

Repetition and Resistance in Doris Lessing's *Children of Violence*

In a 1957 essay entitled "The Small Personal Voice," Doris Lessing laments what she sees as the sorry state of literary criticism: "At the moment our critics remind me of a lot of Victorian ladies making out their library lists: this is a 'nice' book; or it is not a 'nice' book; the characters are 'nice'; or they are not 'nice.'" This dig at critics is overdetermined by her anger at the reception of the first two volumes of her *Children of Violence* series, about which she writes: "Not one critic has understood what I should have thought would be obvious from the first chapter, where I was at pains to state the theme very clearly: that this is a study of the individual conscience in its relations with the collective" (14). Against the "Victorian ladies," Lessing poses the "serious" critic who would disdain "private sensitivity" and subjective response in favor of the larger questions pressing on "man." This formulation imposes a gendered framework on literary response; that is, Lessing engenders the "serious" reader and writer of literature, as male, and the frivolous reader and writer as female. Behind this gendered opposition are others: rational/emotional, public/private, political/personal, with the first term of each couple enjoying a privileged status over the second. Thus, despite Lessing's avowed focus on the *relations* between the individual and the collective, her commentary here drives a wedge between the two, separating the private from the public, the personal from the political, the subjective from the serious, and, further, places these oppositions in a gender hierarchy. Thus, it comes as no surprise that it is also in this essay that Lessing refers to herself as a humanist by necessity, as it were: "Once a writer has a

feeling of responsibility, as a human being, for the other human beings he [sic] influences, it seems to me he must become a humanist, and must feel himself as an instrument of change for good or for bad" (6).¹ Yet, while Lessing might well have intended a certain reading of her texts, in alignment with her humanist vision, this does not mean that this is the only reading available. Indeed, these texts are rife with gaps in that humanist vision and it is by foregrounding those gaps that I propose to read in *Children of Violence* a deconstruction of the subject of humanism, albeit an unwitting one. My reading of these novels will, thus, attempt to displace Lessing's humanism by tracing the textual effects that contradict her avowed intentions.

My reading of the first four novels in Lessing's series as a deconstruction of the humanist subject—of narrative, of culture, of history—begins by foregrounding a conspicuously absent term in Lessing's claim that the texts form a study of the *individual* (conscience) in relation to the collective. For, it seems odd indeed that the gender of that individual remains unspoken—given Lessing's focus in these texts on how a *woman* situates herself in relation to the social, here conceived, rather narrowly, as the "collective"—and, indeed, even in that first chapter. It is precisely Lessing's faith in humanism that makes it impossible for gender to enter this statement, since humanist conceptions of the "individual" have always assumed that individual to be male, white, and of unspecified class. But gender constantly presses against Lessing's texts, and it does so in the form of a disturbance—a disturbance in the humanist ideology of singular and unified identity that supports, and is supported by, the quest plot which ostensibly structures them. These novels—*Martha Quest* (1952), *A Proper Marriage* (1952), *A Ripple from the Storm* (1958), and *Landlocked* (1958)—² present a sustained exploration of the production of *female* subjectivity as a struggle against cultural and narrative conventions.

These cultural and narrative conventions conspire to keep woman in a position of passivity in relation to historical process by constructing man, Lessing's "responsible individual" ("The Small Personal Voice," 12), as the sole subject of

narrative and history. I will focus on two interrelated conventions here: the classical quest story, through which the individual passes into adulthood and culture; and, the humanist paradigm of the individual self on which this quest story is dependent. Martha's quest for an identity, and a collective in which that identity can reside, takes the form of a quasi-linear, teleological narrative whose goal is the achievement of a unified and authentic self that can participate in the historically specific functions of a collective. Or, to put it in slightly different terms, the quest narrative is mobilized by a desire to install its "hero" as subject of cultural and historical processes. This hero must pass certain tests, in the form of obstacles to his quest, in order to accede both to selfhood and cultural authority. As Peter Brooks puts it in his study of the ambitious hero of nineteenth-century narrative, the questing hero strives to "totalize his experience of human existence in time, to grasp past, present, and future in a significant shape" (39). For Brooks, as for Martha Quest in Lessing's novels, ambition is the "force that drives the protagonist forward.... Ambition is inherently totalizing, figuring the self's tendency to appropriation and aggrandizement, moving forward through the encompassment of more, striving to have, to do, to be more" (Brooks, 39). Yet, as Brooks also notes, this dynamic of plot "most obviously concerns male plots of ambition. The female plot is not unrelated, but it takes a more complex stance toward ambition, the formation of an inner drive toward the assertion of selfhood *in resistance to the overt and violating male plots of ambition*" (39, my emphasis).³

