negative emotions were recalled more quickly during downward movements (180-181). Such results suggest that bodily gestures and movements can have an effect on thinking and that physical stimulation can instigate or influence thought.

Freak Central). As Spider moves between locations, he moves between the past and the present; as he physically writes in his book, constructs sculptures, or works on a jigsaw puzzle, he simultaneously creates and pieces together a story about the past that allows him to better understand his experience in the present. The relationship between Spider's experience in the past and his experience in the present, and between his physical actions and psychological experiences, is therefore wholly reciprocal. His physical performance, or acting-out, throughout the film is part of what Cuddy-Keane might call "problem solving" (684), a persistent effort to work through and unravel the puzzle of the past, but also an effort to navigate his subjective experience within the environment he occupies in the present time.

Spider's engagement with the past and present and the feeling of timelessness created by the setting adds to the film's sense of temporal disorientation: the frequent movement between past and present, and the merging of different time periods when Spider appears in scenes as both adult and child, forces the viewer to relate to the confusion that Spider experiences. Although certain clues suggest that the film's present time is the 1980s or 90s—for instance, the dress of the characters who disembark the train in the opening sequence, or the young mother wearing jeans who exits Spider's former childhood home—the dilapidated buildings and the lack of cars, traffic, commerce, and young people in most of the scenes lends the film an ambiguous temporal dimension.⁷⁷ In the scene where Spider unpacks his suitcase in the halfway house, it is also significant that among his very few possession—string, collected artifacts, and a pair of pajamas—is a bedside clock. That Spider pauses to look at the clock before carefully placing it on his bedside table, and that the camera angle over his shoulder means that the clock also becomes a focal point for the viewer, calls attention to Spider's slow race against time as he works to reconstruct and comprehend the past. The repeated images of spider webs, a circular

⁷⁷ Mark Browning also draws on specific clues in the *mise-en-scene* to make a similar argument, although he dates the film around the 1970s:

The "Keep Britain Tidy" poster held lingering in shot in the cafe would date the film around the early 70s. However, Spider revisits the street where he grew up and a young mother, dressed in casual jeans and sweatshirt, pushing a buggy, suddenly emerges from the his old house. Nothing else in the film, apart from the opening sequence at the train station, strikes us as contemporary and this eruption of the present seems strangely out of chronological kilter so that we share some of the protagonist's sense of disorientation. (180)

shape with divided sections that emerge out of a centre point, also implicitly echoes the shape of a clock face and therefore serve as reminders of how Spider operates within webs of time: although he moves in circles (he comes from and returns to the asylum) his journey also spins outwards and forwards through his reconstruction of the past and his gradual understanding of himself and his past actions.

The film's complex pattern of time is immediately connected to bodies, physicality, and movement. The speed of movement as the passengers disembark from the train and hurry down the platform in the film's opening scene, entitled "Spider Cleg" on the DVD, is contrasted with Spider's own slow and careful exit from the train. He is immediately distinguished from the crowd by his costuming—his dull colored clothes and long overcoat counter the 1980s fashions worn by other passengers—as well as by his bodily movement and his relationship to the environment. Unlike the passengers around him, Spider's movements are tentative and his individual pace, as Cronenberg states in the DVD commentary that accompanies the film, sets the pace of the movie: "we...had determined that the movie would accept the pace of Spider. That is to say, we weren't trying to hurry it up, make it move quickly. The understanding had to be that if we were going to live in Spider's mind and space, which is really what I wanted the audience to do, the movie would have to accept his rhythms, which are slow and deliberate and confused." The contradiction that Cronenberg articulates about Spider's movements being both deliberate and confused points to the way that the film offers a physical characterization of Spider as being in control of his actions at the same time as he is perplexed by his situation.

The links between Spider's body and his environment, the color of his clothes and the pacing of the film, are, of course, part of Cronenberg's filmic language and expression rather than of Spider's own embodied thinking or acting out. But by creating a visual focus on Spider's body, Cronenberg also primes the viewer for occasions when Spider's actions (such as his construction of webs) have a cognitive effect. As I move through examples of how Spider's body is presented in the film, I will endeavor to parse apart Cronenberg's artistic focus on embodiment from the moments when Spider uses his body to instigate or alter his cognitive processes. The opening sequence, for instance, instigates the intimate engagement with Spider's body that viewers have throughout the film: once Spider steps off the train and onto the platform, the camera focuses in turn on his face, feet, and midriff. Spider's removal of a sock from the crotch of his trousers, in

which he has stored the piece of paper stating the address of his new “home,” immediately points to his desire for privacy and also provides an early example of Spider’s strong attachment to his very few possessions. The careful placement of his suitcase on the ground, and the close-up shot that shows Spider’s feet shuffling towards the case until they touch it, work to the same effect. The focus on Spider’s nicotine stained fingers also provides the first indication of his addiction to smoking—an activity that not only visually marks his body, but also indicates Spider’s reliance on embodied routine or habit. The repetitive action of smoking, for instance, plays into the film’s general artistic interest in depicting repeated habits or cycles. For Spider, however, the habit of smoking is also presented as a coping response that helps to restore his sense of comfort in an otherwise frightening environment and offers a small although constant clue throughout the course of the film about how Spider’s responds to and counters his psychological confusion. When Spider awakes on the first morning in the halfway house, for example, his immediate response is to light and smoke a cigarette—a habit that is repeatedly arrested by Mrs. Wilkinson, the proprietor of the halfway house. Such a habit might be classed as a procedural memory, but it also suggests the kind of comforting bodily response to trauma that Merleau-Ponty explains. A “smoke” is also the last thing Spider asks for when he is being driven back to the asylum in the film’s closing sequence. This final request, and the tender way that John, the asylum supervisor, lights Spider’s cigarette, positions the act of smoking as a significant gesture that offers for Spider a small degree of control over, and pleasure in, his embodied experience. William Beard suggests that Cronenberg’s films often position smoking and other “bodily indulgences” (drugs, junk-food eating, and sex) as “signs of a slip (or impending slip) over the edge of control into what ends up as a dissolution of subjectivity, a perdition of the self” (497). Although Beard argues that Spider is in a “permanent state of perdition,” this formula seems to be reversed in *Spider*: Spider’s habit of smoking, like creating webs and writing in his journal, appears as a repeated gesture that grants Spider a small amount of control over his physical and emotional pleasure; his self-rolled cigarettes become, in effect, another of his artistic creations. The film engages with postmodern notions of aesthetics by suggesting that expression and individual, sensory experience is central to Spider’s artistic engagement.

