Reading the Postcolonial Allegory in Beth Yahp's *The Crocodile Fury*: Censored Subjects, Ambivalent Spaces, and Transformative Bodies.

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I

Ambivalence. Difference.

The postcolonial Other has always been located under the sign of difference, in contrast to the colonizer/self reflected in the master narratives of imperial discourse. Under this sign, the postcolonial Other "reads" and "writes back" to the Empire, mobilising new modes of resistance against imperial discourse through its alterity. Yet the sign of "difference" is at the same time invested with ambivalence, since it is also a permanent reminder of marginality, its Other-ness. In "Reading for Resistance in Post-Colonial Literature" (1989), Stephen Slemon observes that the English literatures produced by the Commonwealth are defined by the contradictions inherent in the terms "New" and "Other." Even as we assert our difference under the label of "New" literatures, he argues, we are "already constituted within institutional and generic constraints whose work it is to package and displace the counter-discursive force of both our literary and our critical texts under a sign of secondariness, derivation, simulacrum, or mimicry" (p. 100). New. Other. Both terms play on what Slemon calls the sign of "paradoxical doubleness or ambivalence" since they reflect the conflicting position occupied by the subject, "whose institutional subjectivity is interpellated by a double sign of contiguity (our filial `newness') and rupture (our disjunctional alterity)" (p. 112, 100).

What has drawn me to Slemon's argument is his suggestion of "paradoxical doubleness or ambivalence," for I have observed this sign dominating the textual representations of self-censorship in the novel *The Crocodile Fury* (CF), by Malaysian writer Beth Yahp, wherein recurring patterns and doubling motifs indicate an allegorical structure at work in the text. Operating through subterranean ellipses and embodied silences, this ambivalence can be seen in the double-edged images of gain and loss that underpin the narratives of censorship, trauma, marginality and loss experienced by

gendered subjects. As Slemon says, "this ambivalence can itself serve as an enabling mechanism, for it names a space in which another kind of methodological `history' might be written" (p. 107). This enablement is also "one whose figural possibilities always hang upon the already socialised investments of the historical apparatuses of textual power" (p. 113).[1]

This essay considers the implications of Slemon's "paradoxical doubleness" in the reading of censorship as a power discourse, and how its ambivalence can enable the naming of a space where allegorical revisions of the censored subject, as well as its transformation, can take place. As markers of the temporal and spatial discontinuities experienced in the performative space, the recurring censored spaces in the allegorical structure represent the sites where fragmented and ambivalent subjectivities — in the form of unvoiced or suppressed thoughts, painful silences, secret feelings, and unspeakable memories — linger and dwell. However, these nebulous, undetermined spaces also point to ongoing processes within the subjectivity, which assimilate and construct meaning; the subtle internal changes are an indication of the subject's potential for transformation. In other words, censorship as a power discourse is neither absolute nor stable [2]; there are underlying fissures and cracks in the discourse through which women's will and agency escape. These are the fragmented and ambivalent spaces where hegemonic power lines have been fractured by the many possible "self-representations of individual women and men as engendered subjects" (Moore p. 56).

The term "censored subject" signifies the conditions of powerlessness and exclusion experienced by the gendered subject — the nameless and featureless protagonist, whom the readers only know as "I" in CF — as she inhabits the periphery of her world order. Although we hear her voice, we have no definitive picture of her. The protagonist's featurelessness acts as a metaphorical blank page that is inscribed with the stories told by her grandmother, mother, the bully, and other characters. Each story involves the formation of "I," her being, and her perception of life. The protagonist's voice thus functions only to narrate the stories of other characters, while her own story goes unspoken. Demarcated by significations that are not even hers, the protagonist is thus "emptied" of meaning; she is effectively censored. Not only is "I" censored within the discourse, but the stories told by "I" also revolve around the repeated experiences

with marginality, exclusion and loss — which are represented by textual ellipses and silences — in her multilayered narratives. However, it is my contention that these repetitive structures are deconstructed by the very same "empty" forms in which they appear. I believe that these voids point to hidden and ambivalent subjective states that can escape cognition, and as such, the censored subject may still have the potential to undermine circumscription. Although the censored subject is already inscribed under the ruling sign, I argue that the effects of the discourse should not be taken as conclusive, as the voids and silences inhabited by the subject should also be considered as "blank" sites that await the redeployment of different, "other" meanings. There is then, the element of alterity, or "doubleness," operating in the recurring gaps of the narrative structure, where absence paradoxically entails presence at the same time, and where loss is intertwined with gain. It is thus pertinent that I explore the double-edged nuances of these textual silences and voids, for it is the very ambivalence of their vacancy that serves as an enabling space of transformation for the censored subject.[3]

In CF, the allegorical framework of the narrative provides the key to understanding the relationship between the recurring processes of self-censorship and the transformation of the gendered subject. The repetition of signs, or the doubling structure, operates at the heart of what Slemon calls the "post-colonial allegory."[4] According to Slemon (1988), the postcolonial allegory departs from our conventional understanding of the allegory as a "constrained and mechanical mode" of representing history, as it is involved in "displacing [history] as a concept and opening up the past to imaginative revision" (p. 157, 165). Since "the allegorical sign refers always to a previous or anterior sign", the postcolonial allegory, while allowing the reader to recognize the "known" master codes in use, is at the same time ushering in "new" signs according to the "transformative power of imaginative revision" (p. 158, 159). I believe that CF fits this postcolonial allegory schema as it raises questions about the authority of the past through the imaginative revisions of the censored subject. By providing alternative visions and versions of the past, and by highlighting the elusiveness of signs through their double-sided meanings, CF undermines the established patterns of subjection by suggesting the transformative potential inherent within the "emptied" body of the censored subject. As the space where the dichotomous signifying differences between self and other,

traditional Asia and modernizing West, are dramatized, the postcolonial allegory also sets the scene for the censored subject's negotiation of agency and freedom from two intersecting yet culturally disparate structures of authority, and the proliferation of meanings that emerge from the encounter. Hence the postcolonial allegory is not only advantageous for querying the changing identities and power dynamics in the mutable spaces of developing Asia, but it also opens up different imaginative "hybrid" spaces where we can reconsider the transformation of the subject.