Martha's quest, her ambitious plot, participates in both of these narrative forms at the same time. That is, her narrative is marked both by the desire to have more, do more, and be more; and, simultaneously, by the violation of this desire. Yet it is not the male plot of ambition, per se, that violates Martha's assertion of selfhood; rather, it is the fact that narratives of selfhood and personal development are culturally coded as male. What Martha must resist, then, is that cultural coding, insofar as it prohibits a woman from being subject of the quest for self. Her resistance, however, is continuously

compromised by the paradigm of identity with which Lessing aligns her quest story. For Lessing in *Children of Violence*, the "self" is a masculine ideal that is endangered by feminine forces that continuously militate against authenticity, wholeness and, even, "humanity." The texts thus inscribe the same gendered oppositions evident in Lessing's division of literary response into "subjective" and "serious," and Martha's struggle becomes a struggle to avoid becoming a woman. The paradigmatic *Bildungsroman* quest narrative into which Martha attempts to insert herself as subject constructs the subject as man, "the responsible individual, voluntarily submitting his will to the collective, but never finally; and insisting on making his private judgements before every act of submission" ("The Small Personal Voice," 12). For woman, that submission entails aspiring to the universal, "man, the responsible individual," and, subsequently, transcending gender. Indeed, to foreground gender would mean to debunk the humanist claims that Lessing espouses. Lessing's desire to transcend gender is mediated by an ironic narrative presentation that, through the distancing effect of irony and sarcasm at Martha's expense, functions to disembody the textual subject. Throughout these four texts, Martha's desire to be a human subject capable of significant action is paralleled by Lessing's desire to distance herself, in true humanist spirit, from the female body that threatens to derail that quest.

For, the subject of humanism is, precisely, disembodied, ungendered, unmarked by social and discursive differences. This subject—or, better, "self"—exists *prior* to its insertion in discourse and social practices. If for Martha the goal of her quest is to *find* her "self," that is because she believes, as does Lessing, that that "self" is an entity that constructs, but is not constructed by, the world. The texts ostensibly support a conceptualization of human identity as an internal essence that exists independent of social and discursive determinants. Against this representation of identity, we have Martha's self-representation: a process through which she is inserted, and inserts herself, into multiplicitous positions offered her by discursive and social practices. This process

is fragmented and discontinuous, rather than linear and teleological. And, while Martha is focused on the goal, the self that lies at the end of her quest, the texts continually pull against this goal by showing how Martha's identity is a process, not a product. Since Lessing represents Martha as, above all, a *reader*, it is possible to articulate the history of her subjectivity as a history of being addressed, or interpellated, by texts. Martha is a literal reader, always hungry for an authoritative explanation of her experience, which amounts to a normative *construction* of that experience. She is also a reader in the larger sense of producing meaning through her engagement with the world as text. Because the texts to which Martha appeals for self-definition position her in gender-specific ways, these novels present a history of the production of a female subject as a history of taking up differential positions in relation to discourse. The history of Martha's subjectivity can be described as oscillating between seduction by normative representations of the self, and particularly the female self, which support masculinist and colonialist ideologies; and resistance to that seduction, withholding her compliance in the ideological construction of gender and other cultural differences.

Thus, *Children of Violence* inscribes a conflict between two versions of subjectivity that are radically at odds with each other: a humanist version that relies on the ideal of authentic and whole selfhood as the goal of personal development; and an "anti-humanist" version in which subject positions are seen to be temporary, ideological, and situational. As Bidy Martin and Chandra Mohanty note, humanist conceptions of the "self" obscure the "the fundamentally relational nature of identity and the negations on which the assumption of a singular, fixed, and essential self is based." Such a "self" can only "sustain its appearance of stability by defining itself in terms of what it is not" (196–97). Because these novels are set in white-settler Central Africa, in "Zambesia"—a fictional country that Lessing means to be taken as "a composite of various white-dominated parts of Africa" (Author's Notes on *The Four-Gated City*)—Lessing's exploration of Martha's personal history takes on a complex negotiation of

the racial ideologies that structure subjectivities, both hegemonic and nonhegemonic. Martha's desire to discover her "real self" is complicated by the social codes that continue to construct her as a white British woman in opposition both to the "natives" and to white men—a construction that Martha attempts, sometimes successfully, sometimes not, to resist.⁴

