Land of Their Graves

Maternity, Mourning and Nation in Janet Frame, Sara Suleri, and Arundhati Roy

> Dear, dear England! why was I forced by a stern necessity to leave you? What heinous crime had I committed that I, who adored you, should be torn from your sacred bosom, to pine out my joyless existence in a foreign clime? Oh, that I might be permitted to return and die upon your wave-encircled shores, and rest my weary head and heart beneath your daisy-covered sod at last! Ah, these are vain outbursts of feeling— melancholy relapses of the spring home-sickness! Canada! thou art a noble, free, and rising country—the great fostering mother of the orphans of civilisation. The offspring of Britain, thou must be great, and I will and do love thee, land of my adoption, and of my children's birth; and, oh, dearer still to a mother's heart—land of their graves! (73)

THE WORDS "restrained" and "cheerful" rarely spring to mind when reading Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush*, and this passage is typical— she has not been called "moody Moodie" by thousands of Canadian university students for nothing. Despite the rather turgid tone which begins this excerpt, however, there is genuine pathos in the final line and in Moodie's equation between the death of her children and an identification with Canada. This is only the end of an extended trope, which begins with the comparison of England with a mother and Moodie herself with an orphaned child: she is "torn from" England's "sacred bosom" and left to a "joyless existence in a foreign clime." This representation of England as parent and colonies or colonials as children is a cliche in the literature of empire; what

is unique is Moodie's association between mourning and nation: it is the literal death of her own children in Canada that allows the figurative separation from her mother nation (England) and the attachment to a new nation as a mother in her own right. Mourning quickly becomes ritualized, moving from an expression of personal grief to an expression of cultural values. Mourning can be thought of, in short, as discourse. I-will argue here that the association between mourning, maternity and nationality is a recurring theme in the writing of women in postcolonial nations, and that this particular representational matrix may shed some new light on how nationality may be understood.[1]

As Peter Metcalfe and Richard Huntington write in *Celebrations of Death*, cultural attitudes toward death have much to reveal about attitudes toward life:

> the study of death is a positive endeavor because, regardless of whether custom calls for festive or restrained behavior, the issue of death throws into relief the most important cultural values by which people live their lives and evaluate their experiences. Life becomes transparent against the background of death, and fundamental social and cultural issues are revealed. (2)

Ralph Houlbrooke argues that as funeral rites were simplified in England between 1500 and 1930, largely as a result of the Protestant Reformation, the service itself focussed as much on the living as the dead: "By removing the intercessory elements from the funeral service, the reformers made it first and foremost a vehicle of instruction for the living, not a means of assisting the dead" (34). Indeed, all funerary ritual manifestly serves the living as it relegates the dead to the imaginary: representation is always the purview of the living, even when the order it constructs contains the dead. A number of theorists of funerary ritual have made this argument: that is, that in a post-Enlightenment world of increasingly secular values, funerals and other rituals surrounding death centre more on the living than the dead and also more on the body or its remains than the soul. In "Mortuary Practices, Society and Ideology," Michael Parker Pearson argues that shifts in attitudes in the Victorian period have "reduced the power of the dead as symbols manipulated by the living," and further that "we are losing a language of death celebration" (in). Pearson suggests that this loss coincides with the rise of a modern, scientific world view:

> Burial ritual is susceptible to ideological manipulation within the construction of social strategies. An analysis of mortuary practices in modern and Victorian England leads to an interpretation both in terms of the way the dead are seen by the living and in terms of the social relationships between competing groups. Since the Victorian era when burial ritual was a forum for the display of wealth and status, the dead have come to be seen more and more as unwanted matter to be disposed of quickly, without extravagance. This development, involving changes in the use of cremation and in the physical traces of the burial, is part of the increased use of hygiene, science, and medicine in agencies of social control. (99)

Not only has mortuary ritual come to focus more on the living and the physical remains of the dead with the rise of modernity, it has also become more overtly discursive as it has become more secular, according to various commentators. For instance, Michel Foucault suggests in "Different Spaces" that