The allegorical framework is seen in the text's representation of power through the binary system of authoritative history, and the replicating sub-structures of power within the system. For example, the hierarchical relations between the colonizer, the rich man (whose origin is detected from the colour of his head, a "blaze of gold"), and the colonized natives is a recognizable postcolonial theme, while the invocation of traditional cultural tropes is seen in the character of the Chinese Grandmother and her multiple roles as the family matriarch, storyteller, and "keeper of an ancient knowledge" (p. 69, 55). Through Grandmother, the text highlights the older forms of authority that preceded colonial rule, whose power is derived from prescribed rituals of prohibition and taboo, the enduring power of memory, and the oral tradition, which relies on the power of the mouth to ensure the continuity and legitimacy of the dominant. Similarly, the story of three generations of female storytellers in a family — Grandmother, mother and the protagonist — is also a well-known feminist trope.

Despite these familiar allegorical figures, the text also highlights recurring absences, mainly in the removal of specific labels and names. The setting is recognizably a postmodern one, inhabited as it is by changeable bodies and identities like the Lizard Boy and the lover, or universal figures like Grandmother and mother. Not only do Yahp's characters "avoid being bound to a particular nationality or country", there are also no remarkable traits or landmarks to declare the specificity of the novel's location save for the occasional use of "Mat Salleh" and "pontianak" (Chin, 1999). The first is found in colloquial vocabulary of Malaysia and Singapore and refers to a Caucasion (mainly male) while the second refers to a female vampire in Malay folklore. The striking absence of names and labels is also seen in Yahp's treatment of race. In keeping with her authorial style, Yahp shies away from the specificities of race and settles for general terms such as

"people" (p. 21), "locals" (p. 109), or "natives" (p. 111) to denote the residents of the hill, while racial components are hinted at through the "different shades" (p. 2) of colour; the foreign "pale men and dark men" (p. 22) who were shipwrecked and washed ashore, the "brown and yellow" (p. 69) servants of the rich man, and the "different-coloured people" (p. 70) with "different-coloured voices" (p. 70) who flocked to the city. There is then, a textual interplay between absence and presence in the text; the latter is denoted by the presence of allegorical figures and discourses that are familiar to the postcolonial and feminist imagination.

The textual interplay of absence and presence in the allegorical structure can also be seen in the juxtaposition between the familiar signs and their shifting and multiple significations. By drawing on the similarities and differences between Western imperialism and non-Western cultural discourses, CF effectively engages two culturally distinct structures of perception and interpretation to bring about revised and "new" meanings and inscriptions.[5] At the same time, the allegorical signs involved in both authoritative histories are also rendered ambivalent and ambiguous according to the flux of time and space. These changes — mirrored in the different voices, shifting subjectivities, and transforming bodies contained within the multi-layered worlds of the text — act as spatial and temporal discontinuities that disrupt the linear flow and continuity of colonial power and establishment. Due to the novel's changing viewpoints and interpretations, the reader finds that the allegorical signs are in the process of being revised even as they are repeated throughout the text.

The location of the novel for instance, is concentrated on a single focal point: the "hill with the convent and the jungle" is where the protagonist begins her story, and to which she keeps returning as "the place to begin" (p. 1, 21). Known by locals as Mat Salleh Hill, and named as Mad Sailor Hill by "rival schools", the hill, despite the different shapes it takes, is established as the seat of power, be it the rich man's mansion full of colonized servants, or a convent school full of nuns disciplining young girls (p. 21). The changes in the shape of administration do not signify an end to the reproduction of power narratives or the subjugation of women; if anything, these changes only serve to emphasize the repetitive cycles of power and the struggle it entails through different times. Whether denoted by the rich man's mansion or the convent school, the hill is still

symbolic of the site where gendered subjects are produced. Nevertheless, the reader has to take a step back from this one-sided interpretation as the hill is also described as "curiously twisted [. . .] in the shape of a woman turned away from the harbour, in the act of turning back" (p. 7). This alternate vision of the hill as a woman caught in the act of turning back echoes the lover's resistance against the rich man: "She stared through him, she turned her face to the wall" (p. 252). Even though the hill signifies the authority of the white man, it is also the place where female resistance and agency, however fragmented and dispersed, are engendered. The double-edged meanings derived from woman's ambivalent status and place — marginal and yet rebellious — are thus captured by the ambiguous signification of the hill. As the site of 'herstory' then, the hill is also somewhere that marginalized female figures dominate.

By employing multiple temporalities and spaces within the fixed location of the hill, where numerous stories are played out, the text manages to invoke the old and the new, something familiar yet altered. The postcolonial allegory therefore names a space where established significations are undermined, where they are made ambivalent by the simultaneous, conflicting expressions of the sign. In this way, CF stresses the paradoxical doubleness of absence and presence by bringing in the element of alterity from the start. The alterity is especially pronounced in the performative bodies of the gendered subjects who inhabit the hill, for their movements and agency take are similarly double-edged. The text's subversive effects are felt when we find the bully "torturing and tickling" the protagonist, or "greeting everyone with an amicable slap", or when we see the conflicting image of "giggling cackling convent girls with fists raised and legs poised to run" (p. 61, 105, 58). Even more unsettling is the way Grandmother "train[s]" the protagonist in a strange "game": "Then she would smack. Then call again. Then push. Then smack. In between smacks she hugged me" (p. 100, 99).