These texts delineate the process by which one becomes a woman, as a process of normalization/naturalization that comes into conflict with the desire to resist that process. They are structured by a doubled movement between two contradictory narrative forces, one represented by Martha's quest and her conscious desire to preserve the integrity of a "self" that she only vaguely perceives as a kind of unchanging "center," and the other by the gradually building evidence of the inefficacy of this paradigm of identity to describe her experience.⁵ On the one hand, we have Martha's quasi-linear history, a classical *Bildungsroman* story of her growth from adolescence to adulthood:⁶ a history that can be described as a process of disillusionment with first, a conventional social body and, later, with various contestatory, "alternative" social bodies. The forward push of the teleological narrative depends on the humanist model, but the ambiguities and ambivalences produced within this movement disrupt both its linearity and teleology. These ambivalences, or disturbances, give the texts a counter-movement, less like a narrative line than like a rhythm of repetition and resistance. A reader coming to these texts with an expectation about how quest narratives are structured—particularly in terms of a teleological movement toward an end—is likely to find herself disappointed, and her expectations unfulfilled. Such a reader is also likely to experience an extreme frustration with Martha, who seems to be particularly good at botching up the narrative that is her life. Yet, as I will demonstrate, a different reading of these texts, a reading attentive to the contradictions that structure them, foregrounds the gaps in Martha's narrative that demonstrate the impossibility of transcending gender when detailing a woman's quest for meaning and for "self." Like the repressed of discourse, which some feminist theorists have called "the feminine," gender returns again and again to

structure Martha's self-representation. Gender, thus, not only disturbs Martha's quest, but also disturbs our reading of the quest plot as paradigmatic of "human" experience. These texts enact the contradictions between Woman and women by demonstrating what happens when the subject of narrative is engendered as a woman.

*The Female Oedipus:
Gender and the (De)Structuring of Martha's Quest*

The *Children of Violence* novels seem to be governed by what Roland Barthes calls the hermeneutic code of narrative, in that the texts set in motion a trajectory of desire described by the following question: Will Martha ever act on her growing knowledge of the falsity of her many different roles, and find a life that will allow her to be "herself," free of the stifling atmosphere of conventionality and "the nightmare repetition" that characterizes the "white settler mentality" in colonial Central Africa? The hermeneutic code of narrative privileges beginnings and ends over middles and inscribes the drive of narrative as the drive toward a truth to be unveiled at the end.⁷ What is situated in the middle are desire and expectation, signified as a disturbance or disorder. The Martha Quest novels follow this hermeneutic code on one level, and the desire expressed in the above question represents pretty closely Martha's desire. But Martha's Quest is, in effect, *overtaken* by the obstacles and complications that Barthes argues keep both reader and character going in narrative, so that it gradually becomes clear that she and we will never reach an answer to the question. In short, these texts are structured less like the classical quest narrative than they are like soap opera, a genre in which, as Tania Modleski so eloquently puts it, "the narrative, by placing ever more complex obstacles between desire and fulfillment, makes anticipation of an end, an end in itself" and, she continues, "Soap operas invest exquisite pleasure in the central condition of a *woman's* life: waiting" ("The Search for Tomorrow," 266, my emphasis).

I have moved in this paragraph from the general to the

(gender) specific in order to suggest, as Modleski and many others have, that narrative characterized by the hermeneutic code is culturally encoded as masculine. The linear quest narrative is perhaps most obviously so. Without essentializing that construct⁸ I would like to suggest that there are reasons why such a narrative mode simply does not work so well when one sets out to tell a woman's story, and to read one. Although I question Modleski's generalization about the "central condition of a woman's life," her description of the narrative form of the soap opera evokes a certain social reality that does indeed surface in the *Martha Quest* novels: a woman on a quest—for meaning, subjectivity, the fulfillment of desire—might well find that her culture places "ever more complex obstacles between desire and fulfillment." And, as Annette Kuhn observes, also in relation to soap opera, a woman in such a narrative might well find herself in a "masochistic" position of being forced to renunciate her quest, or "forever anticipating an endlessly held-off resolution" ("Women's Genres," 27). Martha is impatient with beginnings and impatient for ends; as the narrator sardonically tells us at one point, she "tended to think too much of an end before she had mastered a beginning" (*MQ*, 109).⁹ Her imagination and desire projected toward the end of her quest, Martha is bogged down in the middle and does in fact see this condition as specifically female.

