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How Silently Sheela-Na-Gig Speaks: Memory, Mythos, and the Female Body

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**How Silently Sheela-Na-Gig Speaks:
Memory, Mythos, and the Female Body**

by

AMBER C. SNIDER

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Abstract

**How Silently Sheela-Na-Gig Speaks:
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by

Amber C. Snider

Advisor: Professor Kyoo Lee

How and why do we destroy female agency, still today? Focusing on some of the mythical foundations and formations found in ancient Celtic and Greek imaginings, the “bodily” aspects in particular, this thesis traces the ways in which some of the modern women intellectuals receive or reject the typical feminist or female elements found in mythologies; the elided nature of the female trinity and the life giver-destroyer circularity inherent in goddesses and archetypes, for instance, appears to mirror our cultural impulse to destroy the female body. It is then not enough to create a new mythology by and for women—we must reinterpret and reintegrate myths of women back into our social consciousness in order to understand women’s historicity. To ignore these stories, signs and symbols is to blacken the illumination of nature, to silence historical voices, and to muddle the female lineage of spirituality.

The symbols and mythos that point to the life and death circles have not been fully integrated into our modern cultural consciousness. Despite the interest feminist thinkers have ascribed to mythological women, the idea of the female trinity has been rebuffed and buried by patriarchal religions. While this annihilation is common, the question of *why* and *how* still remains. Interestingly, as we dig into the reasoning behind this patriarchal disempowerment and disregard we find that the problem is not with the enchanted woman of the myth, but her body.

Preface

[38]

By H.D. (From *Trilogy*)

This search for historical parallels,
research into psychic affinities,

has been done to death before,
will be done again;

no comment can alter spiritual realities
(you say) or again,

what new light can you possibly
throw upon them?

my mind (yours),
your way of thought (mine),

each has its peculiar intricate map,
threads weave over and under

the jungle-growth
of biological aptitudes,

inherited tendencies,
the intellectual effort

of the whole race,
its tide and ebb;

but my mind (yours)
has its peculiar ego-centric

personal approach
to the eternal realities,

and differs from every other
in minute particulars,

as the vein-paths on any leaf
differ from those of every other leaf

in the forest, as every snow-flake
has its particular star, coral or prism shape."¹

¹ H.D. "Tribute to the Angels." *Trilogy*. New York, NY: New Directions, 1973. 51-52. Print.

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I. Introduction: The Question of the Myth and The Female Body

“Simone de Beauvoir proves in *The Second Sex* that myths are male-devised stories which invariably portray woman as the Other. Whether she is the epitome of male desires or the symbol of male fears, the representative of his needs to revulsions, the woman of myth is not her own person.”²

In the *Women's Studies* article “Mother, maiden, and the marriage of death: Women writers and an ancient myth,” published in 1979, Gubar analyzes women in mythology through the lens of modern feminist intellectuals. In her opening, she points out that de Beauvoir believes that women have not been able to free themselves from the confines of patriarchy because we have yet to create our own myths as women. Because we have not “created a demystified religion, or poetry of [our] own” we still view the world as an outsider, or Other, through the gaze of man.

Although I walk along the trails and pathways created by these Intellectual Giants, I too know that I am merely picking up their dropped seedlings. Intellectuals such as Susan Gubar and Simone de Beauvoir, Adrienne Rich and H.D., have, as Whitman once wrote, “contained multitudes” in their work. Their revolutionary ways of viewing the world stand, even after the Third, Fourth, and maybe Fifth Wave of feminism continues to break the crest. With that said, I use these intellectual seedlings of sorts, like bread crumbs from those who’ve walked before me, to

² Gubar, Susan. "Mother, Maiden and the Marriage of Death: Woman Writers and an Ancient Myth." *Women's Studies* 6.3 (1979): 301. Print.

humbly construct this paper. An apology must be made on my part, for any misgivings, misinterpretations, or lofty ideas I may put forth that may seem absurd to some. But amidst this humility, please, dear reader, know that there is an arrogance involved in my perception of the world and I do not adhere to the current academic dilemma of “the problem of speaking for others” (Alcoff). This very essay invokes ideas of unification, the Divine source, and wholeness—therefore I will not, and cannot, separate myself from the body of this work and that of others. My own physical body is apparent throughout the text: I am woman; woman is me.

The need to recreate mythology with a reinterpretation of female figures has always been critical for feminist scholars. While it has been done since the 1970s, in the light of the so-called “Second Wave” of feminists, one issue of mythology has yet to be fully explored. That omission, I believe, is a type of trauma, one that comes from silencing or the severing of language, which I will explore in detail in Chapter Two, “Representation: Memory, Witnessing, and Silencing.” But silencing isn’t the only way to deflate women’s history—a rejection of the female body is also a means destroy agency.

Mobile Bodies in Mythos

"Riddles and sophisticated word-play are a reminder of the origin of all sacred mysteries: Breath, or the Word itself" (Sharkey 13).

History can be summed up as a war against the mobility of women. The dominant male figure in most myths is always seen as a *mobile* figure, while the woman is not. Particularly in the myth of Persephone and Demeter, when Hades ascends out of the earth, he is seen in a chariot—a constructed vehicle for movement. Persephone only has her two feet and wanders lovingly amongst nature, in the fields picking flowers, without a constructed vehicle to carry her.

Rita Dove describes his chariot in her poem *Persephone, Falling*:

when, sprung out of the earth
 on his glittering terrible
 carriage, he claimed his due.
 It is finished. No one heard her.
 No one! She had strayed from the herd.

The lure of his glamorized vehicle is seen in conjunction with the male figure “claim[ing] his due.” The stripping away of her agency through voice (or lack thereof) is seen in the speaker’s “No one heard her.” This silencing occurs precisely because “[Persephone] strayed from the herd.” The herd, in this instance, is most definitely primal, like that of an animal pack, but points at a community of women. Persephone is protected in her natural state, so long as she stays within her female community. “This grievous separation of mother and maiden implies that in a pa-

triarchal society women are divided from each other and themselves” (Gubar 305). Separation of women from their communal nurturing presence can only result in a loss of her agency and ultimately a separation from nature.

Essentially, recreating the female through mythos must first address the body. First, agency is only possible with a mobile body.

Shattering of Sacred Traditions

The sacredness of the female community has been disrupted by the presence of patriarchy. Simply looking at the continual political questions involving women's sexual rights and autonomy over their own bodies is a testament to this disparity. The separation of woman from her community, from her natural tongue, employs a cycle of destruction of her very nature. The natural world, in turn, is defiled by this separation between women—and this disruption affects language. The notion of separation and severance of language, or silencing, has been taken up repeatedly by Post-1945 Trauma scholars, which we will look at in Chapter Two, “Representation: Memory, Witnessing, and Silencing.”