There are many times when CF depicts the alterity of subjectivities in terms of their ambivalent "double-sided" corporeality; examples include the lizard-like boy who transforms into a crocodile, and the beautiful lover who is also a sea-creature. But there are none as evocative as the portrayal of Grandmother's "split" body. As "the youngest bonded servant" in the rich man's mansion, Grandmother is also considered "the most inferior" in the domestic order (p. 11). However, Grandmother is also disliked by the

other servants as she possesses two kinds of bodies — her "night-time body" and her "daytime one" (p. 10), and thus two kinds of "face[s]":

> Grandmother's face at midnight was not her petulant daytime face, her stubborn headstrong face that she turned to the other servants when they were cruel, when they forced on her the chores that nobody wanted to do. Her night-time body was no relation to the daytime one she disobeyed the senior servants with, disappearing for hours on end, reappearing to slop through her work without a word of apology or explanation. At night Grandmother was otherworldly. (pp. 9-10)

At night, Grandmother's sleeping body appears to possess an "otherworldly" agency that is separated from her conscious mind: "She walked with her sleeping breath rattling the kitchen windows, her voice a hoarse whisper coming from lips that did not move" (p. 10). Yet the very nature of her alterity, her otherness, also signals the inherent potential for transformation; the pivotal moment of change in the subject(ivity) emerges when her "extra eye" opened, and "drained [her] world of colour" (p. 12). Grandmother's transformation is conveyed in terms of loss and gain, for the leaking of her coloured vision ironically empowers her to see the black-and-white images of ghosts and spirits, a power which later helps her become the city's "most famous ghostchaser" (p. 30).

In CF, the transformation of the subject not only hinges on the paradox of loss and gain, but it also suggests that the change can resemble a traumatic experience. The textual implications of trauma, seen in the paradox of loss and gain, are rendered through the recurring metaphor of "turning" in varying characters. Grandmother's sudden experience of loss and gain is one such instance. Another example is mother's "turning a corner" (p. 34). This turning not only marks her pivotal encounter with her future husband, but is later connected to her traumatized state as she compulsively searches for her missing husband in the torturous, roundabout paths of the city in an endless "turning" (p. 183). The traumatic sign of "turning" can also be seen in the lover during the episode of the "sea ghost turning" (p. 279), when the lover, or the sea ghost, changes into different forms in a bid to escape the rich man's possessive grip: "In his arms the shape was turning, was a shape now suddenly long and scaly, now bloating, now ridged with spikes" (p. 135). Once again, we find that the act of "turning" is accompanied by the unsettling experience of loss and gain, for the lover's new shape also indicates her dislocated status and enslavement when the rich man tears her from the sea and forces her

to live with him on the hill. While the recurring signs of "turning" denote the processes of transformation across the textual landscape, they also underscore the traumatic structures of repetition in the novel as each gendered subject keeps revisiting the memory of her "turning."

Indeed, the very structure of the narrative itself is traumatic; consider the compulsive manner in which the re-tellings of the stories take place. The protagonist begins with one story, stops abruptly in the middle and jumps into another story, another description, and another character, before doubling back to the stories already told; this disconcerting process is repeated throughout the novel. These multiple narratives overlap and, as a result, repetitious phrases and recurring situations populate the text; the reader experiences deja-vu as s/he has read fragments of the story in previous pages. Chin (1999) noted thus:

> In a way, the narrative is deliberately made into a huge jigsaw puzzle whereby fragmented pieces of the stories must be fitted together. But unlike an actual puzzle, the novel will not yield a unified whole. There are still many unresolved voids left gaping in the novel; these loose ends are left open to questions, and thus frustrate [the reader's] attempts at exegesis.

As mentioned earlier, the recurring pattern of textual gaps and voids point to the tropes of self-censorship circulating the text in the shape of unvoiced memories, hidden secrets, and painful silences. There are experiences that simply cannot be articulated other than as a compulsive repetition. The stories narrated by Grandmother for instance, never reach their end: "Grandmother never wants anything finished, she never wants to get to the end. She is always afraid of telling too much; of giving away the story before the end" (p. 317). With so many unfinished stories, grandmother's tales have lost their track; "the story goes here and there, trailing off at every turn until she ends up silent" (p. 320). There are signs that she is reluctant to talk about certain memories: "Nowadays the gaps between my grandmother's tellings get longer and longer" (p. 321). Like grandmother, mother too, can never finish telling her stories: "Then, midway, she will suddenly stop. She will grow pale, [. . .] and stand with lips drained and features frozen as though seeing an unbearable sight" (p. 64). The track of mother's stories is arrested by the recurring trauma of a memory which nobody can see except herself: "When she forgets and looks

into her memory. The enemy shimmers around the corner, or behind her, waiting for my mother to turn" (p. 65). Mother's stories always stop exactly at the point where she remembers the loss of her husband.

The traumatic structure of the text — represented by the silenced or censored subjectivities — highlights the discontinuities and gaps that occur in between each re-telling of the narrative. This textual rupture is indicated by the subject's experience of time. For example, the opening of Grandmother's extra eye comes at a time when "her life as she knew it was soon to end" (p. 156). At the symbolic age of fourteen, the "end of her second life cycle" Grandmother inhabits an ambivalent "in-between time" before "the child [is] shed" and "the young woman assumed" (p. 25, 156). The time "in-between" childhood and womanhood is a dangerous and uncertain time. Some, like Grandmother and the protagonist, end their second life cycle by beginning a new phase of a third life cycle in their transformed state. Others are not as fortunate. The story of the Bully for instance brings out the tragedy of getting stuck in this "in-between" time: "She grew until she was fourteen, [. . .], the end of her second cycle. Then the bully stopped" (p. 25). The bully's stagnated growth is reflected in her fixation with "seeing life frozen a moment at a time" through her photograph collection (p. 14). Caught in the paralyzing grip of the past, the bully "didn't know which way to grow" and she fails to develop normally: "While other girls get taller or wider, or slimmer or shapelier with each passing year, the bully always looks the same" (p. 25). The "in-between" time denotes a temporal rupture not only in the traumatic structure of the narratives, but also within the subjectivity; there are thus ongoing processes of transformation taking place in the interior spatial fabric.