Children of Violence, thus, inscribes sexual difference through what Teresa de Lauretis convincingly describes as a gendering of narrative processes. The quest narrative constructs sexual difference as a binary distinction between activity and passivity: "male-hero-human, on the side of the subject; and female-obstacle-boundary-space, on the other" (*Alice Doesn't*, 121). The "mythical subject" of narrative is male, and the pattern of his narrative is one of movement, progress, transformation. This archetypically masculine "hero" is assumed to be a unitary, rational subject who, in the specific case of the *Bildungsroman* moves toward the "possibility of a conscious choice" about his life and who he wants to be.¹⁰ The feminine in this paradigm is most often represented as a static force, an obstacle that must be over-

come if the hero is to find his “true self” and his place in the world. We are, of course, back to Oedipus and his story. As de Lauretis remarks:

It was not an accident of cultural history that Freud, an avid reader of literature, chose the hero of Sophocles’ drama as the emblem of Everyman’s passage into adult life, his advent to culture and history. All narrative, in its movement forward toward resolution and backward to an initial moment, a paradise lost, is overlaid with what has been called an Oedipal logic—the inner necessity or drive of the drama—its “sense of an ending”...(*Alice Doesn’t*, 125)

Everyman, but of course, not Everywoman. *Her* place in this drama is as “what is not susceptible to transformation, to life or death; she (it) is an element of plot-space, a topos, a resistance, matrix and matter” (119).

The Martha Quest novels almost literally enforce this Oedipal logic, but on a thematic rather than structural level. That is, the texts represent Martha’s desire on a thematic level as the desire to be subject of this mythical narrative; while, on a structural level, the texts consistently work against the form that narrative must take. Thematically, the masculine represents progressive movement: man makes history. The feminine represents a more cyclical movement, most often described as an inevitable repetition that ultimately reduces to stasis: woman may reproduce, but she does not produce history.¹¹ The inevitability Martha assigns to this feminine repetition suggests a particularly dangerous passivity; it is the feminine that participates in an uncontrollable reproduction of conventional ideologies. The masculine, on the other hand, is an active force, capable of change. Her mother, against whom she reacts so violently, is the prime representative of this ideological reproduction; *May Quest* speaks for the status quo, the “official line” in the colony. For Martha, this ideological reproduction is a monstrous force, effectively beyond “rational” control, and is situated in the nuclear family. Thus, Martha’s thinking reproduces what

Denise Riley has identified as the nineteenth-century British conflation of the “social” and the “familial” into the feminine, and the separation of the male “individual” from that realm. The formulation of “individual versus society” becomes the masculine versus the feminine, the former being the realm of “politics” and the latter the realm of “personal life.”¹² However, when Martha enters actively into the colony’s political scene—where individuals fight against “society”—she begins to identify the “pompous, hypocritical and essentially male fabric of society” (*ARS*, 19) as that which causes the ideological reproduction she so fears. As is characteristic of Martha throughout the series, she swings from one extreme to the other, an absolutist whose world view is dependent on binary oppositions. Here, she reverses the masculine and the feminine, but fails to displace the opposition.

Martha’s rebellion against convention throughout the texts pits the masculine against the feminine in a representational paradigm that depends on other gendered binary oppositions, particularly the opposition between rationality and emotionality. As Lynn Sukenick points out, Lessing situates “self” and personality on the side of the rational in opposition to sensibility or emotion: “Rationality is personality; for Lessing it is intelligence that gives one a sense of self and preserves some approximation of integration in the face of invading irrationalities.” Within this paradigm, emotions “*disrupt* the self as if they, the emotions, are outside of the self” (Sukenick, 104–105, my emphasis). Martha consistently appeals to the masculine gods of reason in order to combat feminine irrationality; she feels that, “above all it was essential to account for every contradictory emotion that assailed one”: “Books. Words. There must surely be some pattern of words which would neatly and safely cage what she felt—isolate her emotions so that she could look at them from outside” (*APM*, 60–61). For Martha, the “outside” view provided through the discourses of the “human sciences,” amounts to a kind of universally objective knowledge that can protect her from what she perceives as an assault of irrationality in the form of contradiction. Implicit in the opposition between “rational” and “irrational” is that the latter is

somehow “false” or inauthentic. The feminine becomes, in Martha’s mind, an obstacle to authenticity, here conceived as subjective agency.