Although *Spider* does not present overt fusions of body and technology in the style of films like *Videodrome*, *The Fly*, or *Crash*, *Spider* still alludes, albeit in more subtle ways, to the intimate relationship between the body and the outside world—the kind of embodied connection with the

world that Merleau-Ponty clarifies. The aforementioned links, suggested by costuming and color choice, between Spider's body and the environment in which he moves offer perhaps the most obvious and persistent example. "Spider fuses with his background and surroundings" writes Cronenberg, "[it's] almost as if Spider is the wallpaper--he's part of it" (qtd. in Blair). Spider's clothing, and the use of low-contrast film stock, also connects him to the drab, bleak, isolated East End London environment that surrounds him and which outwardly reflects Spider's psychological state.⁷⁸ Similarly, although Spider's nicotine-stained fingers may function as a sign that his "life is as stained as they are" (Beard 497), they also suggest a kind of breaking down of the boundaries between the body and the outside world.

At times, this fusion of body and environment manifests explicitly. In the sequence where Spider believes he smells gas in his room in the halfway house, for instance, he mentally incorporates into his own body the gas that kills his mother. Although we later learn that Spider's actions in this scene link to the revelation at the end of the film (that as a child Spider murdered his mother by turning on the gas stove while she slept), Spider does not consider his past actions in purely psychological terms, but instead directly links his body to the substance that killed his mother. The sequence contains no dialogue, but rather shows Spider smelling the gas in the room while foreboding shots of the gas fireplace in Spider's room and the outside gas tower that looms over the bedroom serve as visual reminders (or, for a first-time viewer, indications) of his past crime. Although apparently frightened by both the gas-works building and the fireplace, Spider finally locates the source of the gas he smells in his own body—he sniffs the air before smelling his midriff and identifying what he believes is the location of the gas—begins to wrap himself in newspapers. Wayne Egers reads the scene as indicative of Spider's vulnerability against the onslaught of past memories: "Spider cocoons himself inside four shirts (he is a captive of his own disease; his past eating his present self alive) and wraps himself in newspapers (wraps himself in words) to protect himself from the gas, from the horrific maze of memory about the death of his mother" ("Spider"). Eger's reading here is telling of the critical tendency to elide

⁷⁸ As Cronenberg points out, this environment is not a realistic representation of the populated hustle of London, but rather an expressionistic setting: "it gradually became apparent that we were making an expressionistic film. Spider alone on the street is not documentary reality, but it is the reality of his isolation and loneliness. And once we'd realized that, we wanted to keep it very minimalist, so the streets of London you see in the film are not realistic at all. It's a very subjective point of view" (Cronenberg qtd. in Blair).

Spider's agency (and indeed the agency of all who re-experience past trauma and whom he metonymically represents), and to view his past as wholly destructive to his present. Spider's wrapping of himself in newspaper does not signify a fear of his body being invaded by memory, as Egers suggests, but rather a fear that his own body is the *cause* of the gas which he smells—the invisible force of destruction that killed his mother. Indeed, Cronenberg's own intentions for the scene support this reading: “[Spider] believed that he was emitting noxious gases that poisoned everyone around him so that he wears layers and layers of clothing, in essence, to shield others from himself” (Cronenberg, *Film Freak Central*). Spider's fear is therefore rooted not in the belief that the outside world may harm his body, but that his body may harm others. This difference is crucial, as it reverses Egers's conclusion that Spider's past destructively consumes his present. Instead, it suggests that Spider has some control over his actions. As Spider relives his memories and constructs his past through somatic engagement, he also makes a conscious effort to change the narrative of his future; in this case, he creates a physical barrier between his body and the outside world in the hope of stopping himself from harming another person. While a focus on mutating or monstrous human bodies is a signature feature of many of Cronenberg's movies, *Spider* offers a more restrained representation of the “monstrous” body. In this scene, Spider appears to self-identify as a kind of monster,⁷⁹ whose body is capable of harming others.

⁷⁹ The most obvious “monster” in the film is perhaps Mrs. Cleg's double, Yvonne. As is often the case in Cronenberg's films, female sexuality in *Spider* is problematically presented as the cause of the male protagonist's descent into madness and/or depravity. Although a discussion of the film's problematic portrayal of women is not the focus of this chapter, it is impossible to ignore that both Mrs. Cleg and the physically and sexually excessive Yvonne are cast as “monstrous.” Indeed, William Beard discusses how in the DVD commentary Cronenberg repeatedly refers to Yvonne as a “creature,” suggesting that she is not only Spider's creation, but that “labelling her with that word produces a sense of her as another kind of ‘creature’: as the monster in a horror movie, or at any rate a Cronenberg movie” (Beard 488). Yet, Spider, as his name and his “monstrous” crime suggests, is also presented as not fully human. His human-insect/animal hybridity is also suggested by Mrs. Wilkinson who refers to him as a “magpie.” So, too, does Mr. Cleg assume a frequently monstrous role as he looms over and even hits his small son in the film's flashback scenes and, in Spider's own version of the past, fully morphs into a monstrous killer. In *Spider*, then, it is the human condition that is monstrous: the ambiguous space between innocence and experience, purity and sexuality, good and evil, truth and fiction that each character occupies. For recent critical discussions of David Cronenberg's representation of women see Mary Russo's *The Female Grotesque*, Allan MacCinnis's “Sex, Science, and the ‘Female Monstrous,’” and William Beard's *The Artist as Monster*.

The sequence provides a snapshot of the tension that runs throughout the film between Spider as a victim of his past traumas and memories and as a self-determining artist whose creative work and remembering visibly alters his embodied experiences. Cronenberg frequently plays with this tension, but the film's narrative trajectory suggests a movement away from Spider as innocent victim and towards a representation of the protagonist as increasingly self-governing. Indeed, the film begins with Spider symbolically and literally lost, standing on an empty train station platform and trying to find his destination. At this point in the film, he is presented as vulnerable and childlike, overshadowed by the strong personalities that surround him. When Spider first arrives at the halfway house, he is met by the patronizing Mrs. Wilkinson and shortly afterward meets Terrence (John Neville), a fellow resident. Unlike Mrs. Wilkinson, Terrence engages Spider in a non-judgemental conversation, and provides a simultaneously comforting and sinister presence in the already tense scene. Terrence's non-sequitur first line, "You are familiar with the scorpion, I take it?," echoes Spider's own fragmented and non-linear narrative and interest in storytelling and thus establishes a certain camaraderie between the two men. Terrence's reference to another form of arachnid, the scorpion, also creates a symbolic link between him and Spider. The frequent focus on unusual deaths in the short stories that Terrence tells creates another parallel between the two men, and proleptically indicates that the arc of the central storyline will also culminate in an unexpected loss of life. This understated focus on death continues into the scene where Spider is ushered into the bathroom by Mrs. Wilkinson and ordered to undress and bathe.⁸⁰ Lying in the fetal position and immersed in rusty, blood-colored water, the bath scene evokes the sinister image of a bathtub murder. The staged composition of the scene, the dark, starkly furnished room that houses the white bathtub, and Spider's status as writer, even loosely evokes Jacques-Louis David's 1793 painting "The Death of Marat," which serves as another subtle allusion to Spider's own position as both artist and radical author. The next morning, Terrence provides a verbal expression of the previous scene's allusion to Spider's diminished sense of self; when Spider is admonished by Mrs. Wilkinson for wearing four shirts, Terrence replies, "clothes maketh the man. And the less there is of the man, the more the need for clothes." However, the statement, while made in support of Spider during his confrontation with Terrence's "tyrant Queen" Mrs. Wilkinson, is perhaps an autocritical example of the