Sacred female rituals and gatherings, including baby showers and bridal showers, were originally meant as meetings for women-only to share secrets of the Universe in a safe environment. The sacred teachings and mysteries of child-rearing and sex were passed down in the matriarchal lineage, away from the presence of man. Only within this sacred circle of women could these mysteries be discussed, thereby insuring the continuation of tradition and culture. The pedagogical and spiritual purpose of these rituals in modern times has been lost. We are left with blue and pink paper party favors and missed calls from husbands, thus successfully kitschifying our sacred transmission of history. This results in a type of spiritual void, which can only be filled through a re-purposing of common rituals and rites dedicated to women.

When one forgets one's own history, a type of numbing occurs. The “mind is severed from its own psychic forms [and] there's an impairment in the symbolization process itself. Insight begins with the shattering of prior forms...because forms have to be shattered for there to be new insight. In that sense, it is a shattering of form but it is also a new dimension of experi-

ence” (Carruth and Lifton 128). This shattering of form to reveal a new dimension of experience is the reason we need to recreate and reinterpret our history. Perhaps this is exactly what Second Wave feminists sought to revive in the myth of Demeter and Persephone: “to ‘reinvoke/ and name/ a fresh,’ [and express] their discomfort with the mythic traditions and literary conventions they have inherited” (Gubar 310). Long distorted in the collective consciousness of society, the story of women has to be *re-formatted* to allow for change.

Myths give us stories of women who are “not merely engaged in finding or rejecting a man, [but also give us] women who relate to each other, [which] exert[s] a strong fascination on many of us” (Gubar). The Sphinx archetype pops up all over in our cultural memory—ranging from the myth of Oedipus to her physical presence at Giza. Even Muriel Rukeyser takes up the question of the Sphinx in her poem entitled “Myth,” by endowing the stationary archetype with interiority. The Sphinx is in “some ways the epitome of the Female Mythologized... [And] like the Sphinx, [the] Goddess holds the secret of life, but she is much more compelling a model than a stationary, riddling cat” (Gubar 302). Therefore, in this thesis, rather than focusing on the immobile Sphinx archetype, I turn to the Goddess archetype, whose shifting forms weave symbolic strains through our cultural consciousness. The Goddess archetypes tends to encompass two of the basic ancient elements—Earth and Water. The first element, Earth, presents the Goddess figure as Mother Earth or Earth-Mother, one whose nourishment permeates through and within all things on land. She is seen as the life giver-destroyer and can be represented by mythological figures such as the Sheela-Na-Gig and Demeter. The second element, Water, presents the Goddess figure as The Feminine Source, whose fecundity breeds an endless variety of new life. She is seen as the The Great Womb and the River Mother, and has been represented by figures such as the Mermaid (sometimes Sirens) and Aphrodite, who was born out of the sea itself. Let us turn

to one baffling representation of the Earth Goddess archetype—a powerful figure known as the Sheela-Na-Gig.

Chapter One: Sheela-Na-Gig

Section One: Celtic Mythos

Ireland is home to a strange stone effigy dating back to the 12th century—a figure called the Sheela-Na-Gig. Its presence was noted in over one hundred instances around Ireland, mainly adorning doorways, openings, and seen on the walls of churches. The symbol, normally carved out of stone, depicts a female figure exposing or holding open her exaggerated vulva. Scholars debate whether the Sheela-Na-Gig is a fertility symbol, a goddess symbol, a gargoyle, a deterrent against sexuality, or otherwise. Now in the 21st century, the origin and meaning of this provocative image is largely unknown.

More troubling than the Sheela's dubious origins is the issue of *why* the origin of this esoteric symbol is still largely unknown, buried in our cultural rubble. The presence of this symbol in Protestant churches throughout Ireland and several other locations throughout the U.K. has triggered a series of conflicting arguments surrounding female mythology and symbolism. Numerous questions remain: was she brought over by the French in the 12th century? Is the Sheela a Celtic pagan goddess? Or is the Sheela a type of gargoyle figure to ward off evil spirits and possibly thwart sexual behavior? Some say the Sheela is a “graphic representation of the Celtic goddess of creation and destruction” (Sharkey 30). Probably the most intriguing question is not necessarily that of the Sheela's origins, but her location in churches.

The Sheela-Na-Gig's presence in churches around Ireland and the U.K. could possibly stand to represent the Hag/Crone figure of the Female Trinity. The Virgin Mary embodies the other two sides of the Trinity (Maiden and Mother), but the Crone figure is never acknowledged. The Sheela, with her exposed vulva, is displaying her womb for the world as both a life giver and life destroyer. Her presence (and body) takes and consumes, but also provides for the world. Ear-

ly Christian churches, still holding onto the Celtic pagan roots that acknowledge Mother Earth, as well as the Hag figure, most likely used the Sheela to represent this sacred aspect of their culture. A silent syncretization with the Christian Church was necessary for the Sheela because of her overtly sexual imagery.

John Sharkey, a researcher of Celtic history and archeology, describes her presence as such: “The usual characteristics of Sheela-na-gig are 'an ugly, mask-like skull-face with a huge scowling mouth, skeletal ribs, huge genitalia held apart with both hands, and bent legs', offering a fantasy of unlimited sexual license but at the same time a comic reminder of our origins” (Sharkey 8). Other scholars, such as Anthony Weir and James Jerman believe that because the Sheelas are located on churches and grotesque in features, they stand to represent female lust as hideous and sinfully corrupting (Weir and Jerman).

Very few scholars have taken up the question of the Sheela and most books about her are now out of print. However, Lisa Bitel’s *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender in Early Ireland* “comes with an arresting jacket picture of a Sheela-Na-Gig, one of those stone carvings of a woman displaying her genitals that unexpectedly adorn the doors of certain churches” (Leyser 124).

In a book review conducted by Henrietta Leyser, she asserts the following:

Only when we reach the final pages of the book do we discover that, far from being a relic of some Celtic fertility goddess, such figures were in all probability brought to Ireland from France in the wake of the Norman Conquest. Curiously, then, the sheelanagig stands not so much as an emblem of Bitel’s early Ireland but, rather, of the kind of myths she has herself been at pains to dispel through-

out her book, myths, for example, that would present early Ireland as a land of strong women, ‘a Celtic paradise of warrior queens and fairy women’ (Leyser 124-6).

Contrary to Bitel’s views, the problem is not about the expulsion of these myths, it’s about reincorporating their essence into our cultural consciousness. Of course the early Celtic Ireland was not a paradise of women or for women—nor does the Sheela-Na-Gig stand to present that. If the myth symbolizes the divinity inherent in women, it cannot be open, especially sexuality, in the forefront of consciousness in the general community. Such greatness has to be mythologized or *sublimated* in order to contain its own multitudes—the weight, the heaviness of history, the power of imagery can only be cloaked in symbolism. It’s a way to enclose (and yet preserve) the greatness.