In CF, these temporal spaces are opened up by the processes of repetition, "in-between" the recurring life cycles, and act as defining moments of the body's progressive development (or in the bully's case, its stasis) and the changes occurring within the subjective self. In many examples provided by the novel, these moments of temporal rupture are not necessarily restricted to the time "in-between" transcending childhood and becoming a woman. For the protagonist's mother, her "in-between" time comes at "an instant between the time she was a girl and the time it seemed to everyone she became a middle-aged woman, worn, the features of her face caved in" (p. 316). The mother's "instant" is marked by the chance meeting between her and the Lizard boy while "turning

a corner"; this "instant" not only signals her release from the clutches of her "badluck", but also pinpoints her experience with loss and gain at the startling moment of her transformation (p. 34, 35). During the crucial "instant," mother's entire badluck past is rewritten by the discovery of something new within — an awakening of sexual awareness, a recognition of love — and with the discovery, the course of her future is altered at the same time:

> In that instant, which seemed to my mother to last both an eyeblink and forever, she stood poised on a hinge: turning a corner. My mother stood there, perfectly balanced. She could swing either way, but she stood there, an eyeblink or forever, perfectly still. In that instant everything stopped. Gone was my mother's badluck past, disappeared her badluck future. My mother felt young, and light. When the instant passed, an eyeblink or forever later, everything, my mother, my grandmother, the ground, the air, the world, was irrevocably changed. (p. 35)

Here we find that the mother's "instant" speaks of a defining moment in her subjective life; that instant when she could have changed "either way" is also an instant that had lasted "both an eyeblink and forever."

The flexible spatial dimensions indicated by time's ambivalent and paradoxical alterity, "both an eyeblink and forever," not only punctuates the structured regularity of history, but also corresponds with the changes occurring within the subjective interior. Mother's "terror" in the ghosthouse is reflected in the way she feels about time: "Like devilish time and dead time, the time of terror, compared to everyday human time, runs either too long or too short" (p. 262). Another example can be found in the "instant before the closing of my grandmother's eye" (p. 301). Knocked on the head with the "butt of the bandit rifle", Grandmother saw the closing of her eye like a "long slow fall to the ground, the moment between recognition and when the ground hit" (p. 301). In that internally attenuated fraction of time Grandmother recognizes "with perfect clarity" the indirect and intricate manner in which her enemy, the lover, and her "ghostly message" had pursued her (p. 301). The instant in which the lover revealed herself and her purpose to Grandmother, is also both an "eyeblink and forever":

> In that instant Grandmother realised everything. [. . .] All the intervening years of her ghostchasing fame and fortune led only to this moment of perfect clarity. Grandmother watched the dips and rises of her life's pattern with great admiration, all the steps she had taken, the goodluck curves, the treacherous folds. [. . .] The pleasure before falling was very great. In that instant time and space

> stretched endlessly, then suddenly, rudely, was cut short. By the time she hit the ground she'd forgotten the pleasure, the clarity. By then Grandmother could no longer see. (pp. 301-2)

In Grandmother's "instant," the void into which she falls denotes the key moment of recognition and the beginning of yet another transformation as the indistinct meanings stored within the memory bank, and encoded within the body, take on shapes, meanings, and significations never perceived before at the moment of "perfect clarity." Once that "instant" is over, the transformation is complete. This time however, Grandmother experiences a reversal, for as her extra eye closes, her coloured vision returns. Once more, Grandmother's experience of change carries the double-edged implications of loss and gain.

Similarly, the protagonist is also struck by a moment of "perfect clarity" while lying in wait "as ghost bait" on the jungle path. Like her grandmother and mother, the protagonist's moment of "perfect clarity" is experienced within the ambivalent and amorphous depths of her interior space:

> The minutes swelled and stretched until I lose sense of everything except their stretch and swell, and I become alternately large then small; infinite, then nothing. Time and space stretched endlessly. I try to imagine that instant before the closing of my grandmother's eye: my life's pattern dipping and rising before me as hers did, seen with perfect clarity. My life's pattern curving and folding according to her plan. Unlike her I watched the pattern not with admiration but a shivering and shaking that's barely noticeable at first. (p. 303)

As the ambiguous meanings and images take shape and fall into place, the protagonist becomes fully aware of the way in which Grandmother has manipulated her life's pattern. This recognition marks the beginning of change, the beginning of "a shivering and shaking" deep within her subjective interiority when she also realizes that she is "unlike" grandmother in many ways: "Unlike her, the intricate hooks and sweeps of the pattern only make me shiver and shake. [. . .] Unlike the jungle of my grandmother's stories, the one that presses against me is neither a jungle of jumps and shudders nor one to slide my sleeping eyes open for fear" (p. 303).

Significantly enough, the moment of "perfect clarity" and the accompanying interior changes experienced by the gendered subject occur in the ambivalent space of the

jungle, where resides the lover, that "cursed thing lying in wait" (p. 303). As the space where the lover is trapped, the jungle also bears the fluid characteristics of the sea; "the trunks and leaves were the colour of jungle water" while "dark shapes glid[ed] through the undergrowth" (p. 150). The jungle can thus be understood as a spatial reflection of the shifting undercurrents of ambivalence within the subjective self. The change in the protagonist's subjective state is suggested by her reaction to both the jungle and the "cursed thing lying in wait." Unlike Grandmother who fears both, the protagonist finds comfort and security in the "warm and silent" jungle earth, while the "cursed thing lying in wait is not a thing of terror but a huddled thing, thirsty, fitting a parched space at the back of my throat. One swallow and the thirst will be gone" (p. 303). Hence that vital "instant" of discovery — that she is different from Grandmother — is also a moment that leads to a conscious decision: "I have another plan for Grandmother's unfinished business, other than burning it up. I have another plan for finishing" (p. 327).