⁸⁰ The bath scene, in which Mrs. Wilkinson chastises Spider for not undressing in front of her, is strikingly similar to the scene in *Essex County* in which Lou refuses to undress in front of the nurse (*Essex County* 235).

tendency to misread Spider's real intentions: rather than wear the shirts to protect himself from the "loud world" described by Terrence, Spider does so to protect others from what he perceives as his own dangerous body (*Spider*). While both men are vulnerable and often overpowered by others, the film alludes to the possibility of their being simultaneously (like the scorpion and the spider) astute, and even predatory. The bath scene, which perhaps depicts Spider at his most vulnerable, seems to set up a foundational representation of the protagonist as defenceless victim. In this scene, his body is visually exposed as fragile and helpless, and lies motionless in the water. The focus on immobility, and its connection to Spider's pre-writing/remembering state, is important to note as a counterpoint to later scenes in which the psychical actions of writing and web building assist in the construction of his psychological narrative. The scene, then, marks a pivotal turning point in Spider's self understanding and remembering: the blood-coloured water and the fetal position in which he lies signal the gradual rebirth of his memories, his sense of self, and the creative autonomy that gains momentum throughout the narrative.

Indeed, immediately after the bath scene, Spider carefully hides his journal under the carpet before lying on the bed and mumbling a series of locations, barely intelligible without subtitles: "Kitchener Street. Spleen Street. Omdurman Close. The allotments...by the railway—By the railway...and down the canal. And down the canal. Kitchener Street. My Mum." Although at this point in the narrative the place names do not hold significance, they are later revealed to be locations from Spider's childhood, linked by his focus on the as yet unremembered act of killing his mother. The following scenes depict Spider visiting two of these places, first the canal and then the allotment where he weeps into the soil and calls for his mother—the site, we later learn, where Spider imagines she is buried. His physical response to the location and the close-up shots of his fingers moving over the soil provide to the viewer a visual metaphor for his unearthing of memories, but also indicate his planting of new "memories," a suggestion made all the more plausible by the metaphorically charged allotment setting. Beyond this metaphorical reading, though, Spider's bodily actions of moving the soil point to his very agential effort to unearth his past and the connection between physical movement and cognitive process. The fact that this scene precedes his recreation of his mother's murder suggests that his fantasy of his father and a new lover (the sexually forward Yvonne, whom Spider, as a child, remembers seeing in the pub his father used to frequent) killing his mother is created in order to provide a background story for the already established idea that his mother is buried in the allotment. The idea of Mrs. Cleg's

buried body becomes, on an artistic level, a central and foundational narrative point for Spider from which he spins out a narrative web to explain the murder he believes his father committed. In his recreation of the story that leads to his mother's "murder," Spider imagines his father's affair with Yvonne. That both Mrs. Cleg and Yvonne are played by Miranda Richardson provides an obvious clue to the reader that the two characters are likely versions of the same person.

We, as viewers, are invited to participate in the blurred, subjective experience of reality and fiction that Spider both creates and lives within. The complex relationship between Mr. Cleg and Mrs. Cleg/Yvonne challenges the viewer's interpretation of the narrative—one may not, at first, realize that both characters are in fact the same woman—and thus destabilizes clear lines between truth and fiction. In the sequence "Mother Everywhere," the viewer is further implicated in Spider's hallucination as Miranda Richardson replaces Lynn Redgrave as the actress playing Mrs. Wilkinson. The casting of Miranda Richardson as three characters (Mrs. Cleg, Yvonne, and Mrs. Wilkinson) means that the viewer, like Spider, must separate these various identities and make decisions about what is "truth" or fiction within the plot. In doing so, the film draws attention to the issues of identity fragmentation and subjective perception that it presents, and shows us how we too may be deceived by what we see. The film holds a mirror to our own sense of reality and the limits of our knowing. Indeed, and as Beard points out, the formal aspects of the film's construction, the "[discreetly] unrealistic lighting, slightly wider than usual lenses, the emptiness of the streets, the occasional geometric stylization of shots," provide "visible signs of Cronenberg's relaying of an intensely subjectified world" (480). In this sense, Cronenberg casts the viewer as the fly caught in his filmic web just as Mrs. Cleg is caught in Spider's.

Spider appears increasingly in control of his quest, his narrative re-creation of the past. The film introduces Spider's ability to recreate and intentionally alter his memories in the first sequence that flashes back to his childhood; here, Spider is cast as an artistic director of his past. My use of the word "director" is twofold: first, the word signifies Spider's position, which mirrors Cronenberg's on a metafictional level, as artistic director of his memories and imagination;⁸¹

⁸¹ In an interview with Willa Paskin, Cronenberg comments on reading Spider as director: "Someone said to me, 'When you see Spider looking in the window, lurking in the corner he's almost like a director in a film set,' and I

second, the word also references Spider's increasing sense of agency and control over the direction of his thoughts and his subjective experience of both past and present. Browning argues that the adult Spider "appears in his own visions but seems powerless to affect what he sees" (181). Yet in his discussion of the first flashback scene, during which the adult Spider stands outside, peering through a window and watching his younger self interact with his mother in the kitchen, Browning contradicts this point. After noting two instances when the adult Spider echoes sentences spoken by his younger self, Browning points to a change in the dynamic:

the mother then says that 'Food's on the table' to which the adult Spider outside responds, 'Not on the table' *before* the boy speaks. In the first two examples, the adult's action of repetition provides an echo but the third anticipates the dialogue like a prompt to the actors and reactive speech is replaced by a pre-emptive phrase. Interposing himself creates the sense of the adult Spider as a character in the same time frame and as part of an interactive dialogue as well as reflecting the feelings of the audience who cannot, in that split second, see food on the table. (182)