Bitel asserts that there was no “golden age” in Celtic Ireland. “According to *Cain Adomnain*, before the advent of Christianity the lot of women in early Ireland was bleak indeed: compelled to do heavy labor, flogged into battle, such women lived as miserable an existence as the workforce of brutal callous men” (Leyser 126). But it is not the reality of women that I am directly concerned with here—but how mythology shapes our understandings of women and how it has been perverted to contain only fragments of the female experience. The problem, again, is in the literal gaps in history and dismissal of the female body.

Bitel’s *Land of Women* seems to be absurdly pragmatic and only views the sacred act of symbolism (and witnessing) with a Marxist, rational eye—lenses, or tools, provided by man in which to view history. The problem with this view is that while it tries to condemn the mystification of women in history, it begins with a problematic question by essentially asking “what is the value” of the thing first. Quite possibly, the flaw in Bitel’s *Land of Women* is that she “has no

interest in looking for some hitherto unsuspected female writer or in searching for some 'authentic' female voice" (Leyser 125). Without this necessary search for the female voice and presence in history, one can never uncover the essence behind spiritual phenomena, figures, and rituals. If there is a female tradition in literature, it is defined by this impulse to express the authenticity of their voices, and it is through this tradition that we can learn and re-learn the past.

Chapter One: Sheela-Na-Gig

Section Two: Religion and Myth

"The prime function of myth is to explain the inexplicable....Explanations of such phenomena are always in terms of deep psychic need" (Sharkey 6)

For every oral transmission-dependent culture, when silencing occurs, the myth is broken. The myth can be passed on not only through language, but also through ritual, that is, involvement with the body. The act of storytelling through ritual is essential to ensure cultural regeneration. "Riddles and sophisticated word-play are a reminder of the origin of all sacred mysteries: Breath, or the Word itself" (Sharkey, 13). Perhaps this is telling of why the Eucharist in Catholicism is so important—it is a repeated act of the body; a ritual that involves not only the Word, but the Body in unity.

The Catholic Church acknowledges only one distinct female presence in its sacred rituals—The Virgin Mary. Yet Mary's voice, like the voice of most women in mythos, has been lost in time and buried in the rubble of patriarchal penmanship. But Mary had a body too, and was first a woman before she was a mother. One cannot discount, or exclude the physical presence of this body. Going back to the image of the Sheela, whether she is a symbol of vulgarity or fecundity, the Sheela-Na-Gig's primal presence points out a larger cultural question: does the problem of interpreting this symbol, and subsequently female myths as a whole, lie in the modern cultural reception of the female body? The Sheela-Na-Gig represents an actual body, a figure of a woman, either haggard or healthy, exaggerated and never understated, but always distinctly female. To cast this off as mere representation, or mere myth, is to subjugate the body itself.

As we've seen, geography also plays a major part in the analysis of spiritual emblems or symbols. According to Sharkey in his *Celtic Mysteries: The Ancient Religion*, "Every sacred spot had its guardian spirit who tended it, observed the daily rites with proper ceremony, and could materialize as cat, bird, or first, whatever form was most pleasing to the goddess—even as a hideous hag or beautiful being, depending on the circumstance or disposition of an intruder or visitor...Such places were womb-openings of the Earth Mother, who was invoked under many different names and aspects" (Sharkey 7).

The presence of the Sheela is not simply the Christian Church's attempt to syncretize pagan symbols into Christian dogma—her presence signifies the Church's embrace of the female figure or possibly the womb-openings of the Earth Mother in the shadow of patriarchy's dominance. Furthermore, her close proximity to signs of water, like wells, denotes her connection to the fecund sea and its power—an archetype we will take up in Chapter Three: *Myths of the Sea & the Feminine Source*.

According to sociologist Wendy Griffin, in modern Goddess worship, women "focus on the differences between the mythic image of a female divinity who creates life alone in an act of parthenogenesis by reaching within her own body in a physical, material act, and that of a transcendent, celibate male divinity who create life with a thought or a word and who is above and apart from his creation" (Griffin 39). Again, in this imagery of "reaching within" oneself, we are reminded of the Sheela-Na-Gig.

There is a general fear or horror attached to the figure of the Sheela-Na-Gig, partially because she may represent the Hag/Crone figure as discussed in Section One: *Celtic Mythos*. The Hag/Crone figure in Celtic mythos provided a cultural reverence and awe mingled with sublime fear of consumption and death. In her Maiden and Mother forms, the Divine Goddess, or Arche-

type, provides life—and in her Crone form, she destroys it. Beauvoir describes the horror attached to Mother Earth in *The Second Sex*: “Mother Earth engulfs the bones of its children within it. Women—the Parcae and Moirai—weave human destiny; but they also cut the threads. In most folk representations, Death is woman, and women mourn the dead because death is their work” (Beauvoir 166). When the origin of the symbol is lost, we see it through a modern lens of vulgarity and stylized sexuality, causing displaced revulsion of the body itself.

Throughout history there have been crossovers of this image of the Life Giver-Destroyer image that is distinctly feminine. “The type of grotesque effigy known as the Sheela-na-gig is a graphic representation of the Celtic goddess of creation and destruction. Common in Irish castles and churches, its blatant sexual nature relates to male-fear fantasies of the devouring mother. This repellent Kali-aspect of the goddess recurs throughout the Indo-European myth and ritual (Sharkey 30). Could the Sheela represent this Mother/Death goddess, similar to that of the Hindi goddess Kali? The power of female goddesses to give life and take it away transpires all over ancient mythology and the presence of the Sheela is no exception.

The Sheela’s actual image—the center of the image is quite obviously her vagina, an exaggerated image that she seems to hold open for the world. Or is it that she is holding open the world itself? The Sheela may or not be a Celtic goddess, but she most definitely represents the birth of something large—and also hints at the death of it, too, by consumption. Maybe it’s through this concept of the Mother figure that the church paid homage to her (think of the Virgin Mary). Possibly the *Ashes to ashes, dust to dust* action in the Christian bible is presided over by a Mother Earth figure, whose body we all emerge from. The reason we no longer *know* her is because we are repelled by this sacred source, this common form, especially when exaggerated, and are left to let the mythos fade in the dusk of history.

The visual focus on her “center” could also be representative of the sacred center of an actual locality or space: "The use of the sacred center underlies its traditional appeal as a regular meeting-place and also a mythical arena where momentous events could be shifted into the ever-present time-scale of the poem and the story" (Sharkey 6). The need for myths, for storytelling, wasn't simply a pastime or novelty to the ancient peoples, but determined the continuity between past and present. The constant metamorphoses of motifs found in Irish tales, coupled with the “easy intermingling of physical and supernatural realms, made the world of the Celtic imagination tangible through thousands of years of story-telling” (Sharkey 6) Without them, the historicity of rituals, beliefs, practices, and understandings of both the natural and spiritual world were lost.