II

> In the darkroom the bully and I sit cross-legged, knee touching knee. [. . .] In the darkroom the bully and I touch foreheads, we sit with our eyes squeezed shut, our lips pressed together, imagining we will never part our lips or open our eyes. The bully and I sit on the cushioned mats she has sneaked into the darkroom, imagining the dark is a place we can hear, we can see. An in-between place, like babies in limbo, like spirits of the dead my grandmother says are waiting for reincarnation at the top of the hill. (pp. 59-60)

In the excerpt above, we find the bully and the protagonist engaged in a game of mimicry or mirroring. Here, the protagonist is not yet endowed with the conscious will of an individual self; instead, her self is reflected in the other. Hence the "I" is nullified, absorbed into the collective "we;" "we sit with our eyes squeezed shut." Like "underwater [. . .] morsels curled in a shell" (p. 60), the protagonist and the bully epitomize the double paradox of absence and presence, sleeping foetuses in the "infinite dark, the nothing dark" of the womb, represented by the darkroom (p. 60). As the space where different narratives and gendered subjects are located, the darkroom, like the hill, should be seen as an ambivalent "in-between place" where both absence and presence are

powerfully felt in the ghostly presences of "spirits" hovering between limbo and reincarnation. Known once as the punishment room, the darkroom has a dubious history as the site where rebellious female figures like Grandmother and the lover were incarcerated during the rich man's reign on the hill.[6] But by the time the protagonist arrives on the scene, the meaning of the darkroom has already shifted; the darkroom that was once Grandmother's most hated place is now the space where the protagonist is free to experiment and explore the vast, ambiguous spaces of her inner self:

> Behind my eyelids the dark grows to enormous proportions, in my ears the silence of cotton is a pounding like drums. The minutes swell and stretch until I lose sense of everything except their swell and stretch. The bully and I become alternately large then small, large then small: enormous, then the head of a pin. We become infinite. Then nothing. [. . .] In the infinite dark, the nothing dark, only our fingertips, our hands, our knees touching knees, hold me silent. Hold me still. (p. 60)

Deep within the dark interiority of the unformed self, the empty void of nothing-ness is balanced out by the possibility of something new emerging into being, a change occurring within the silence of holding "still." Within the silence and the stillness of the ambivalent space, the ambiguous "I" comes into being and subsides into nothingness, pulsing with unknown possibilities that signal the body's inherent potential for transformation.

Between the time when the protagonist is a malleable, unformed child (in her first life cycle) and when she arrives at her "instant" of "perfect clarity" (before the end of her second life cycle), there is a space where formative lessons and experiences take place. During this hazy in-between time and space, the protagonist does not yet possess a personality, opinion or a voice of her own. As the narrator who holds the novel's multi-layered, fragmented narratives in place, the nameless "I" ironically forms the core of the text even though she is devoid of any individual meaning. But as the novel's revolving performative and mimetic structures demonstrate, the unformed, "vacant" body of the censored subject is also in the process of building its own individual corpus of knowledge by negotiating different histories and memories, and by appropriating varying roles through the mimicry of different identities. Hence in every narrative that she listens to and absorbs, in every role-play game that she's made for herself, the protagonist is also in the process of trying on different roles and identities. It is in this manner that the text also

points out that the structured processes of self-censorship are simultaneously transformative in nature.

The novel's play on mimicry and mimesis is depicted in the censored subject's transformative body, which takes on connotations of Bakhtin's theory of the "grotesque." In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin posits the idea of "grotesque realism" through the exaggerated bodily image of "fertility, growth" and "abundance" (p. 19). As a representation of "people who are continually growing and renewed" (p. 19), the grotesque body is deeply positive in meaning since it expresses the continuous processes of change:

> The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming. The relation to time is one determining trait of the grotesque image. The other indispensable trait is ambivalence. For in this image we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis. (p. 24)

There are close parallels between Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque body and my earlier arguments on the transforming subjective self, namely the body's "relation to time," and the embodied ambivalence that emerges from the tension of straddling the "poles of transformation." This idea's usefulness to this paper lies in the fact that it describes the development or evolution of the grotesque body as it undergoes various stages of perception and experience, from its most "primitive" phase until it becomes a full articulation of the "artistic and ideological [. . .] awareness of history and of historic change" (p. 24, 25). However, Bakhtin also stresses that even in this late stage, the grotesque body is far from achieving the classical and aesthetic image of the "finished, completed man": "They remain ambivalent and contradictory; they are ugly, monstrous, hideous" (p. 25).

The construction of the grotesque body is brought to our attention via the formation of the protagonist's life pattern, which has been planned by Grandmother "long before I was born" (p. 312). Bent on the path of remembrance and revenge, Grandmother plots and schemes against her oldest enemy, the lover, by manipulating the protagonist's role and function as "an instrument of revenge, a way to get back face" (p. 313). Subjected to years of indoctrination and strict rules, the protagonist's formative body is

regulated according to what Grandmother says: "I have repeated [grandmother's plan] after her like [. . .] convent sayings learnt by rote" (p. 300). Moreover, she is trained to reproduce Grandmother's memories in her "extra special notebook" (p. 300). Even the protagonist's body is moulded in the shape and manner of the matriarch's desire. For example, she wears her hair in a "knotted" (p. 15) braid as Grandmother wishes, places Grandmother's strongest amulet under her tongue, wears Grandmother's "special leaf and root collection bag" (p. 38) around her waist, and is also trained to imitate Grandmother's favourite sign "Avert!", her "glaring expression" (p. 78) and famous "tiger stance" (p. 100). The extent of the protagonist's mimicry of Grandmother is stressed in her facial expression, as she begins to take on Grandmother's features: "my face a copy of Grandmother's tiger face" while "[m]y mouth shapes itself to the shape of her mouth" (p. 299-300, 309).