Perhaps more importantly, the pre-emptive dialogue that Browning identifies suggests the adult Spider's orchestration of the scene. In fact, Spider directs and prompts the events in this flashback, as well as the dialogue he speaks with his parents. There is also, however, the possibility that Spider remembers and repeats the dialogue from his past, but even if this is the case Spider's words still suggest his control over his memory. A crucial detail in the scene, which is overlooked by Browning, is the fact that the memory is instigated by Spider standing in his room at the halfway house and writing, in the film's present time, in his journal. This detail suggests that it is the gesture of writing that triggers his memory of the past and which allows him, as writer, to imaginatively embellish the parts of the memory that he cannot recall. As such, this is the first instance in the film that shows how Spider's body, his movement and gestures, directly influence his thinking about and construction of the past. The same kind of direction occurs later in the film, in the sequence entitled "Murderer," when Spider believes his mother

said I hadn't thought of that consciously. But that works perfectly because he is sort of redirecting, re-choreographing to hide things from himself, to make sense of things." William Beard argues a similar point: "Spider becomes an artist not only in the medium of literature, as he writes in his journal, but in the medium of cinema, as he oversees the stagings of his own memory" (497).

has been replaced by Yvonne. Watching through the kitchen window, the adult Spider pre-emptively his mother's action of presenting toast to her son by muttering the words "[y]our toast," before his mother does the same. The extent to which the adult Spider controls the scene is evident when Spider scripts his mother's/Yvonne's confession: "Yes, it's true we murdered your mother. Try and think of me as your mother now." Following this sequence, the hymn "Silent Night," which plays behind scenes that show Spider contemplating his memory and quietly singing along to the tune, verbalizes his desire for his "virgin mother" to return to her child. It can be assumed, therefore, that the dialogue in these flashback is written by Spider at the same time as it is spoken by his parents and his adult and child self—the act of writing in itself becomes a kind of performance. In her work on performing gestures, Carrie Noland writes that the "body we observe in the act of writing may indeed be communicating a message or completing a task, but it is simultaneously measuring space, monitoring pressure and friction, accommodating shifts of weight. These kinesthetic experiences that exceed communicative or instrumental projects affect the gestures that are made and the meanings they convey" (2). In *Spider*, the act of writing is positioned as process that exceeds communicative projects, "a very specific kind of gesturing" (206) that allows Spider to physically work-through his psychological stasis and re-instigate his imaginative creation and acting-out of his past. Such writing, then, might be read as an instance of bodily thinking, rather than only a physical expression of thought. Spider's writing becomes, in effect, the film's first example of the kind of physical schema, to borrow Cuddy-Keane's term, that instigates Spider's psychological navigation and restructuring of the past.

Spider's increasing sense of control over how he re-imagines the past often serves a very functional role as he works to construct his story and confront his present-time experience. Browning compares *Spider* to the work of Fyodor Dostoevsky, arguing that both Cronenberg and Dostoevsky create protagonists who construct their reality through fantasy. The fantasy world that Spider creates is part of his acting-out and working-through, to borrow LaCapra's terms, of his traumatic past, and it involves his physical engagement and expression as much as it does his psychological imagining; Spider's fantasies frequently allow him to cope with his embodied experience in the present time or recent past. The gradual assemblage of his childhood experiences causes Spider to recast the asylum, for example, as an idyllic safe haven that contrasts the horrific reminders of the past that are present in the "real" world. In other words, Spider's memories of the asylum are re-imagined as peaceful times that constitute both a literal

pause in the narrative and in Spider's piecing together of the past. These scenes, which act as timeless spaces between past and present and which appear twice in the film, work to restore for Spider and for the viewer a comforting sense of relief, albeit temporary and surreal, from an otherwise frightening world. They present a kind of "time out" in the film, a non-temporal space in which Spider is able to reformulate his physical and psychological space before returning, in both instances, to the task of reconstructing the past. They also reflect Spider's desire for a future where he is at peace with himself and his surroundings.

He first connects his asylum experiences to the idyllic "Keep Britain Tidy" poster in the coffee shop. As he looks at this pastoral image, Spider moves into a scene where he imagines himself with two other men from the asylum who share a comfortable camaraderie, and stand, wearing matching clothes, in the countryside. Although the sequence may depict an actual memory of work duty in the asylum, the apparent lack of supervision or authority, Spider's evident contentment, and the sunny pastoral setting, which starkly contrasts the drabness of Spider's urban environment in the film's real-time, endows the sequence with a sense of comfort. That the remembered/imagined scene contains the film's only obvious instance of comedy (each man reaches into his trousers for a possession, but the third appears to humorously pleasure himself for the entertainment of the others) only emphasizes its positive tone. This sequence, and therefore Spider's recreation of his asylum experience, is positioned between two created images in the film's present time—one of an idealized rural English landscape in the coffee shop poster, and one of a bird flying through a blue sky in the jigsaw puzzle he works to assemble—which further suggests the aesthetic construction of the embedded scene. That it is immediately followed by Terrence asking Spider if he is "making progress" as he adds pieces to the puzzle contributes to the sense that Spider creates an ideal version of his existence, and perhaps his hope for the future, within the rural scene. The idyllic-asylum sequence is picked up a second time in the film when Spider and the two men are depicted as taking a coffee break within the same rural setting. On this occasion, the two inmates crudely discuss women, while Spider unfolds a faded soft-porn image of two naked women and imaginatively transforms their faces into Yvonne's. That Yvonne is also Spider's mother is alluded to by the voiceover of the two men: as Spider moves his hand away from the picture to reveal Yvonne's face, one of the men reveals to the other his own interest in his mother's sexual activity. Because we, as viewers, share Spider's perspective and see the faces on the images transform into Yvonne's, we are also made aware of

the fantastic construction of the entire environment: all that is shown in this sequence is apparently controlled and created by Spider.

In contrast, a later sequence, which follows Spider's brutal imagining of his mother's murder by Mr. Cleg and Yvonne, presents what is likely a more realistic memory of the asylum. Here, Spider and the other inmates wear matching, clinical uniforms and occupy small white cells while a clearly disturbed Freddy, one of the men from the idealised earlier scenes, threatens the asylum supervisor with a shard of broken glass. The scene also depicts Spider contemplating suicide: he delicately traces the tip of a shard of glass from the broken window across his wrist before returning it to the supervisor. His contemplation and then dismissal of the destruction of his own body, and his decision to give up the shard so that the supervisor can complete the glass puzzle he assembles from the broken window, points to both the control that the adult Spider is able to exert over his embodied experience, no matter how difficult the environment, and his desire to continue his own reconstructive project. The switch from an idyllic to a horrific memory of his asylum experience is paralleled by Spider's painful, fictional creation of his mother's death story.