> [the] cemetery, which was lodged in the sacred space of the church, took on an altogether different look in modern civilizations; and, curiously, it was during the time when civilization became, as we say very roughly, "atheist," that Western culture inaugurated what is called the cult of the dead.
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> Basically, it was quite natural that at a time when people really believed in the resurrection of bodies and the immortality of the soul they did not attribute a cardinal importance to mortal remains. On the contrary, from the moment that one is no longer quite sure of having a soul, that the body will return to life, it may be necessary to devote much more attention to those mortal remains, which are finally the only trace of our existence in the midst of the world and in the midst of words. (180-81)

Ralph Houlbrooke argues similarly that during the Reformation, "The rise of literacy prompted a long-term shift from pictorial representation to the epitaph, which could say more, and say it more eloquently, that all but the very best and most expensive engraving or sculpture" (39). As Pearson succinctly puts it, "material culture can...be seen as a form of non-verbal communication through the representation of ideas" (100). Communication is no guarantee of clarity, however, even ritualized communication. As Pearson argues, "the context of death is one of ritual action and communication as opposed to everyday communication," but "what is clear about ritual is how to do it but its meaning may be clear, complicated, ambiguous, or forgotten" (100). In a sense, all writing about death might be regarded as epitaph or memorial; such writing is likely to contain the signs of ritual but also of ambiguity and forgetting.

The shifts in the meaning of mortuary ritual—from a spiritual commemoration of the dead to a secular assertion of life and materiality—coincides with the rise of concepts of nation. As the authors of Key Concepts in Postcolonial Studies point out, "the idea of nation is now so firmly fixed in the general imagination, and the form of state it signifies so widely accepted, that it is hard to realize how recent its invention has been" (149). Though there have long been political and ethnic groupings of people, the concept of the modern nation-state is generally recognized to have developed into its current form in the nineteenth century. E.J. Hobsbawm writes of the "period when the 'principle of nationality' changed its map in the most dramatic way, namely the period from 1830 to 1880," adding that "for Walter Bagehot 'nation-making' was the essential content of nineteenth century evolution" (23). Indeed, Hobsbawm states bluntly that "The basic characteristic of the modern nation and everything connected with it is its modernity" (14). However, as Adrian Hastings points out in *The Construction of Nationhood*, lofty theoretical constructions of nation are not always identical to daily and practical experiences of nationality:

> 'Nationalism' means two things: a theory and a practice. As a political theory—that each 'nation' should have its own 'state'—it derives from the nineteenth century. However, that general principle motivates few nationalists. In practice, nationalism is strong only in particularist terms. (3-4)

The paradox of death is that it is perhaps the epitome of particularity at the same time that it is universal; representations of death often contain this paradox. Likewise, representations of nation often negotiate tensions between particulars and universals—one might think of Canada's "multicultural" policies versus the American notion of "the melting pot," two nationalisms over which much ink has been spilled. Historically, death and nation have been associated precisely in the context of an elaborate negotiation of particulars and universals, perhaps the clearest example being the commemoration of individual soldiers killed in wars:

> A major class of memorials commemorating the dead are the war memorials— the Cenotaph in London and cenotaphs scattered all over Britain. The war dead are commemorated as 'warriors' who died fighting for their country and the ideals of freedom and equality which it enshrines. Nationalism as an ideological means of control is thus legitimated through remembrance of the war dead of Britain (as opposed to the dead of all countries involved in the World Wars). The fact that the soldier buried in Westminster Abbey is named the "Unknown Warrior" further advances the cause of nationalism since he is related solely to his country, transcending all kinship, regional and class connections. (Pearson III)

As I have already pointed out, however, the construction of nation which evolves from the paradigm of death in battle is evidently masculine; in fact, I would argue that the transcendence of kinship enacted through the "Unknown Warrior" is a marker of the masculinity of this death and the male construction of nationality to which it contributes. But there is more than one way of constructing the mythology of death or a nation, for, as Adrian Hastings writes, "The nation-state has always been itself to a very large extent an unrealized myth; it only too manifestly does not fit the complex reality of human society very helpfully in many places" (7).

Just as the "Unknown Warrior" dies in a masculine performance of nationality, I would like to argue here that there are deaths which perform nationality in distinctly female forms. Furthermore, these deaths do not "[transcend] all kinship" of "regional...connections," but work instead to reinforce precisely these connections. Kinship and region are equally points

of reference in discourses of particularity and are also implicated in both the representations of death and nationality; as women are often associated with domesticity and family—indeed, they are imagined to be the heart of the home and the family—it seems unsurprising that one can discern in postcolonial women's writing a discursive thread that weaves together maternity, death and nation. And, as I will show with an analysis of the work of New Zealand writer Janet Frame, Pakistani writer Sara Suleri, and Indian writer Arundhati Roy, this particular discursive thread transcends specific nationalisms through the transcultural experiences of maternity and mortality.