At the same time, the novel underscores the negative repercussions posed by the circumscribed processes of learning and development through mimicry and drill lessons. As the protagonist reveals, "I only know what I'm told, what I see. I see only what I'm told. This is what my grandmother has taught me: to narrow my eyes and look sideways, and see what she has told. To see what Grandmother sees" (p. 241). With her curtailed vision, inhibited agency, and limited knowledge, the protagonist's position as a censored subject is reinforced by the unnatural twists and turns of her body; these abnormal changes can be seen by comparing the protagonist's body at the start and at the end of the novel. In chapter one, we find that the protagonist possesses a physical lightness that comes from a carefree existence: "My walk to the convent is as light as air, as crooked as a crab baby's, it's a scuttle here and there to look in through shop windows, to crouch at a pedlar's mat strewn with trinkets" (p. 19). The protagonist's chin, which is "lifted for whistling", reflects her enjoyment of life (p. 19), while her body is endowed with a natural curiosity "to peek under shop awnings" (p. 241), and with an innate desire for fun and mischief; "to crouch at a pedlar's barrow and slip a trinket into my shoe" (p. 241). Compared to Grandmother's "immovable" bones and whose body is "like the anchor of a ship tug-tugging against it," the protagonist's "walk to the convent is a walk on waves" (p. 19).

However, Grandmother's dominance over the protagonist's life pattern leads to certain changes in her corporeal body, physical movements and agency. As the protagonist realizes, her body is undergoing a radical transformation. By mimicking grandmother's gestures, expressions, language and rituals, she is in the danger of *becoming* grandmother herself:

> Every day I seem to get heavier. My walk to the convent is no longer as light as air, as crooked as a crab baby's; no longer a skip here and there [. . .]. Nowadays my convent walk is a pull against metal, a straight line, like tugging at the anchor of a ship. My chin is no longer lifted for whistling. My feet press further into the ground [. . .]." (p. 241).

By the end of CF, the protagonist's body has grown to abnormal, grotesque proportions, "twisting to a pattern my grandmother likes" (p. 312). Burdened with the memorized teachings and sayings of her grandmother, the body of the censored subject not only fails to physically mature in a natural way, but she also develops inhibited forms of agency and movements:

> By the time I turned fourteen the sideways tip of my head will be an acute angle, I will be so heavy I'll hardly be able to lift my feet. I will be filled with everything my grandmother has tried to teach me, all the years of training and telling will stiffen my blood to sap. My arms will be lifted in whatever direction Grandmother likes, my fingers pointing, my head tilting that way too. My feet planted firmly in Grandmother's earth. Already her stories swell my chest and head, they crust my skin with swirling knobs. (p. 313)

The reader should not however assume that Grandmother's power over the censored subject is complete, for even at this late stage, we find that the grotesque body is still undergoing the continuous processes of renewal and change. As CF points out, the repetitive structures of mimicry and mimesis are subjected to flux and instability, for in-between these patterns, there are spaces of ambivalence and ambiguity that threaten to unfix the established signifying meanings. As the protagonist intuitively senses, there is something not quite right with her growing self. Indeed, there are moments when this realization seeps through the narrative: "But my back aches in spite of all the years of training. There's a catch in my voice" (p. 311). And, despite the years of training her "fingers for flexibility and strength, sometimes the pen flies out of [her] hand" (p. 311). There are thus moments when the body involuntarily reacts against its grotesque and

"twisted" formation; these are the fractured spaces that do not fit into the pattern of grandmother's plan, as when "the pen lies rocking between my grandmother and me" (p. 311).

The emerging individual self and will occurs at the time when the protagonist is an "in-between girl, no longer a child, not yet a young woman" and whose "life as she knew it was coming to an end" (p. 196). The "in-between girl" suggests the transformative body as an ambivalent and insidious force, a force that lies "in-between" the structures of inscribed signs, inhabiting the ellipses and silences in the form of temporal and spatial rupture and discontinuity. Regardless of Grandmother's rule over the protagonist's life pattern, there are invisible "in-between" gaps and voids that ultimately escape the matriarch's gaze and circumscription: "I will breathe slowly, carefully, into the spaces that are left. I will make these spaces my own" (p. 311). The first signs of the protagonist's unknown will appear when she defies Grandmother's authority and rewrites the gaps and spaces in the latter's "extra special notebook" (p. 300) with fragments of the voices and narratives that she's heard, as well as her own words: "By now I know Grandmother's words by heart. I leap over the gaps in her words, the times she stops her stories with her lips clamped tight. Into those spaces I slide my mother's words, and the bully's, and the Old Priest's [. . .]. I creak my own tentative words into the leftover spaces, look at Grandmother sideways to see if she'll notice" (p. 300). As she develops her own voice, the assertion of her self becomes more prominent: "I pick up my pen. I make my first mark, hesitant, then another, more firmly. Then another" (p. 323). Unlike the pen used to record Grandmother's narrative, the one that "flies out of my hand," the pen used to express her emerging self "fits neatly between my thumb and forefinger" (p. 323).