Martha’s self-representation thus places her firmly in the camp of the mythical hero; like other “great” heroes of *Bildungsromane*—Stephen Dedalus comes immediately to mind—she feels she must work against those claustrophobic “feminine” forces that conspire to hold her down.¹³ She does indeed encounter many obstacles in her journey toward this telos, and they are often encoded as feminine. But they are not, as Sukenick suggests, entirely “outside” forces; rather, these obstacles to progressive movement are situated *both* inside *and* outside Martha, and this sets her apart from her male counterparts. These forces are inside to the extent that Martha feels the existence of a “female self” at odds with her “real self”; and outside to the extent that she thinks those feminine forces and that “female self” have “nothing to do with her”—a phrase that echoes through all four novels. The irrationality that Martha links with the feminine is rooted in the female body that comes to signify the greatest obstacle to her quest for “self.” Thus the texts essentialize gender as a being, an internal force that can be located *inside* the individual. Yet, at the same time, Martha’s resistance to “becoming a woman”—that is, her resistance to taking up the “natural” position of femininity—serves to denaturalize that becoming. Martha, then, situates herself both inside and outside the ideology of gender which gives the equation “rationality: authenticity:: irrationality: falsity” its meaning. She is trapped, or framed, *inside* discourse and social systems that construct Woman as non-man, and, thus, *outside* the realm of cultural possibilities for action and meaning. The phrase, “the female self,” in other words, contains a contradiction in terms. Martha is *subject* to the ideological production of femininity as passivity, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, for her to be *subject* of her quest narrative as self-representation.

This becomes clearest in *A Proper Marriage* where Martha finds herself succumbing to the feminine pattern of repetition, “the dragging compulsion” (24) of domesticity

that she never fails to characterize as static and conventional. She is inexorably drawn toward what she sees as a feminine compliance, while at the same time feeling a desperate need to rebel against it. In keeping with her construction of the feminine as conservative repetition, Martha tries to fight a certain kind of nostalgia—within which “nothing mattered very much” (*APM*, 207)—with a “dispassionate, cool eye” (*MQ*, 165). Martha situates this nostalgia inside herself as a private affliction, seeing feminine compliance as an inevitable force that all subjects gendered female must contend with. Her access, however, to an outsider position signified by the “dispassionate, cool eye”—a phrase connoting the masculine in these texts—makes it possible for her to rebel against this supposedly “natural” feminine condition. While both (feminine) compliance and (masculine) rebellion are culturally sanctioned positions existing in relation to hegemonic ideologies, Martha’s belief in an internal essence—of gender and of self—blinds her to the fact that such essences are the effect of ideologies. The masculine and the feminine take on their differential meanings only within a representational paradigm that privileges one over the other, as we can see through the contradictions which mark Martha’s self-representations. In order to safeguard the unity of “self,” Martha must work to banish contradiction. But, because her ideal of selfhood comes into conflict with her experience of becoming a woman, she most often chooses to align herself with subject positions encoded as masculine. It is this vicious circle which in Martha’s view keeps her from positioning herself as a woman and as a person; and, in my view, demonstrates how gender disturbs the humanist ideal of unified and authentic selfhood.

The fact that Martha must consistently battle to banish contradiction testifies to the irreducibility of contradiction in her experience of female subjectivity, that experience being her ongoing engagement in social and discursive systems which offer her only limited self-positioning. Her self-representation, thus, is marked by confrontations between different ideological systems which define the terms “woman” and “person” as mutually contradictory. Martha’s response to