At times, Spider exhibits masterful control over the creation of his narrative, the progression of which is directly tied to physical gestures that stimulate and catalyze his creative direction. The scene that depicts the "first" murder of Spider's mother, "Out with the Old," provides perhaps the most overt example of Spider's creative direction in his writing, imagining, and creation of an alternative past. Previously unable to reconcile his present situation with the actual episode of his mother's death, Spider writes and envisions a version of events that positions his father and Yvonne as his mother's killers. After imagining himself watching his father and Yvonne at the pub, the scene switches to a brief view of Spider writing in his journal but then quickly becoming frustrated and scribbling out the lines he previously wrote. The suggestion here is that Spider reaches an impasse in his memory and in his creation of narrative events. The scene switches again to the kitchen in Spider's childhood home, in which both the adult Spider and child Spider watch as Mrs. Cleg puts on her coat and declares she is going out to meet Mr. Cleg. While the adult Spider assumes a position as viewer and director of the scene, the boy Spider sits at the table and dextrously constructs a cat's cradle. The cat's cradle structure, which appears throughout the film as the young Spider's primary mode of play, foreshadows the web that will

eventually kill his mother, and so appears as a kind of prototype for the final and fatal web design. Most significantly, though, the boy Spider's cat's cradle, as creative sculpture, corresponds to the adult Spider's writing as another form of schema; indeed, the scene shifts from a close-up of the boy's manipulation of the string web to the adult Spider's frantic writing. Moreover, as a game typically played between two people, the cat's cradle suggests a collaboration between the child and adult character, the past and the present. If the adult Spider creates the memory of his younger self, he too manipulates the strings of the cat's cradle in a way that symbolically connects to his writing, to his structuring of his narrative webs of thought, and, finally, to his recreation of the large web in his bedroom at the half-way house. As an adult, his spidery and unintelligible writing instigates the creation and recreation of the past, while the boy's creation of the different string webs between his hands suggests his own strategizing and creation of events as he considers his future actions. Spider's physical and spatial manipulation of webs operates as a kind of schema that assists in his process of mental way-finding. The physical gestures of writing and sculpting, therefore, are imbued with tremendous power.

The sequence in which Spider imagines his mother's murder, which follows a close-up of his hand as he writes, is a key point in his understanding of both past and present. Creating and imaginatively performing the scene with the actors he chooses allows him to locate, if only temporarily, an alternative narrative for the past. In addition to the absence of the child Spider, which suggests that Spider never saw the event and thus it did not occur (a method employed throughout the film to suggest when we are watching a memory and when the scene is Spider's own fantastic creation), the sequence subtly departs from the previous narrative of the film, and asks the viewer to notice the overly theatrical, almost cartoon-like, series of events and thus to recognize that the scene is crudely imagined or created by Spider. When Mrs. Cleg walks down to the allotment shed and finds her husband having sex with Yvonne, the scene quickly escalates into a crude depiction of the murder that Spider imagines: Mr. Cleg kills his wife with a shovel, buries her in the potato patch, and then celebrates with Yvonne and a bottle of vodka. The scene explains Spider's earlier fixation with and emotional reaction to the potato patch. That both Yvonne and Mrs. Cleg are played by Miranda Richardson, and appear in this scene in the same space and time, further highlights the unreality of the scene. Both women also wear blue (Mrs. Cleg wears a blue dress and Yvonne wears a blue blouse under her leopard-print fur), which enforces the notion that the event is a fantasy and the two women are, in fact, the same person. In

the film's commentary, Cronenberg discusses his intent to make this scene appear as Spider's fantasy:

there is a sense of unreality here....It's rather unbelievable that he [Bill] could be so callous and so cruel and so murderous, and so quickly....I think the second time that people see the movie they will begin to sense all of that and begin to realize that this is really Spider's anguished, fevered imagination: the death of his mother at the hands of his father. It's not really played very realistically. If I were really trying to do this scene in a way that was believable there would be much more texture and complexity in the murder of the mother and of course Yvonne would not be so casual and relaxed and unconcerned that she had just witnessed a murder. (Cronenberg, DVD commentary)

As in previous scenes, Spider again appears as a writer-director, scribbling in his notebook as the burial of his mother is enacted. The scene is, presumably, a visual expression of the content of his writing, but also perhaps his writing serves as a physical navigation of space that translates into the story that he mentally constructs.

As the narrative progresses, the overlaps between Spider's creative direction, transformation, and oedipal desire become more overt. In the sequence "Yvonne's Handiwork," Spider becomes, in effect, an actor within his own script and is fully integrated into his own created/directed scene. The sequence also offers the most overt clue that Yvonne is a creation, an expression of Spider's negative reaction to his mother's sexuality. Here, Spider's creation of his father's affair leads him to imagine Yvonne sexually pleasuring his father under the bridge by the canal. As Yvonne moves towards the camera to flick the semen from her hands, the figure behind her, formally Mr. Cleg, transforms into Spider. On one level, the scene offers a literal example of Cronenberg's interest in transformation (Spider imagines himself as his father in his desire for Yvonne/his mother), but it also implies that it is this literalized desire to occupy his father's position that causes Spider to reach an impasse in his restructuring of the past. The casting of bodily fluids toward the camera also presents a subtle nod to Cronenberg's interest in body horror. The sequence, which is an enactment of Spider's sexual fantasy, is followed by the child Spider being woken by his parents arguing about why Mr. Cleg was late getting home (Spider appears as a child here, which indicates that we should view the scene as a memory rather than a pure

fantasy), and then the child Spider's disgust at seeing his mother in a blue negligee she bought to impress her husband. The blue of the negligee translates into the blue sky of the jigsaw puzzle that Spider attempts to piece together in the film's present time. There emerges, then, a direct correlation between past and present; Spider's memory of his mother as sexual being, which is implicitly tied to his fantasy about Yvonne, and his frustration with the jigsaw puzzle. As Spider works on the puzzle under Terrence's gaze he becomes increasingly agitated, attempting to force pieces of the puzzle together while muttering about how they do not fit. Again, this scene provides an example of bodily direction-finding that operates as a schema for the navigation of mental space: Spider's present-time embodied engagement with the puzzle directly connects to his cerebral process of remembering and creating a narrative about his childhood. If we were to approach the body metaphorically, the pieces that do not fit represent a kind of writer's block in Spider's psychological recreation of remembered events; the pieces do not fit because he refuses to believe that his mother and "Yvonne" are the same person. But considering the body as action allows us to see the ways that Spider's movements are linked to his cognitive processes.

Spider's frenzied spurts of writing and his careful construction of the web sculptures are always connected to his narrative progression: as long as Spider engages his body in the building both physical and psychological structures, the story he tells progresses. Spider's memory of his childhood construction of the web that kills his mother is instigated by his construction of the web in the halfway house in the film's present time—a physical process that animates Spider in a way that starkly contrasts with his slow-moving actions elsewhere in the film. The process of constructing the web sculpture, then, appears inseparable from Spider's process of reassembling his memory. Immediately after the construction of the present-time web is complete, Spider begins to see Mrs. Wilkinson as Yvonne/his mother.