In the analysis above, we find that the spaces and gaps in-between Grandmother's words are filled with narrative fragments borrowed from the novel's other characters, including her mother, the bully, and the nuns; all these varying voices and subjectivities contribute to the subversion of Grandmother's hold over the protagonist's life pattern. As the last pages of the text emphasise, the protagonist's life pattern has also been influenced by the different and conflicting signifying meanings that the other characters carry within their own private world:

> My life pattern was laid out by my grandmother, my mother, my disappeared father, the rich man, the lover, the nuns, the mad sailor, all the twistings and turnings of their stories, the walking and slightings and yearnings and sighings and hatings and weepings that they did and did not do. All the stories they told, and did not tell. (p. 312)

As an embodiment of the fragmented histories and memories gathered over the years, the grotesque body should be considered as a patchwork composed of identities other than Grandmother's. In fact, I would argue that the different narratives serve a vital function as an alternative discursive model of identity for the protagonist, and are thus integral to her quest for an individual self. In this way, the grotesque body reaffirms the ongoing processes of change in the ambivalent "in-between" gaps and spaces of the subjectivity; these interstices mark the places that appear in-between each repetitive allegorical pattern, represented by "the stories they told, and did not tell." Once again, we find that the processes of transformation are dependent on the discursive structures that produced the censored subject in the first place. For the protagonist then, the act of narration in itself is a transformative process, for as she experiments with words and meanings belonging to others, she also learns to redeploy different significations for the self. The paradox of locating the self through the trope of censorship thus resonates with the double-edged meanings of loss and gain, as each identity that the protagonist experiments with involves both self-censorship and self-revelation.

Of the many stories that she's listened to, the protagonist realizes that there is one other person whom she truly resembles — her missing father, the crocodile. Like the protagonist, the "crocodile's back is bowed" (p. 324) by "the weight of all the jokes and jibes, the petty slights and discriminations accumulated over the years; all the back-bitings, jealousies and injustices involved in the scramble for favour, the aches of being owned body and soul" (p. 324). Subjected to the narratives of others, and reproduced as legend, a saying, or a charm to ward off bad luck, the crocodile and its "hunched shape" is ultimately a grotesque construct, a collage of "all the hinted-at secrets and half-told stories that pattern the years" (p. 324). Similarly, the "croc doesn't burn up the past, he sifts through it like treasure", as does the protagonist (p. 324). The crocodile bears more than just a likeness to the protagonist, there is also a strong bond of affinity between them. While with the crocodile, the protagonist re-discovers the freedom involved in a

"madcap dance and run", the adventure of "[slashing] through jungle cobwebs", and the joys of "laughter" (p. 323). Through the crocodile, the protagonist not only renews her acquaintance with that part of her self that has been lost in Grandmother's scheming plans, but she also locates an identity she is comfortable with: "Face to face the croc and I run our hands over each other, our face-to face skins hold no terrors" (p. 325). Unlike the "shivering and shaking" that accompanied the moment of dis-identification with Grandmother, the identification with the crocodile is a time of "discovery, not fear" for it also marks the moment when she realizes her true self (p. 325). By this time, the protagonist comes to her own conclusion about the crocodile, one that opposes grandmother's views: "The croc I know is not the evil creature my grandmother tells me" (p. 324). Instead, she agrees with her mother's opinion: "As my mother says, he's merely a creature whose luck is rather bad" (p. 324).

In every respect, the crocodile, or the Lizard Boy, is the complete antithesis to Grandmother. While the latter nurtures the memories of her past "like a special hate" (p. 313), "twisting her already twisted hands" (pp. 298-9) in her spiralling madness, Lizard Boy "practised forgetting" (p. 244). With "[n]o memory", the Lizard Boy symbolically has "[n]o past" and "[n]o future" (p. 275); yet it is the very nature of this absence of past and future that he is also enabled to rewrite his entire life: "People like this special. Make their own luck. Their own future, their own past" (p. 279). Once again, the novel brings into play the double-edged sign of loss and gain through the paradox of forgetting and self-affirmation, and that the transformation of the censored subject depends on this paradox. Through the crocodile, or the Lizard Boy, the novel makes emphatic the freedom and the joys involved in forgetting, or letting go the past. Without a memory to burden his body or to torture his mind, and without a past to hold him back, the Lizard Boy is free to transform into King Crocodile, while his disappearance contributes to the growth of his legendary status. Lizard Boy's transformation occurs on the day when he "stands up straight" and rebels "against the patterned fixity of the years" (p. 324): "The Lizard Boy stared [. . .] at his lengthening limbs, his shortening backbone, his face shrinking to size" (p. 249). The protagonist describes this transformation as the "crocodile fury" (p. 325), a fury that designates the end of one life cycle and the beginning of another: "When the crocodile fury hits there's a wild urge to run. The in-

between time is over, the child shed, the young woman assumed. Everything, the view out the window, the ground, the air, the world, is irrevocably changed. The patterns are rearranged" (p. 325).

The protagonist's experience of the crocodile fury, the "shivering and shaking that's barely noticeable at first" (p. 303) coincides with her "instant" of "perfect clarity" when all the "patterns are rearranged." The crocodile fury experienced by the protagonist is not only a powerful moment of illumination, but it is also a reflection of the ambivalent subjective states churning within as she contemplates the meaning of Grandmother's plan: "All my life's walking and listening and waiting bubbles up my throat, all my years of treading the path of Grandmother's plan. The trembles turn into giggles and small shards of laughter" (p. 304). The beginning and the end of her life cycle is thus accompanied by emotional upheaval as the protagonist's fury changes into laughter and tears: "I am laughing. I am holding my sides with laughter, brushing the tears that spout from my eyes" (p. 326). Indeed, the celebration of the censored subject's transformation and "self-regenerative strength would be incomplete without the accompanying awareness that life encompasses pain and joy, anger and laughter" (Chin, 1999).