this confrontation is a drive toward a unity that constantly slips away. She seeks a “woman who combined a warm accepting femininity and motherhood with being what Martha described vaguely but to her own satisfaction as ‘a person’” (*APM*, 206). Yet, it is unlikely that Martha will *allow* herself to find this woman because, as Sukenick points out, Martha’s “mistrust of female irrationality” works “against an admission of female resemblance” (102).¹⁴ Indeed, Martha feels “obliged to repudiate the shackled women of the past” (*MQ*, 8)—not, it is worth pointing out, obliged to *avenge* them. Women are the “enemy” because Martha opposes “personhood” to femininity in an interpretive move that suggests an unquestioning acceptance of the ideological codes that essentialize gender. Despite her “reasonable” conviction that feminine compliance endangers her “personhood,” she nevertheless accepts what official wisdom constructs as “normal womanhood,” as can be seen in this fairly typical description of Martha being pulled in opposite directions: “The instinct to comply, to please, seemed to her more and more unpleasant and false. Yet she had to reassure Douglas and kiss him before he left if she was not to feel guilty and lacking as a woman” (*APM*, 264). According to conventional wisdom, the voice of the dominant ideology in these texts, to become a woman means to be passive and compliant; yet Martha’s sense that this identity is false keeps her from locking herself within this singular position. Her divided response to conventional wisdom suggests that there are gaps in the prevalent ideologies of gender to which Martha owes her view of women being not wholly “persons.” Such gaps leave open the possibility that individuals can resist occupying the subject positions ideologically determined within discursive and social systems. Neither compliance nor rebellion are “false”; rather, they are subject positions that Martha occupies at different times and in different contexts. If the feminine is “false,” it is only because the ideologies to which Martha subscribes construct it as such, simultaneously constructing the masculine as the “authentic.”

The feminine—messy, emotional, irrational, and, above all, false—disturbs Martha’s quest toward selfhood, and dis-

rupts the linear movement of the texts. Martha's desire to be subject clashes with her (self)object-ification. The narrative she creates for herself—her self-representation—is constantly derailed by “feminine” forces that leave her floundering in a kind of freeze frame without progressive movement. Since her occupation of feminine positions stalls her quest, time and again, gender becomes the obstacle toward self-realization. This is because the texts work to locate gender *inside* the “self.” Gender becomes something added on to that self, not constitutive of it. If gender is an essence, and if the feminine is naturally in opposition to everything Martha believes a “person” to be, Martha's resistance to becoming a woman must take the form of an intense (self) negation. Throughout the novels, she uses negation as a form of self-defense, a protective measure necessary to preserve a clear receptive space for her “self” to be built in. It is most often a strategy of reaction against everything she feels her “self” should not be:¹⁵ the masculine must defeat the feminine. She reacts against her mother and other women in the colony who are made to represent the conservative force of repetition, yet she must pay a price for this kind of negation. It is not so easy to negate one's experience of gender relations because cultural institutions continually produce those relations, and work to situate each individual within the terms of a sexual difference oppositionally, and hierarchically, conceived.

The difficulty Martha experiences in resisting normative constructions of gender relations takes shape as a contradiction in subject positioning. Despite her desire to realize an internal “self” independent of social forces, Martha takes up multiple and often contradictory subject positions in relation to her culture's narratives of gender. We can see this when she represents herself as a prototypically feminine figure who waits for a man to call her “self” into being. The contradiction between her desire to “find” her “self” and her desire to be “created” by a man signifies a gap in Martha's self-representation where we can see how she continues to become Woman. Contrary to her desire to be the subject of her own narrative, and of history, Martha positions herself as the object of someone else's narrative, a man's. She is seduced

by romantic discourses into taking up a gendered position in a type of narrative that can be loosely described as “woman needing a man for fulfillment.” This ideal is constructed through a complex of hegemonic discourses which take effect in social practices and serve to normalize male dominance by positing woman as some kind of lack. What ought to be particularly problematic for Martha in this narrative, given her desire for self-determination, is that it assigns her a passive position as the female object who waits for the male subject to give her meaning. In an extended description of Martha’s state after her lover William leaves the Colony, the narrator foregrounds the inadequacy of this explanation by placing the word “self” in quotation marks, and suggesting that Martha is less an individual than a member of the category “woman”:

There is a type of woman who can never be, as they are likely to put it, “themselves” with anyone but the man to whom they have permanently or not given their hearts. If the man goes away there is left an empty space filled with shadows. She mourns for the temporarily extinct person she can only be with a man she loves; she mourns him who brought her “self” to life. She lives with the empty space at her side, peopled with the images of her own potentialities *until the next man walks into the space, absorbs the shadows into himself, creating her, allowing her to be her “self”—but a new self, since it is his conception which forms her....* Martha knew, with William gone, she was not so much lonely as self-divided. (ARS, 38–39, my emphasis)

The language I’ve highlighted here suggests that Martha has given up her position as questing, active subject—in favor of occupying the “feminine” position as the object at the end of someone else’s quest/story, a man’s. The only activity attributed to Martha here is “mourning,” an activity which gains meaning only in reference to the man for whom she waits. She is reduced here, she reduces herself, to an empty space, and the language of the passage foregrounds the

conventional construction of Woman as feminine "matter" in need of masculine "form" to take shape. We can read her "self-division" in two different ways: first, such a division signifies compliance with the ideological "truth" that a woman needs a man to be "whole"; but, second, *self-division* implies recognition that the passively waiting woman is divided against her own desire to occupy an active subject position in her own narrative.