But why is the meaning of the Sheela up for so much debate? How is she such an anomaly? To understand why, we must go back in time to examine ancient Ireland. The Celts rarely, if at all, transcribed their history into the written word; they conveyed their stories through the spoken word. Ancient Ireland had a heavy reliance on the Bard figure and "Oral transmission was an entertaining and well-perfected method of imparting all the nuances of important events within the life of the tribe... Woven into the tales, for easy rendition and remembering, were the ritual themes that revolved around the gods: the act of naming, the oracle-stone that screamed during the inauguration of a new king, the divine twins, and the heroic warrior" (Sharkey 6). With the coming of Christianity, this reliance on oral transmission proved faulty and the story of the Sheela and other powerful symbols were lost in the landslide of female history.

Through the diminishing of oral tradition, not only is the Sheela-Na-Gig's true meanings and origins lost, but a severance of cultural and spiritual history occurs as well. Continuity with the past is broken, which leads to gaps in history and a silencing of historical voices.

Chapter Two: Representation

Section One: Memory, Witnessing, and Silencing

Mythology contains the residue of our cultural trauma, particularly the residue of women's history. A reinterpretation of this mythology is essential, yes—but are we looking in the right spaces? I use the word “spaces” intentionally here to signify the gaps in language, the omissions. But even within the mythos themselves, there is an uncanny usage of severance in the female body via language. We can see this literal severance most prominently in the myth of Philomela, who had her tongue cut out by her sister's husband King Tereus because of her defiant speech against him raping and defiling her. Her destruction, decay, defilement, or whatever word you wish to supplant in this place, is almost always in tandem with a disconnection to language, or her voice.

When one does not have the narrative means (in this case, Philomela's literal tongue) to tell one's story, a type of trauma can emerge in regards to self-identity. According to Dr. Dori Laub, as deduced from his Holocaust studies, trauma survivors need to not only “survive so that they could tell their stories...they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell* and thus come to *know* one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life” (Laub 63). This need to *tell* one's story comes in tandem with validating one's own experience. It is only through language, that is, a coherent narrative language, that one can achieve this effective *telling* and therefore *knowing*.

In the case of a severance of language, or a literal disconnect between one's narrative and the ability to transcribe it, a person can experience acute trauma. Those who do not tell their sto-

ry “become victims of a distorted memory...which causes an endless struggle with and over a delusion” (Laub 64). Could this be the case for women who do not know their own historicity?

Among the most famous saying in the ancient Greek world were those words scribed on the temple of Apollo at Delphi: "Know thyself." In Greece's "Golden Age" of philosophical speculation, scientific discovery, architectural marvels, and literature treasures, this philosophical virtue was held in the highest esteem. To know oneself requires *language*, a medium of exchange—and when this continuity is severed, one is left damaged. “The ‘not telling’ of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny. The events become more and more distorted in their silent retention and pervasively invade and contaminate the survivor’s daily life” (Laub 64). This ultimately leads to the death of the self, “for when one’s history is abolished, one’s identity ceases to exist as well” (Laub 67).

When trauma occurs— or in this case, the severance of language and erasure of one’s own identity— under extreme conditions, memories can be displaced separately in the brain. Regular memories associated with certain events cannot be integrated into the brain’s existing schemas and are thus “dissociated from conscious awareness and voluntary control” (Janet, 1889, 1919-25). The displaced fragments are in turn re-enacted, or acted out, in the form of repetitive behaviors without conscious effort. This kind of trauma is particularly evident in victims of rape and abuse, where the frightening experience haunts the victim and they are left with destructive behavioral patterns due to displaced memories.

Part of the recovery process for victims of trauma is the reintegration of memory into normal brain schemas. It is through storytelling and the act of remembering that one can re-bridge the continuity with the “real” past. This is why there is a need for an “other” to be present in the witnessing process or storytelling—hence the need to bear witness—and for this, language

is required. A coherent structural narrative language is essential for this transmission and in turn, recovery (of the past).

But one must also be careful not to be a “false witness” to this storytelling—a term used by Robert Jay Lifton in his work in memory studies. False witnessing contributes to a type of collective delusion, where culture is literally shaped by misinterpretations of the past. This can be said of women’s history as well, for the weight of patriarchy has deformed and morphed history itself—another reason why women writers in the 1970s took up their pens to rework myths. If storytelling is vital to our connection with the past, myths are the mediums in which to convey these past experiences. At the same time, “myths also lose their vitality when they fail to reinforce the link between the self and the experience world. Sometimes in times of crisis, a new mythos is created that speaks to the revitalized or faded myth...the new myth and its symbols come into immediate conflict with existing social institutions and authority” (Griffin 39). The conflict of subjective history embedded in existing memory schemas gives rise to change and reintegration of basic knowledge of the world.

These ideas of trauma and severance of language can be further used to analyze female sexuality. Female sexual initiation within the myth “involves a terrifying separation from the female community and grotesque submission to male force so the marriage of death becomes a symbol of daemonic male peer which simultaneously effects the destruction of the girl and the desecration of nature” (Gubar 305). When looking at the body in particular, the literal disconnect of woman from her tongue is evident in mythology. And yet a subtler severance of language comes creeping up in these myths as well—a separation from the community of other women because of the interruption of man. The social fabric of female-hood is displaced, or literally torn.

Chapter Two: Representation

Section Two: The Body in Modern Art

“The sun moves and now the sharp images / behind the shades are gone. Everything is / dissolved, amorphous.”³

The Fertile Goddess at the Brooklyn Museum of Art: Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* (1974-1979)

The exhibition by Judy Chicago, entitled “The Fertile Goddess” at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, includes nine ancient female figurines and a wall map, which shows the geographic distribution of where these figurines have been found around the globe. Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* (1974-1979) “emerged as the most visible icon of this trend in early feminist art and is filled with such imagery, notably the vulvar forms Chicago used for the plates that symbolize each of the women at the table” (Rizvi and Vali 143-5). These vulvar symbols, like that of the Sheela-Na-Gig, were the core imagery found in the exhibition. Chicago’s exhibit denotes a historic trend in modern art: “While some work [represented] specific Goddesses and their associated myths and traditions, artists were increasingly drawn towards developing an essential female iconography that transcended temporal and cultural difference, and championed increasingly abstract and stylized representations of female bodies and, specifically, female genitalia.”

“Vaginal forms and ‘central core’ imagery, a term Chicago developed, were presented as feminist alternatives to the phallic symbols that dominated Western art history, celebrating the specificity of women’s bodies and challenging the traditional suppression of images of female genitalia” (Rizvi and Vali 143-5). It is perhaps through this modern re-interpretation of the vul-

³ Taylor, Judith. "Persephone." *Poetry* 165.6 (1995): p. 321. Print.

var symbologies that we can better understand their original presence in ancient culture. Perhaps the attempt to “celebrate the specificity of women’s bodies” was the case in ancient Ireland and Europe, while paying homage to the Mother Earth/Source/Divine. A kind of harmony emerged between the Goddess figure and nature in most ancient cultures and this symbiotic relationship has been captured in myths, including the myth of Demeter and Persephone. “The matriarchal culture that venerated [the Goddess] was thought to be...an ecological utopia very much in tune with the counterculture zeitgeist of the period” (Rizvi and Vali 143-145). This kind of harmony is recreated via ritual by certain practitioners of modern feminist witchcraft. According to Dr. Griffin, whose research we shall discuss later on in Section Three, she asserts that “feminist witchcraft sees women’s oppression and environmental abuse, which they argue are intimately linked, as firmly rooted in patriarchal religions” (Griffin 39).