However, the reverse of this relation between psychical and psychological movement is also true. When Spider reaches an impasse in his memory of past events, or is unable to imagine a narrative solution to bridge remembered events, this psychological block is figured as a physical state of immobility. The level to which Spider's thought processes are entwined with his bodily experiences becomes clear when he throws the jigsaw puzzle to the ground and rushes outside to face the gasworks. Standing in front of the looming building, Spider is rooted to the ground: the shot focuses on Spider's feet, which shuffle in the gravel but which he seems unable to lift or

move. Spider's physical stasis here recalls the experience of the narrator in Brand's story "St. Mary's Estate" (see Chapter two), whose sighting of the colonial house where she grew up causes her to re-experience the traumatic past and stand rooted to the spot. In *Spider*, as in Brand's story, the physical stasis or pause is intimately connected to a temporal pause in which the character overwhelmingly experiences the relation between past and present. For Spider, this pause in time implies that he is unable to move beyond his present moment of trauma—either physically or mentally. These instances of extreme paralysis indicate a pause that is a radically different experience for Spider than the aforementioned pauses in which he experiences a "timeless" relief from his engagement with the past and present. It is only when Terrence picks up each of Spider's feet and moves them for him that Spider is able to walk back into the house and regain his momentum, physical and psychological, in his restructuring of the past. Indeed, the following scene, which depicts Spider once again writing in his notebook, suggests that he works through the impasse that held him captive. Spider's vulnerability and reliance on another character returns him to the status of helpless victim and thus reminds the viewer of the shifting boundaries between Spider as agent and sufferer. Spider's body, then, seems to both instigate and respond to his mental processes of remembering and imagining the past. This experience of physical immobility in connection with physiological stasis occurs again when Spider visits the pub that his father used to frequent. As before, the scene shows a close-up of Spider's feet shuffling against the curb, suggesting that he is physically unable to climb onto the sidewalk and move closer to the location. When Spider finally remembers the real cause of his mother's death, the connection between his physical (im)mobility and remembering/thinking becomes starkly evident.

In order to be certain that Yvonne really has replaced Mrs Wilkinson, Spider rummages through her closet for evidence and finds a fur coat, similar to the one that Yvonne wears in the pub, which he takes as proof that Yvonne really has returned. Having stolen Mrs. Wilkinson's keys, Spider takes a hammer and a screwdriver out of a locked cupboard and approaches the sleeping Mrs. Wilkinson/Yvonne with the intention of killing her. Holding these tools and standing over the visually transformed body of Mrs. Wilkinson—Miranda Richardson has, by this point, replaced Lynn Redgrave in the role—Spider appears as another kind of artist, a classical sculptor who, as Browning observes, appears to be "considering making a sculpture of a living woman" (189). Drawing attention back to Spider's creative autonomy and artistry in this moment appears

as a conscious move to reaffirm Spider's directive role over the piecing together of his past and confirms his power to alter the present and create a future just as he appears to be controlled by his delusions. In the tense moments that he hovers above Mrs. Wilkinson with his chosen weapons, the scene switches to his memory of the original matricide: the young Spider sits on the bed and pulls the strings of his self-made web that turn on the gas in the kitchen where his mother sleeps. What follows is a moment of present-time recognition of his past act, which effectively prevents Spider from repeating his crime. Again, sensory perception plays an important role in Spider's remembering and subsequent future actions.

Leaning over Mrs. Wilkinson, he carefully studies her face and seems unable to bring himself to commit the act. Although Browning reads this pause in action as Spider's contemplation of *how* he will proceed rather than *if* he will proceed (189), Spider's facial gestures suggest otherwise. Immediately before the scene switches to the flashback of his childhood, Spider appears to be distracted by something, most likely a smell, that triggers his memory of the matricide; presumably, he smells the gas that killed his mother and which, as earlier scenes establish, he now believes emanates from his own body. In the flashback that follows, the child Spider, having used his web to turn on the gas, is pulled from the house and onto the street by his father. The child then walks backward until the heels of his feet hit the wall of the house, suggesting that he cannot escape from the memory and is forced to watch the scene unfold and therefore recognize the truth about his mother's fate. In the next shot, the child is replaced by the adult Spider, who sees his real mother lying dead on the road and listens with mounting concern to his father's accusations: "You did this. You did your mum in. You killed your mother. You murdered your mum." Here, Spider's immobility in his memory plays a pivotal role in the present time. In an echo of the memory, Spider freezes above Mrs. Wilkinson (who has returned to her original appearance and is once again played by Lynn Redgrave), and backs slowly away from her as she repeats the question, "What have you done?" Although spoken by Mrs. Wilkinson, the question appears to vocalize Spider's thoughts: the second time the line is spoken over a shot of Spider's face as he recalls what happened to his mother and simultaneously recognizes that Mrs. Wilkinson is not Yvonne. Spider's pause in action, then, translates into a temporal pause: a working-through that leads to a recognition of the past that brings him more fully into an awareness of the present, and prevents him from repeating his past actions.

In these final scenes, Spider's position between reality and fantasy is reflected in the film's focus on boundaries and thresholds, especially doorways, but it is Spider's body, rather than his physical environment, that articulates his psychological state and instigates cognitive change. Browning reads the scenes in which Spider is unable to move as part of this focus on liminal spaces and points out that Spider's murderous act is in fact "perpetrated using doorways to guide the string from the gas tap in the kitchen to his bedroom" (188). He reads Spider's "edging away from the kerb" and his position up against the wall of the house, the space formally occupied by his child self, as indicative of Spider being "on a threshold, in terms of his sanity, the acceptability of his actions in a conventional society and his recognition of what he has done" (188). Although I agree with Browning—and I do think that Cronenberg, sometimes in a rather heavy-handed way, offers doorways and windows as liminal spaces that represent the film's play with boundaries⁸²—I also argue that this focus on externalized psychology overlooks the body's role in Spider's self transformation. In the final scene, for example, Spider is able to move away from his mother's body, and is only stopped by the wall of the house against which he stands. Spider is, then, positioned between the site of the crime and the body of his mother. In the film's present time, the adult Spider mirrors his remembered actions as he backs away from Mrs. Wilkinson and towards the wall of her bedroom. By moving backwards towards the wall of the house, Spider moves towards the house/memory (the two become conflated in this scene) rather than, as in previous scenes, experiencing a feeling of stasis that prevents him from approaching sites that were connected to the past. Earlier in the film, for example, Spider is unable to move his feet closer to locations that trigger his memories—the pub that his father frequents, or the gas works—as he is emotionally unable to face or remember the past. This subtle change in movement in the final scene suggests that Spider's physical movement or stasis directly mirrors, and perhaps informs, his psychological movement or stasis in the present. His embodied remembering of his mother's death prevents him from murdering Mrs. Wilkinson.