At the beginning of *Landlocked*, Martha is caught up in another period of waiting, and the narrator asks: "what was she waiting for, in waiting for (as she knew she did) a man? Why, someone who would unify her elements, a man would be like a roof, or like a fire burning in the centre of the empty space" (*LL*, 30).¹⁶ The narrator's description here, beginning with the rather off-hand "why," is ironic—at Martha's expense. The "why" places the comment in brackets, as it were, signalling Martha's belief that, of course, it is only "natural" for a man to arrive on the scene and miraculously "unify her elements." The language of this passage foregrounds a particularly phallogocentric conception of female subjectivity, an "empty space" that will be filled by a "fire burning in the centre"; and, as is characteristic of hegemonic representations, this conception "naturalizes" socially constituted differences. It is Martha's susceptibility to this kind of normalizing narrative of gender differences that leads her to essentialize Woman as that "veiled personage that waits, imprisoned, *in every woman*, to be released by love" (*MQ*, 157, my emphasis). *Children of Violence* implicitly problematizes this type of generalization through its socio-political context; the minutely determined racial and class divisions in the colony undermine Martha's attempts to subsume heterogeneous women under a monolithic Woman.

These two examples of the narrator's ironic commentary on Martha's compliance with normative constructions of Woman illustrate Lessing's strategy of distancing herself from Martha. They also point to what might be called the "unconscious" of these texts. If these texts form a "study of the individual conscience in its relations to the collective," they also study how that "individual" is constrained by how the "collec-

tive" constructs her gender. Representations of Woman, such as those rendered through these two narratives of female sensibility, have power over women's self-representations. Because maternity, more than anything else, signifies the kind of feminine stasis and repetition that Martha fears, she needs to devise strategies for protecting herself from it. She needs, in other words, to distance herself from her female body—just as the narrator's irony distances Lessing from that body. One strategy she employs is projection, and it comes into sharp focus in a scene where Martha and her friends are engaged in a discussion of abortion. When Alice tells her it's illegal, Martha "flares into animated indignation," with "Do you mean to say that a woman's not entitled to decide whether she's going to have a baby or not?" (*APM*, 19). Martha here espouses what she knows to be a radical view, implying that *all* women should be allowed to decide what to do with their own bodies. Lessing juxtaposes this scene with the appearance of a "native woman" with three small children, a woman to whom Martha's "animated indignation" clearly does not extend. Her own fear of falling into the cycle of childbearing that she sees as the beginning of the inexorable pattern of feminine repetition is projected onto this woman who "summed up her uncomfortable thoughts and presented the problem in its crudest form" (19). The presence of this woman does not prompt Martha to reconsider the conversation about abortion that has just taken place; indeed, Martha seems to place this woman outside the realm of choice altogether.

She represents to Martha that part of herself that simultaneously attracts and repulses her, the susceptibility to the "feminine" rhythm of reproduction and compliance:

This easy, comfortable black woman seemed extraordinarily attractive, compared with the hard gay anxiety of Stella and Alice. Martha felt her as something simple, accepting—whole. Then she understood she was in the process of romanticizing poverty; and repeated firmly to herself that the child mortality for the colony was one of the highest in the world. *All the same...* (*APM*, 19; my emphasis, ellipses in the original).

Either view of this woman, romantic or "reasonable," denies her any specificity or even humanity. And, while Martha disapproves of Dr. Stern's implicitly anthropological, "objective" stance on black women—"It seems even Dr. Stern is only interested in writing papers about them," she says "bitterly"—this does not prevent her from seeing this woman as other to her conception of *all* women. Later in the text, we are told that "during those first few weeks of her marriage, Martha was always accompanied by that other, black woman, like an invisible sister simpler and wiser than herself; for no matter how much she reminded herself of statistics and progress, she envied her from the bottom of her heart. Without, of course, having any intention of emulating her; loyalty to progress forbade it" (63–64).