What of the reception and depiction of the female form in modern culture? “For feminist artists in the United States, the 1970s were undoubtedly a unique time, a period categorized by the reclaiming and reframing of ideals of form and concept...Feminist artists in the early part of the decade mined history for ancient powerful female forms that could counter and supplant the oppressive representations commonly found in Western art’s historical tradition.” The methodology of looking at history through binaries, however, innately contains a hierarchy—one that reverts the Goddess over the God—and has been critiqued by some because it inverts “traditional hierarchies” and uses the same “epistemological framework of polar opposites and rigid gender roles that defined patriarchy” in the first place. Rather than reconstructing our own lens of the world, we’re reverting back to using the incomplete and clumsy tools, with which patriarchy has provided us.

Some have also called this wave of art “highly stylized female forms that either emphasize or reduce to abstraction the breasts, bellies, and thighs.’ In this context, these figurines are read as (sexed) females over and beyond anything else, thus reducing the histories of the contexts within which they were found, the complexity of gender and politics of representation, and the continued development of contemporary theory in archeology to nothing more than a footnote” (Rizvi and Vali 143-145). But sometimes a single footnote can be greater than an entire book; it can be said that women’s scholarship and writing has been nothing more than a footnote in the book of mankind. The need to embrace diversity has always been apparent in women’s studies and occasionally this presents a problem when analyzing archeological finds through our modern lens: “Dealing with the Goddess movement is awkward for archeologists who are committed to multivocality and notions of shared heritages. Promoters of equal access to the past, pluralism in the past, and those committed to providing alternative readings of the past, should embrace such Goddess groups and their interpretations—however, this is not the case.” Through embracing pluralism of the past and multivocality in history, we can better understand the place of the Sheela-Na-Gig and other figures, without reducing them to mere fertility symbols.

One thing this re-examination of ancient ‘goddess’ symbols does is push these esoteric symbols into the limelight and out of the buried rubble of academics’ desks: “By incorporating archeological imagery into 1970s icons of feminist power, artists such as Chicago moved the power of interpretive archeological text into the realm of art thus moving it outside the inscriptive universes of academic literature into the broader public sphere.” This push to bring feminist discourse of mythology into the public sphere is essential for reinterpretation of history as a whole.

Chapter Two: Representation

Section Three: Feminist Witchcraft and the Embodied Goddess

Over the course of 5 years, Dr. Griffin studied the rituals and mythology surrounding two particular Goddess Worship groups: one group, a radical feminist coven who call themselves Redwood Moon, and another more loosely defined group who call themselves “Womancircle.” Her work undertakes the cultural mystery surrounding modern goddess worship in the United States. By closely following the activities of these two groups, Dr. Griffin concludes that women in the Goddess movement “seek to shape a new cultural ethos...and through the conscious construction and enactment of myth, they seek a new cultural understanding and vision that will reconnect and, in the Weberian sense, ‘re-enchant’ the world” (Griffin 48).

Within her research, published in 1995, Dr. Griffin sought to uncover a particular *experience* of the cultural disparity found in spirituality and the body: “As in many other New Religious Movements, the relationship between the spiritual and the material is being redefined, but in the Goddess movement the material is firmly rooted in the female body.” Griffin’s essay uses a “phenomenological approach and descriptive analysis to demonstrate how those who practice feminist witchcraft and/or participate in ‘goddess ritual’ use consciously constructed mythopoetic images in religious ritual to create a framework of meaning which seeks to define a new ethos. This ethos is intended to ‘revision’ power, authority, sexuality, and social relations.” Griffin posits that both Goddess groups assert the following:

As in feminist witchcraft, the spiritual focus is on an autonomous female divinity and the creation of powerful female images, and the group holds rituals to celebrate the seasons. Many women in

the Goddess movement practice witchcraft and magic in a manner similar to Dianics and neopagans, although many of them tend not to call themselves witches and to prefer the word ‘spirituality’ to ‘religion’... They differ from most other neopagans in their feminist analysis, political activism, and in that most of them acknowledge only an autonomous female principal and reject the concept of male divinity (Griffin 37).

While attending a ritualistic ceremony held by one of the groups, Griffin witnessed a theatrical reenactment of the female trinity—that is the Mother, Maiden, and Crone figures. Interestingly, the Maiden figure was represented by the Virgin Mary, who came out on stage dressed in her usual garb of blue and white robes. Griffin notes the following:

As [Mary] circled the altar, her robes swirling gently about her ankles, Mary smiled and said she too was the Goddess and that “being a mother of a child was not all that *any* female was, no matter how important the particular child might be. The Church Fathers and their artists always dress me in blue and white. What they never tell you is that under my robes I wear a red petticoat,” and she lifted up her draped to her knees, revealing a bright red petticoat with flounces! People laughed (22 December 1990).

The revealing of the red petticoat shows that Mary does in fact have a body and life blood. She is not simply a vessel or a womb, but is a woman with menstrual blood and sexual

energy. She is not simply a role or an abstract representation, but first and foremost, she is an actual woman. “The small gesture of raising her robe was intended to uncover a new Virgin Mary. Her red petticoat was a metaphor that served to establish a link between the *female* body and the divine, in other words, between the material and the spiritual.” (Griffin 44). Through this small act of revealing a red petticoat, the Virgin Mary recaptures her autonomy, sexuality, and divinity.

The figure of the Crone, present during several rituals, was represented by ancient Goddess figures, including Hecate, Lilith, and Isis. “In claiming their cronehood, announcing their matrilineage, and declaring themselves valuable, these women shattered the stereotypes of aging females, both for themselves and those attending...[the Crone figure] could be respected and valued by her community, an old age in which she could be serious, playful, sexual, wise, powerful, political, and humorous, should she so choose. In other words, the image is one of a woman who is old *and* whole” (Griffin 45).