Spider poses a significant challenge to psychologically focused approaches to traumatic remembering by suggesting the varied ways that the body responds to and navigates past and present spaces—both psychological and environmental—and is integral to the (re)creation of

⁸² In particular, the dead Mrs. Cleg being pulled through the doorway of the house suggests an especially horrific movement from fantasy into morbid reality; from forgetting to remembering; and from past into present.

memory in the process of working-through and acting-out the past. Emmanuel Levinas argues that “The body is the fact that thought is immersed in the world that it thinks and, consequently, expresses the world while it thinks it. The corporeal gesture is not a nervous discharge but a celebration of the world, a poetry” (“Meaning and Sense” 40). Describing bodily experience as inseparable from thinking and as a form of poetry, Levinas points to the kind of connections between somatic gesture and creativity that I have argued are crucial to Spider’s expression and understanding of his experience in the world. “[T]he body,” Levinas argues, “is conceived as inseparable from creative activity and transcendence is inseparable from the corporeal movement” (39). Levinas’s understanding of transcendence suggests that creative thinking or fantasy can never fully involve a departure from the body. Attending to the body’s contribution to and expression of Spider’s experience enables a recognition of the nuances in the film’s trajectory and in Spider’s subtle transformation through remembering and creativity: while Spider’s internal and physical journey may appear cyclical and ultimately degenerative, his construction of the past suggests a simultaneous movement forward that alters his actions in the present and, perhaps, his future trajectory. Although Spider, presented as a child, is driven back to the asylum in the final scenes, his aforementioned return to beginnings might indicate a restorative new start as much as it does a regressive step backward. Such counteracting interpretations add to the ambiguity present throughout *Spider* that creates the tension between the protagonist being both an agent who controls his own story and a victim of his own mind. Spider’s physical poetry, like the web weaved by Ondaatje’s artist-spider, is therefore a simultaneously creative and destructive performance, a working-through and an acting-out that promises change as it spins out the past. Recognizing poetic, embodied expression and modes of thinking, then, enables a reading of the film, and perhaps of accounts of psychosis more generally, which moves beyond symbolic interpretations of experience that may overlook the individual’s agency and relationship to the world. Such recognition may affirm the connections between body and mind, physical and psychological space, gesture and mental navigation, creative process and remembering.

Conclusions

Thinking in Motion: Gesturing Back, Moving Forward

“[A]s we relate to the body, so we relate to the world.”

--Philip Shepherd, *New Self, New World* (5)

I began by engaging with J. Hillis Miller’s questions about how, or if, literature is able to convey “the innumerable diversified experiences” of “lived human time” (89). The differences and nuances of the works I have addressed—united by their attentiveness to movement, gesture, remembering, and forgetting—are testimony to the complexity Miller identifies. By examining the ways that the body is presented in a short-story collection (or, as I have argued, short-story cycle), a graphic narrative, a novel, and a film, I have shown how a range of forms grapple with the issues at stake and how each work examined suggests that moments of meaning might be located in the kinetic, shifting processes of expressing, communicating, and thinking through the body. All four narratives both complicate and elucidate the connections between the body and psychological processes, while suggesting a broader interest in the relationship between time and embodiment within contemporary Canadian fiction and Canadian culture more generally. In the most general sense, I have argued that bodily experience should be considered as part of a subject’s personal narrative. Examining the body’s movements, expressions, and gestures is crucial to understanding a character’s subjective experience, especially aspects of this experience—such as in cases of trauma, for instance—that cannot be adequately expressed using verbal language. The body is also integral to the expression of and engagement with time, the processes of remembering and forgetting. In *Anil’s Ghost*, for instance, Anil engages with her body to forget the war-time atrocities that surround her: she loses herself in a dance that brings her wholly into the present. In contrast, chapters three and four show that, for Lou and for Spider, the body plays a crucial role in the process of remembering. Since the body, unlike the mind, can only ever be in the present, a literary focus on the body (such as in the above examples) reveals the complex intersections between considerations of the past and future within present-time embodied experience. It is this fundamental observation that forms the foundation for the ideas in this study.

My attention to the emphasis on present-time embodied experience offers a counter to recent critical trends in Canadian literary criticism (by critics such as Linda Hutcheon, Marlene Goldman, Gerry Turcotte, and Cynthia Sugars), in which a focus on the historiographic aspects of Canadian fiction and the tropes of haunting and ghosts have been a central preoccupation. I suggest that it is time to consider anew the connections between embodiment and the present-time, to focus on how Canadian fiction reflects present-time experiences and future possibilities. The authors I examine here are markedly interested in “the now.” Indeed, although the past and the process of remembering is central in each of the works I have examined, Lemire, Ondaatje, Brand, and Cronenberg are equally concerned with how individuals experience and survive in the present through their embodied engagements with the external world. These narratives offer the body as a bridge between subjective experiences and the outside world, between self and other, and between understandings of the past, present, and future. The ability to connect through gesture and sensory experience means that the body frequently provides a crucial antidote to experiences of trauma, loneliness, and isolation.

Far from eliding the past, the works studied suggest a privileging of present-time embodied experience that allows characters to confront trauma, past or present. This awareness of the present often enables characters to locate meaning and/or a sense of self by bridging the gap between self and other, or between self and world. This approach has, for instance, led me to argue that Brand’s *Sans Souci and Other Stories* is not merely a short-story collection, but is a short-story cycle that focuses on the connections between the protagonists’ embodiment and their consideration of their place in time and in the social order. I have also suggested, while attempting to avoid an overly optimistic or futuristic argumentative drive, that this present-time focus on embodiment at times implies an expectant or hopeful narrative tone, which opposes the frequent negativity of the past with a sense of possibility or of forward movement. Although each of the narratives I examine appears to centre on past experiences, such consideration of preceding times often leads to characters’ heightened awareness of their present-time embodiment. For instance, the subtle focus on embodiment, touch, and communication that occurs in *Anil’s Ghost*—captured in the moment when Ananda experiences the “sweet touch from the world” that connects him to another human and to the past and present (307)—suggests a small reach into the future, a degree of hope in an otherwise bleak situation. Similarly, in Cronenberg’s film, Spider’s piecing together of his past prevents him from repeating his initial

crime so that his return to the asylum, during which he is presented as a child-like version of himself, appears as a return to the start: a movement that simultaneously delivers him back to the beginning of his journey and grants the possibility of commencing anew.