Like a "train on a track" (p. 305), the subtle but decisive changes taking place in the subjective interiority are irreversible, and cannot be stopped until the protagonist takes on a "new" body and a "new" identity. The "new" identity that she decides to take ironically belongs to the lover; this indication is made earlier in the text when the protagonist steps into the lover's ghostly "footprints" and makes a discovery: "The lover's footprints curl around my feet like well-worn shoes" (p. 66). The censored subject's transformation into a "beautiful woman" is complete once she dons the lover's gown (p. 328). By assuming the body of her Grandmother's "oldest enemy" the protagonist significantly lays the ghost of the past to rest by setting it free (p. 56). At the same time, she releases herself from the suffocating binds of the past where the other censored subjectivities lay trapped. By sifting through the various "herstories" — Grandmother's refusal to forget, the mother's desire to forget, and the bully's obsession with old photos — the protagonist realizes that the only way to end Grandmother's "unfinished business" is to erase the effects of power that have "travel[led] an indirect route" through three generations of memories and narratives (p. 327, 28). Like the Lizard

Boy, the protagonist must forget the past to start anew. But first, she must empty the self of Grandmother's inscriptions and rules:

> I'm still laughing as I tug at the ribbons fastening my too-tight braid. I ease Grandmother's leaf and root collection bag from my waist, dig into its folds for the never-fail matches and ghostburning candles she makes me wherever I go. [. . .] I crumple the matches and candles, slip their pieces into the grave. I slide Grandmother's strongest amulet pouch from under my tongue, toss it into the grave where perhaps a lily will grow. I lift my skirt to piss on it for good measure. This spot: the end of my second life cycle. The beginning of the next cycle, where the lover's footprints have left my feet and are pointing. (pp. 327-328)

As Chin (1999) points out, for "both the protagonist and the lover to be truly liberated from the chains of the past, they have to travel the path of forgetfulness, the way Lizard Boy did. Hence a lily, `the flower that makes people forget their troubles' and which the lover is named after), must grow in the grave where the past is buried. (p. 145)" The text thus argues that freedom can only be located when all previous relationships and bonds are broken, and when the inscribed self is released from the authoritative narratives of history and memory. By turning away from Grandmother's memory, and her vengeance, and by embracing the joy of liberation that is embodied by the lover — "her joy is something I can touch" — only then can the protagonist begin a new chapter, a new life cycle (329). The shedding of old associations, even the relationships formed during childhood, delineates the paradox of loss and gain through the symbolic death of the protagonist and the subsequent rebirth of a new identity and self.

The concluding picture of the protagonist's transformation, as positive as it may be (since it carries the knowledge of female agency and liberation), should not be taken as conclusive. The trope of forgetting merely signals the start of the "next cycle", albeit in a new direction and in a new space: "East, towards the sea" (p. 329). And the sea, for all its promise of rich possibilities and choices, is still an unknown territory. The blanking-out of the old self thus marks the start of another passage of rites where new rules, inscriptions, and meanings have to be learnt. In this sense, the journey of the gendered subject is far from over. Moreover, by becoming the beautiful lover, the protagonist also inherits her "[s]trange" and changeable underwater forms — "dragon-shape, the reptile-shape, the fish-shape" (p. 135). As Bakhtin describes it, the grotesque

body is always in the process of "outgrow[ing] itself, transgress[ing] its own limits" (p. 26); it will always retain its ambivalent and contradictory characteristics. Through the postcolonial allegory, we see an ongoing dialectical relationship operating in the doubling structures of CF, as erasure entails reinscription, while loss involves gain, and vice-versa. This ongoing dynamic highlights the "unfinished" nature of the subject's construction in the system, as the authoritative discourses of censorship are turned into individual stories of redemption, hope, and courage.

Notes:

[1] In another article, "Unsettling the Empire: Resistance Theory for the Second World", Slemon notes that resistance to authority implies an earlier acknowledgment of prescribed boundaries in place; hence any theory of resistance is "always *necessarily* complicit in the apparatus it seeks to transgress" (p. 37).

[2] See Chin (2006) on why essentialist views of censorship and its invariable association with oppression and powerlessness are problematic. This article also looks at the ways in which women in particular are subjected to the double structures of prohibition and censorship in both cultural and public domains.

[3] Transformation is conventionally associated with the liberal ideal of individual freedom and agency since it suggests the individual's potential for growth and change. In the text however, not all the transformations bear such positive connotations. Thus my use of the word "transformation" is mainly to indicate the change in subjectivity and bodily intention and/or agency, and the connotations it carries must be read contextually.

[4] Slemon's concept of postcolonial allegory is influenced by Paul de Man's "The Rhetoric of Temporality". According to de Man, the repetition of signs in the allegory, which he calls the "rhetoric of temporality," is necessarily maintained by certain codes of recognition established by the previous allegorical sign: "But this relationship between signs necessarily contains a constitutive temporal element; it remains necessary, if there is to be allegory, that the allegorical sign refer to another sign that precedes it. The meaning constituted by the allegorical sign can then consist only in the *repetition* [. . .] of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is of the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority" (p. 207).

[5] The meeting between Asia and the West is hilariously recounted in the story of "Mad Sailor" in CF. Shipwrecked and marooned in a foreign land, the mad sailor ran away at his first sight of the native inhabitants whom he assumed were "cannibals", whereas in fact they were "[s]imple fisherfolk" (p. 22, 21). This comic moment of misidentification results in the mad sailor getting lost in the jungle. Years after this meeting, the locals who "rolled the first pale man's name in their mouths" have since mispronounced the name as "Mat Salleh"; this enduring hybrid name is both an appropriation of the original name and the conception of a new linguistic form (p. 24).

[6] In order to discipline Grandmother's uncontrollable behaviour, the other servants lock her up in the place she hates most, the punishment room: "The punishment room was in

the lowest part of the house, the furthest corner of the basement. Its walls were two feet thick, its door barely shuddering though her fists swelled up red" (p. 10). The lover too is imprisoned here when she rejects the rich man. Within these impenetrable walls, the rich man attempts to subjugate the lover by playing on her fear; "her terror was a thing he could touch" (p. 253).

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