The maiden figure was normally represented by Diana, the Goddess of the Hunt, and also known as the Lady of the Wild Things. During her ceremonies, which normally involved moon worship, menstruating women were praised and singled out as “special.” Blood has been regarded as sacred in many ancient cultures, within the Mayan traditions, and there is a power within the lifeblood. Simone de Beauvoir cites that blood is “more imbued with the mysterious manna that is both life and death” (Beauvoir 169). “Menstrual blood embodied the essence of femininity, which is why its flow endangers woman herself, whose manna is thus materialized” (Beauvoir 169). Diana was a powerful figure to these feminist witches in that, although she was not a virgin, she was not necessarily sexually inactive—simply autonomous and independent from her lovers. All three of these figures—the Virgin, Maiden, and Crone—presented a “physical mani-

festation of the connection between the material and the spiritual and then went on to not only liberate female sexuality from concepts of sin, but actually celebrate the erotic” (Griffin 46).

This kind of contemporary need for study of early female mythos and the questions of the sacred body is apparent in virtually every hub of intellectual debate—just in a silent way. Questions of the body are on the tips of everyone’s tongues— it is the unspoken hum at dinner parties, it is the unsaid dialogue in the meeting room, and it is hidden within a curt glance in the coffee room. This constant questioning and censoring of the human body—even through the subtle squint of an eye—we cannot seem to get around. In all our education, our civilized grandeur, all of our evolution, we still can’t help but judge others with each eyelash stroke. The material aspect of life—that thing you’re not supposed to talk about—the body, is always in question. The material and the spiritual—go ahead, flip a coin—pick a side.

Chapter Three: Myths of the Sea & the Feminine Source

Section One: Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the Wreck"

“Like Persephone in the realm of death, the poet initially inhabits a scarred and silent desert where the man’s “dry heat feels like power” and it is not until she has retraced her steps back to her own origins that she can remember this man again and feel that his body “is no longer/ the body of a god/ or anything with power over [her] life.”⁴

In Adrienne Rich’s “Diving into the Wreck,” the speaker does not go on a journey out into the desert, or space, or into the forest—she goes into the sea. She knows that she will have to go *down* to uncover the mysteries of herself and history. She is not only looking to uncover her sexuality, but also her sacred history—her own divinity, which has also been pushed down within herself. We only have certain “clumsy” man-made objects to bring us back down to these depths—depths from which are, in effect, our source.

The retracing of steps to find one’s origins is true of the beginnings of all myths—this is not just a singular woman’s journey. The attempt to explain the inexplicable in the form of symbols is a trademark of mankind. It exemplifies a need to sublimate what is awe-inspiring. Just as Jesus Christ spoke in parables to his disciples and the public, the presence of these stories amplifies this deep rooted need to understand the unity of the world through symbology. The sacred teachings of the universe cannot be understood in their totality through overt language or even scientific findings—hence the reason why poetry and the arts is a necessary medium for sublimation.

⁴ Gubar, Susan. "Mother, Maiden and the Marriage of Death: Woman Writers and an Ancient Myth." *Women's Studies* 6.3 (1979): 301. Print.

According to Gubar, “Rich, like so many women writers, uses the images of ancient myth to map her way back to the original scene to discover ‘the thing itself and not the myth.’ She enacts there a ritual that makes the old stories obsolete. Emerging as a new species, she echoes H.D. in her insistence for new volumes with blank pages as she now carries back with her “a book of myths / in which / our names do not appear” (Gubar 313).

This is about searching for the “thing itself” and not the essence of the thing. This wreck of history, women’s history can only be found when one is armed with simple tools, tools which may include a “book of myths,” as a guide of sorts, in which “our names do not appear.” The speaker is diving down to find this wreckage of history, armored in clumsy rubber and flippers, an extension of her body that is not her own, but one which she must don in order to survive at such depths.

The merman seen near the wreck, alongside the dark haired mermaid, is already equipped with his armor. He can survive because of this, especially in a territory that is not *his* own—which is the Source, the Sea, the Feminine. Unity can only occur at the sight of the wreckage, in communion with the Source, when the speaker no longer feels the glaring differences of gender, “I am she: I am he.”

Language is the thread of guidance into the known world, it is how we come to know ourselves. Armed with her diving accouterment, the speaker also arms herself with language: “The words are purposes. / The words are maps.” Without this “map” we are purposeless and lost. Language is the thread that keeps continuity with the past and present. Words are the bridge between the Spiritual and Physical. This image echoes that of John Chapter 1, speaking of Christ, the Savior of Mankind in Christianity: “1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with

God, and the Word was God. 2 The same was in the beginning with God.”⁵ The Word saves human beings from the ultimate destruction and separation from God. It is the Word that brings us back to the Source.

But with this particular journey “it is easy to forget / what I came for.” The act of uncovering the mythology of women, to get to the actual thing itself and not simply the repetitive images history gives us, one can get lost. How can one compare the findings, in this strange natural world, with that of the image above, in the “real world”? The inverted images of these opposing but complementary worlds can blind and distort—hence the need for a separate lens, or a powerful “mask” to shield oneself and impose clarity.

⁵ King James Version: John Chapter 1

Chapter Three: Myths of the Sea & the Feminine Source

Section Two: Water Source, River Mother

Rivers have historically been equated with the feminine and some have even been named after goddesses of antiquity. “The Marne had its name from the Matronae, the three Divine Mothers, and the Seine from Sequana, goddess of its source...In Britain, the Severn was named after Sabrina, and the Clyde after the goddess Clota, Divine Cleanser, recalling legends of the 'Hag of the Ford'--a goddess of death usually encountered by the doomed hero who knows the end is near when he sees her washing his blood-stained clothes” (Sharkey 7). This “naming” effectively captures the importance of goddess culture in the ancient world, while simultaneously paying homage to women’s connection with nature.

One comes from the source and goes back to the source. In ancient cultures, both the Sea and the womb were seen as the “source,” but in modern culture this symbology has been displaced, or rather repressed. To repress literally means to push down—and this imagery of the body as sacred, the Divine womb, has been pushed down in our culture so that very few fragments of its meaning remain. “Carrying the clumsy equipment of her culture—a book of myths, a camera, a knife, body-armor, flippers, and a mask—Rich finally escapes the dying city to enter the life-giving sea. Here, because ‘the sea is not a question of power,’ she has to learn how ‘to turn [her] body without force’ ” (Gubar 312).

The circularity of this living expression of the Earth/River Mother has been lost to patriarchal allegories. “[The speaker in Rich’s poem] is dead and somehow she must awaken herself. This can only be accomplished by escaping man and the society he has created” (Gubar 311). Birth, death, and resurrection has now taken the place of the circularity inherent in all things—but restricted to one man. If we hold onto every other dogma in the Judeo-Christian bible, why

can we not hold on to the quote: “He replied to him, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ Pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother’.”⁶

If we are all children of God and subsequently divine ourselves, why do we lay prostrate in reverence for one man only? What of our own Divinity and sacredness? Assuming one does the work of God, which is Love, we are creators in our own right, Divine creatures, taking Jesus’ quote a step further. This possibility for both creation and destruction within ourselves has been repressed throughout the centuries, facilitated further by mythos that were either buried with time or scratched upon until the core message is lost to us.