In addition to offering a counter to predominantly historically oriented criticism, my study also challenges the prevailing view that literature can only mime or gesture to the body. Philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy argues, for instance, that we can only read in literature the spectacle of a body, a description that mimes being a body: we can never see a whole or tangible body in a literary text; we can only ever construct *ideas* of bodies from the information we read (193). While critical approaches to bodies in narrative literature frequently consider the conceptual aspects of embodied representation, I argue that by presenting individual, subjective, embodied experiences within the narrative's "real-time," *Sans Souci*, "Ghost Stories," *Anil's Ghost*, and *Spider* push beyond the confines of symbolic representation. Although it is indisputable that literature can never present a "real" body, the narratives I examine offer a challenge to the limitations of narrative bodily representation that Nancy identifies. They each perform what Elke Rosochacki calls in her discussion of *Anil's Ghost* a "reach outside the text into the world in which real people live"—a movement that allows the narrative to move beyond the confines of spectacle and symbolism (26). As a novel concerned with real-life events and actual bodily suffering, *Anil's Ghost*, while aware of its position in the realm of mimesis and signification, invites us to consider the embodied experiences of its living characters outside the trap, to return to Carrie Noland's expression, of "linguistic metaphor" and to approach bodily descriptions in terms of the "body's own experience of itself" (11). In other words, and as Barbara Korte clarifies, "although body language in literature is necessarily conveyed with the use of words, it may still imply the 'unspeakable' elements of many emotions" (41). Indeed, *Anil's Ghost* calls attention to its position within and challenge to the signifying realm by including self-reflexive descriptions of artistic representations of bodies. When, for instance, Ananda paints the eyes onto the face of the statue, the embodied gesture of painting coalesces with the aesthetic performance of representing bodies in art. The mutilated Bodhisattvas that are carved into the wall of the Buddhist temple provide another example of how the novel aesthetically reflects the descriptions of harmed "real" bodies elsewhere in the novel. It also presents a tension between the embodied experiences of its living characters (Anil, for example), and the frequently objectified descriptions of dead bodies, which has the effect of heightening the intimacy of the subjective experiences it presents.

The same “reach” into the world might be said to occur in Brand’s *Sans Souci* collection. The cumulative effect of presenting numerous female protagonists’ embodied experiences of living with an oppressive personal and cultural history foregrounds the importance of these women’s bodies as registers of their experiences, while simultaneously calling attention to how the Black body is, as Brand writes, “situated as a sign of particular cultural and political meanings in the Diaspora” (*A Map to the Door* 35). Indeed, Brand asks her reader to acknowledge the bodily experiences of her protagonists as a crucial mode of expression and communication when verbal language fails. In “Train to Montreal,” for instance, the protagonist’s kiss with her lover following the harassment on the train is both a response and a challenge to the verbal abuse that she suffers; the bodily gesture is a means of self-recovery as well as an unspeakable expression of her anger and suffering (28-29). Both texts, then, suggest that the bodies presented be read in terms of real-life, present-time, grounded experience rather than only as symbolic representations.

The way that bodily expression replaces verbal communication in Brand’s and Ondaatje’s narratives is literalized in Lemire’s *Essex County*; in chapter three I argued that while the narrative depicts the traumas of aging, it also shows how Lou’s body enables him to remember and tell his story and to experience fleeting but positive moments of engagement with his present embodied experience and the external world. Lemire’s images are confrontational in that they compel us to look at and consider Lou’s body in all its complex “messiness” of aging without the distancing that, perhaps, a textual description of the same body might provide. My discussion of “Ghost Stories” suggests that Lemire’s images focus the reader’s attention on Lou’s body and ask that we interpret the visual aspects of Lou’s movement, positioning, and expression as part of the reading process. Often, Lemire offers illustrations of Lou’s body in place of text that might have described his sensory experiences, emotions, and memories. The text tells us that Lou experiences fleeting moments of clarity between moments of forgetting, while the images that accompany this text depict him walking through a forest and watching and listening to a bird as it perches above him in a tree and then flies away. Although the content of the images and text is loosely connected, they provide very different information that the reader is required to connect and interpret. While, unlike written narrative, the images concretely fill in some of the details of Lou’s body—the exact shape of his right ear, for example—they simultaneously encourage the

imaginative completion of the rest of the body. In chapter three, I drew on Silvia Adler's theories of silence in comics to argue that this interactive involvement means that the reader is actively and intimately engaged in the process of constructing, considering, and empathizing with the body presented: "the narrator may turn off the vocal channel in order to invite the reader to gain understanding through observation and deduction, and to decode the narrator's (or the protagonist's) intentions, to let symbols and icons [or, as I have argued, bodies] 'talk'" (2278-2279). Indeed, in "Ghost Stories" the reader is required to interpret the visual "expressions" of remembering and forgetting, and of suffering. That the images in *Essex County* are highly aestheticized, even surreal, means that the interpretation of these images involves an even greater level of reader engagement. As Marianne Hirsch has suggested in her discussion of Roland Barthes and the visual image, to see the "excessive expressivity of images' . . . is to respond through body and affect, as well as through the intellect" (1211). Such a response in the reader, like the visual representations of emotional and embodied experiences that trigger it, may be impossible to transcribe using the written word. Future work might further take up the exploration of the reader's sensory/bodily response to images as a continuation of this focus on embodied experience.

In contrast to written or graphic narrative, film presents a different challenge to our reading of embodied experience as perhaps the only form of narrative that presents the human body as concretely real. As David Cronenberg writes, "you can't film an abstract concept. You have to film bodies. So the body as the first fact of human existence is one of the underlying realities of my moviemaking, even though I couldn't have articulated it until a few years ago" (*IndieWire*). The task of interpreting visual images and bodily expression is central to an understanding of *Spider*. However, as the viewer of the cinematic body may have less conceptual work to do in comparison to reading bodies in graphic or text-based narratives, and film offers more potential for passive spectating, it may also be easy to overlook the intricacies of characters' embodiment that are so familiar to us and commonplace in our everyday lives. Perhaps this is the reason that the body in *Spider* has been largely neglected in scholarly criticism. My final chapter showed the ways that verbal language is almost entirely replaced by body language and argues that the protagonist's bodily movements and gestures are fundamental to his psychological navigation of the past and present. *Spider*'s lack of dialogue invites the viewer to pay greater attention to the

film's visual clues and to the language of the body, which (as in *Sans Souci*, *Anil's Ghost*, and "Ghost Stories") frequently replaces or counters textual (or, in this case, verbal) communication.

What this dissertation has attempted to do is draw out and examine how movement, gesture, touch, and posture weave meaning into temporal experiences. In processes of imagining, remembering, and forgetting, the body facilitates moments of meaningful engagement with the present-time and with what lies beyond the self. Such attention to present-time embodied experience and the relations between the body and processes of remembering and forgetting point to an interest, in each of the works I examine, in conveying "the now," and indicate that looking forward is regularly implicated in remembering the past. Despite the different formal presentations of the symbiosis between psychological processes and the body, these narratives all present a challenge to psychologically-focused reading of interpersonal relationships and modes of expression and communication in imaginative works. Indeed, the body—its varied movements, gestures, physical changes, and sensory feelings—reflects the fragmented, mutating, and shifting experience of living in time. In this sense, the pairing of temporally associated psychological processes, like remembering and forgetting, with bodily experiences is, perhaps, an obvious one. What is less obvious, however, and what each of the narratives examined here shows, is that just as our bodies are changed and shaped by the world in which we live, our bodies can also help us to construct and shape our experience of the world and our engagement with time.

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