Implicit in this comment is Martha's exclusion of the black woman from any kind of "progress," what Martha considers to be her own birthright. This woman, then, represents the "feminine" against which Martha represents herself. The "whole of womankind" evoked by Martha, clearly excludes this woman, as does the white women's discussion of abortion as an option for all women. Martha projects a negative part of herself onto this woman in the kind of identification Abdul JanMohamed points out as a standard feature of the "colonial encounter."¹⁷ Throughout these novels, progress is productive, "rational," and implicitly masculine; while acceptance, and perhaps even envy, are conservative forces implicitly encoded as feminine. Progress is the prerogative of the "universal" subject, the mythical hero who is unencumbered by gender and race. Thus, Martha doubly excludes the black woman from participation in history. She represents this "invisible" black "sister" as the female principle incarnate, as evidenced in her rather glib recognition of her only insofar as she "summed up" Martha's own "problem in its crudest form." There are a host of racist assumptions at work here, only some of which reach Martha's "progressive" consciousness. Most particularly, Martha constructs this woman as "cruder," less rational, and implicitly more "natural" than herself—in order to safeguard herself from these qualities, and

in order to fight against a contradictory experience of subjectivity. As Wendy Hollway argues, projection safeguards unitary subjectivity in that it is a psychic mechanism for avoiding recognition of contradiction in subjective positioning.¹⁸ In this attitude, Martha is not very far from the official colonial line on the “natives”: they are in need of “civilization”—that is, European values—while at the same time being “essentially” incapable of such an assimilation.¹⁹ Martha’s projection is a defense mechanism that suppresses the contradictions between her conscious desires and the “irrational” forces that militate against her desire to be “rational” and “progressive.” In projecting acceptance onto the black woman, and envying her for it, Martha effectively complies with the racist structures of colonial society, despite her conscious desire to fight against them.

Because progress, movement, and subjectivity are encoded as masculine in these texts, Martha’s quest for her “real self” is consistently derailed, deferred, and even, denegated by what she perceives as feminine threats to her self. The fact that she experiences her subjectivity as multiple, made up of “the different selves which insisted on claiming possession of her” (*MQ*, 156), militates against the unity she strives for. This multiplicity, in fact, functions to undermine the humanist ideal of singular and unified identity that underwrites the quest plot to which Martha appeals in her efforts at self-representation. Such an ideal cannot begin to explain how these multiple, and often contradictory, “selves” can exist in one individual, nor how these “selves” are provisional, contingent on the social relations that the humanist conceptualization of identity would locate *outside* the individual. What Martha needs, as she herself senses, is a “theory” that will explain how it is that these contradictory selves keep getting called into existence and how gender is centrally involved in that process. Such a theory, to which I will now turn, might be able to explain why Martha gets seduced into culturally sanctioned gender positions against her conscious desire to avoid them. It might also suggest how it is possible for Martha to resist this seduction, to become a woman without becoming naturalized.

*A Theory for Martha:
Gender and the Production of Subjectivity*

While it is clear that, as many feminist theorists and critics have pointed out, the subject of humanist discourses has always been constituted as male, it is not quite so clear how a "post-humanist" theory of subjectivity can take gender into account except on an abstract and, thus, recuperable level. Luce Irigaray, for example, suggests that "any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the 'masculine,'" and will continue to be. When a woman "submits to (such a) theory" she is "subjecting herself to objectivization in discourse—by being 'female.' Re-objectivizing her own self whenever she claims to identify herself 'as' a masculine subject" (*Speculum*, 133). Such has been the trajectory of my argument, thus far, in relation to Martha Quest. However, I am not as willing as Irigaray, and other French theorists, to leave the question of the subject forever trapped within masculine parameters. The question of female subjectivity remains an urgent one, despite what might seem to be a critical consensus on the impossibility of asking that question without returning it to the structures of knowledge that the deconstruction of the "universal" self has brought into question. As Rosi Braidotti argues, since the construction, and deconstruction, of the subject has been an historically male project in Western philosophy, it is possible that the history of the female subject might tell a different story:

Well may the high priests of postmodernism preach the deconstruction and fragmentation of the subject, the flux of all identities based on phallogocentric premises.... The truth of the matter is: one cannot deconstruct a subjectivity one has never been fully granted.... Just because modern philosophy has discovered an area of twilight within human subjectivity and discourse; and just because this is blurring the century-old distinction between self and other, it does not inevitably follow that there is no more certainty about the self. Just because ever since the end of the nineteenth century the ontologi-