In modern goddess worship, according to sociologist Dr. Griffin, “Their concept of the trinity, the dynamic cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth, as represented by the Goddess’ three aspects Maiden, Mother, and Crone, reflects and reinforces their belief in connection and immanence...The Triple Goddess is a metaphor that supports cyclical time, like the seasons” (Griffin 40). Turning the gaze to the circularity apparent in life and death cycles, traditionally, the figure of the Divine Female holds both the power to create and destroy. The symbology of the Holy Trinity almost exclusively refers to the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Rarely does one hear of the “Other” Trinity: The Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone. This cyclical unity is not simply representative of the phases of physical life, but it also carries out an extensive symbology of life and death circles which are inherently divine.

⁶ Matthew 12:46-50 (New International Version)

Chapter Three: Myths of the Sea & The Feminine Source

Section Three: Mermaids and Sirens

Going back to the consequences of female separation from the community and nature, let us turn our gaze to another modern mythological figure. We can see the traumatizing effects of separation from nature and loss of female agency in the Little Mermaid myth. In the 1989 Disney rendition of the Hans Christian Anderson tale, the little mermaid Ariel loses her wholeness by departing from her natural realm and into the commercialized realm of humans. Upon striking a deal with the Sea Witch, “the mermaid [gave up] up her voice, with which she sang beautifully beneath the waves” (Sax 51). Boria Sax further describes the Little Mermaid’s loss of voice and agency: “She is domesticated, brought into the human realm. First, the loss of her voice signals the declining seductive power of the mermaid and, for that matter, the sea” (Sax 51). Moreover, “the loss of the mermaid’s voice accompanies that of her fish tail, the bestial element that makes her distinct from human beings” (Sax 52). In effect, the physical mirrors the psychological—the changing or taming of the natural body effectively strips away her connection to the natural world (the sea) and she is left without language.

Simone de Beauvoir elegantly shows the uncanny effect the sea had on men throughout history: “For the sailor, the sea is a dangerous woman, perfidious and difficult to conquer but that he cherishes by dint of taming it. Proud, rebellious, virginal, and wicked, the mountain is woman for the mountain climber who wants to take it, even at risk of life. It is often said that these comparisons manifest sexual sublimation; rather, they express an affinity between woman and the elements as primal as sexuality itself” (Beauvoir 175).

The Sea has been personified as feminine for thousands of years in cultures across the globe. The number of water Goddesses and nymphs can attest to this, among fertility and womb

references. “[The sea] impressed early people as an endless fertile womb, from which new forms of life constantly emerged. The variety of life within the ocean is far greater than that on land, and it is still far less thoroughly explored” (Sax 44). According to John Sharkey, “The river or stream is a living expression of the Earth Mother, but this does not in itself make the waters sacred. It is a special combination of different mineral, vegetable and ethereal properties, emanating from certain springs at particular times of day or of the lunar phase, that create the regenerative powers...The recognition of water as the first principle and source of all life to those who move over the land, dependent on its bounty for food and sustenance, is reflected in the dedication of the main river sources of Western Europe as sanctuaries to the Celtic fertility goddess” (Sharkey 7).

The Sea itself, the Mermaid’s natural home, has a presence and can be seen as a life origin for all things: a nurturing first womb of sorts. The little mermaid’s separation from her life source denotes a severance of communication with the whole, the Source, or the first mother—not simply a loss of individual voice.

Separation from this womb-mother is necessary to facilitate patriarchy—for the womb-mother is a “figure of primeval nature, identified with the sea, and energy of the settled life of civilization” (Sax 49). She upsets, she roars, she creates and destroys. The Sea represents chaos and disrupts civilized life; hence the need to separate the woman from this Source and sever her ties with nature. Simone de Beauvoir poetically describes this opposition: “Both ally and enemy, it appears as the dark chaos from which life springs forth, as this very life, and as the beyond it reaches for: woman embodies nature as Mother, Spouse, and Idea; these figures are sometimes confounded and sometimes in opposition, and each has a double face” (Beauvoir 163).

Like in Dove's interpretation of the Persephone myth, there is a silencing that occurs in the female which happens at the moment of separation from the natural world. The destruction of the female voice is necessary for survival in the male-centered realm. Sirens in mythology are a part of this primeval natural world, because they "lure young man away from the patriarchal world of the ship, from moral obligations and masculine companionship. He leaves the realm of civilization and enters that of nature" (Sax 44).

Mirroring the historic reception of women, "feelings towards these [mythical] figures swing between extremes of fear, admiration, contempt, and worship" (Sax 50). "Carrying the analogy a bit further, we might say that the mermaid was, for mariners, a sort of pagan equivalent of Mary, a figure of primal feminine powers" (Sax 46). The mermaid figure, or any mystical feminine creature for that matter, is also "a reflection, an inverted image, of those on board the ship," or more precisely, those who reside in the patriarchal world of civilization.

Even the Birth of Venus, or Aphrodite, denotes the fertility of the sea. Her literal conception, according to Greek mythology, begins with the sperm from the castrated Uranus. The fecundity of the Mother Sea not only gives birth to new life forms, but Divine beings as well. When she emerges from the fertile waters of her mother, she has a woman's body and is naked. Her overt sexuality is apparent at the onset of her birth, she is, in effect, "sexed" from the beginning. Perhaps this is the reason why Goddess worship has been thwarted, because it cannot be separated from the body. It is precisely this reasoning that lends the following: Goddess culture has been buried because of a revolt against the female body.

This is the only way patriarchy can survive—is to sever the female tongue and displace the body.

Chapter Three: Myths of the Sea & the Feminine Source

Section Four: Being vs. Non-Being

As we've seen, many female intellectuals and writers have taken up the myth of Demeter and Persephone in their work. "Yet, ironically, few other myths have so attracted women writers. Feminists like de Beauvoir condemn the myth for perpetuating destructive stereotypes of female passivity and masochism, but women writers of very different sensibilities have used the myth in quite divergent ways to explore their attitudes towards their gender."⁷ For instance, when Gubar analyses Mary Shelley's play *Proserpine*, she notes an alarming connection between the rape scene, silence, and absence: "Interestingly enough, the abduction and rape of Proserpine occurs in the silence between acts: not only are the iron-hoofed steeds, the black car and the spear of Hades too terrible and fearful to represent; the power of the masculine God is directly antithetical to the energy of the feminine Goddess—his is an aggressive power to destroy, not a nurturing ability to create. Because he reigns over non-being, his non-appearance is fitting" (Gubar 304). By Shelley *not including* the physical aspects of the rape scene in *Proserpine*, she symbolizes the silencing aspect of rape, the gravity of severance from the female community, and Hades reign over both the physical and spiritual world. Despite his terror, duality must be present for life to exist, hence the need for the non-being, "masculine" God found in most world religions. We've simply omitted the Mother, or Physical Presence, of the Goddess figure in our culture and settled on the autonomous Father.

⁷ Gubar, Susan. "Mother, Maiden and the Marriage of Death: Woman Writers and an Ancient Myth." *Women's Studies* 6.3 (1979): 301. Print.

Turning back to images of the sea, both the ship and the church (in most cultures) are regarded as feminine. They are vessels to carry the body into the spiritual realm and both are places where the spirit can transcend the body. “Simply to embark on a voyage was, therefore, to enter the feminine world, to place oneself at the mercy of unknown powers. The mermaid embodied the wonder and terror of the sea, which drew the sailors to their doom. The bestial part of the mermaid was an extension of her femininity” (Sax 45). If the problem belongs to the body, or in this case, the mermaid’s bestial physical quality, the body itself is the thing in question. A hierarchy is inherently set into place, one of the *spiritual over the body*, and presumes a need for a non-being entity as a supreme God-head, rather than a balanced duality or symbiotic relationship between the God and Goddess—hence her omission.

The God figure, who presides over the superior spiritual realm is uniquely male and *does not have a body*, therefore it is fitting that He is concerned with the spiritual. The Goddess figure *does have a body* and not only presides over the physical, but the spiritual as well. The Goddess figure cannot be separated from Her body, which contains the world’s womb, the source of all things, which we have already examined through the figure of the Sheela-Na-Gig.

Gubar cites both Shelly and Browning when looking further into this duality; for them, “the myth of Demeter in exploring how helpless women feel in their confrontations with men. At the same time, the myth implies that the very might of man is his own punishment” (Gubar 305). Therefore the problem of the body isn’t confined to the experience of woman, but also man. His attachment to the physical as a destroyer, especially of nature, leads to his own punishment in circumstance. Simone de Beauvoir also cites this opposition between man and nature in *The Second Sex*: “nature inspires ambivalent feelings in man, as has been seen. he exploits it, but it crushes him; he is born from and dies in it; it is the source of his being and the kingdom he bends

to his will; it is a material envelope in which the soul is held prisoner, and it is the supreme reality; it is contingency and idea, finitude and totality; it is that which opposes Spirit and himself” (Beauvoir 163).

This leads one to an image of an inverted Creation Myth in Genesis—it was not Eve’s action in consorting with nature, but Adam’s interference with Eve and her experience of nature that leads to the Fall. The “gold-ripe garden” was lost by this interference of man with woman in her natural state. “As Nancy Willard tells us in her poem, ‘The Animals Welcome Persephone,’ ‘Only man thinks he can live/ forever’ ” (Gubar 305). Man faces himself in nature and tries to destroy it, that which is natural in himself in order to obtain immortality. “But it cannot satisfy him...he possesses it only in consuming it, that is, in destroying it” (Beauvoir 159). That is, within the confines of patriarchal culture, man must desecrate and destroy nature in order to not be consumed by it.

According to Sharkey, “no matter how extraordinary the deities were, [in Celtic mythos] they were still subject to the rhythms of this life and the demands of a particular locale” (Sharkey 6). This echoes modern Christianity’s insistence that God becomes man, or more specifically takes on a human body in the figure of Jesus Christ. The gods were subjected to the physical realities and limitations, and were at the mercy of the elements—which were presided over by female deities—water being just one of the powerful forces governed by a female presence.

When these mythological figures or presences live on as allegory, something else strange occurs—instead of excluding them from modern culture completely, they are reduced to sexualized, commercialized objects. The mermaid is again another great example of this sexualization of mythological figures, including Venus, where her presence enters into a state of “advertising and as kitsch...As with the mermaid, the female sexuality that is promulgated by the mass media

is intensified by identification with animals. The women of *Playboy* are called ‘bunnies’, while those of *Penthouse* are ‘pets’. Their sexuality is supposedly free and easy, yet to know them is impossible” (Sax 52).

Greek and Roman gods and goddesses became allegorical in nature and lived on as such after they “lost their visceral reality for people” (Sax 52). This may be a testament to why a powerful image such as the Sheela-Na-Gig in Ireland is reduced to mere speculation. This transition between the end of both the physical and spiritual beginnings as rooted in nature and the beginnings of Christianity marks a shift in consciousness towards not only the body, but that of nature. Mother Nature is undermined by an ephemeral, bodiless Divinity. This bodiless Divinity, however, uses signs of the Trinity, which were reverted from that of the Mother, Maiden, and Crone to the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Conclusion: A Call to Bear Witness

The Need for Myths and Their Re-assimilation into Cultural Consciousness

“What ultimately matters in all processes of witnessing, spasmodic and continuous, conscious and unconscious, is not simply the information, the establishment of the facts, but the experience itself of *living through testimony, of giving testimony*” (Laub 70).

Culturally, we exhibit a need to destroy the agency of women, which in turn leaves no room for the Divine Female body. “Mythos, then, may be partially understood as a cultural vision of the world, one which ‘links the individual self to the larger morphological structure’ of society. If not reinforced through the regular performance of religious ritual, myths run the danger of being forgotten or reduced to ‘mere’ literature or art” (Griffin 39).

Journeying through these symbols and the loss of agency in women, I have found that the most direct way to assuage the gap in "re-enchanting" or "re-visioning" mythology is public education. People speak very generally in these terms of public education, but in the age of technology, in which we are most certainly directly seated, this subtle reform of information dispersion is possible.

One of the most widely used and direct, publicly accessible forums for obtaining information is Wikipedia. In the mist of obtaining sources and information for this essay, I have encountered a disparity in the rhetoric of wide spread mythology. The symbols of agency, the body, divinity, and circularity have been lost not only in the myth itself, but in its modern renditions and interpretations. Certain modern artists have taken up the task of re-presenting ancient my-

thology in new forms (such as Naomi Iizuka's *Polaroid Stories*, a dramatic urban adaptation of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*) but again, this kind of playwriting and access to performance may seem esoteric to some. It is for this reason that I turn to Wikipedia—the most immediate public forum for accessible information.

I challenge new scholars, feminists, writers, poets, sociologists, etc. to revise/reinterpret/and re-enchant the contemporary versions of history that we have statically laid out for public consumption. By re-writing this mythology according to the essence of female power and community, we can subvert the notions of hierarchy in dualities and write them according to the wholeness they originally attempted to capture. The wholeness of nature, the oneness of the body with not only the earth, but the universe itself; the prevalence of the "female" notions of divinity and not simply blindly accept the Judeo-Christian version of the trinity; to show through myths the female autonomy necessary for creation, birth, death, and yes—rebirth.

As writers, we have a responsibility to those who've gone before us and we must pay homage to the past. "The only way one can feel right or justified in reconstituting oneself and going on living with some vitality is to carry through one's responsibility to the dead" (Lifton 138) Writers have the option, as educated connoisseurs of the intimacies of life, to literally go into the "public mind" of the internet and chisel away at it. The sharp edges of patriarchy can be sanded down with the lens of the divine feminine, and history always beckons to be rewritten.

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