Postcolonial writing almost compulsively explores ideas of nation, sometimes in theoretical or abstract terms, but what I want to examine here is a more intimate, material, indeed, bodily construction of nation through the lives and deaths of mothers, sisters and children. This is not the nation of grand ideals and the "unknown Warrior," but the village that Foucault imagines in the cemetery in "Different Spaces": "it was in the nineteenth century that each person began to have the right to his little box for his little personal decomposition.... Cemeteries...no longer constituted the sacred and immortal wind of the city, but the 'other city' where each family possessed its dark dwelling" (181). Unlike Foucault, however, I would not diminish the "personal decomposition," because for women, the work of nation-building occurs not only in the imagination but literally in the body. For example, as John Belshaw writes, settler societies were "founded on the premise of fertility. Settlers would come, often as families, with an eye to building bigger families that would constitute new communities, towns, villages, and cities" (n.p.). All nations, not just those created partly through settlement, emerge from the bellies of women, because nations are made first and foremost of people, children. Why, then, is postcolonial women's writing not marked by a simple equation between nation and birth? Because, of course, children die, and they die with alarming frequency in emerging nations where political uncertainties make life itself uncertain. As Belshaw points out, the "bucolic frontier mythology belied the very real and crucial presence of death alongside renewal"(n.p.). Thus, in postcolonial women's writing, nations are made largely through maternity and mourning.

I would like to discuss three particularly cogent examples of texts which elaborate this representational nexus of maternity, mourning and nation:

Janet Frame's *An Autobiography* (1991), Sara Suleri's memoir Meatless Days (1989), and Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*. I will begin this analysis in psychoanalytic terms by returning to the Susanna Moodie citation with which I began. First, Moodie expresses grief at having been "torn from [the] sacred bosom" of England, which she conceives as "the great fostering mother or the orphans of civilisation." In this analogy, she compares her sense of British nationality with the sense of plenitude the infant experiences at the breast ("bosom") of the mother. Object-relations psychoanalyst Melanie Klein writes extensively and compellingly about the attachment between mother and child which is initiated at the breast; here, I will focus on her 1936 article "Weaning." Among other things, Klein understands the breast to represent both satiation and separation. There are three points which Klein makes in "Weaning" which are important to consider here. First, she suggests that the breast nurtures the child literally and symbolically, becoming a sign of fulfillment: "the [infant] child receives his main satisfaction through his mouth, which becomes the main channel through which the child takes in not only his food, but also, in his phantasy, the world outside him" (291). Second, Klein recognizes that, from the moment of birth, the infant is always already weaned: "in so far as the baby never has uninterrupted possession of the breast, and over and over again is in the state of lacking it, one could say that, in a sense, he is in a constant state of being weaned or at least in a state leading up to weaning" (295). Finally, Klein argues that "the feelings of having lost the breast lead to the fear of having lost the loved mother entirely," a fear which is "interwoven with feelings of guilt at having destroyed her (eaten her up)" (295). These latter two points, emphasizing infantile experiences of separation and loss, link maternity to our first subjective grappling with death, among other things.

One way in which a woman may reconcile her own feelings of infantile loss and guilt is through the experience of nursing a child of her own: "If she can enjoy it thoroughly, her pleasure will be unconsciously realized by the child, and this reciprocal happiness will lead to a full emotional understanding between mother and child" (300). Clearly the breast/mother is symbolic in Klein's work, but equally clearly she is material, or "real." This same ambivalence about literal and figurative maternity is embedded in Moodie's references to mothers: the allusion to the "fostering mother of

the orphans of civilisation" is obviously figurative, but the reference to "a mother's heart" brings the trope down to earth, literally, to "the land of [children's] graves" (73). Thus, the significance of "nation" in this passage undergoes a semiotic shift through the figure of the mother, from the abstract and external "bosom" of mother England to the adopted, internal and material "heart" of the mother in Canada. The narrative perspective shifts also, from that of abandoned child, to adopted child, to mother of children. The vehicle for both shifts in signification is death. Interestingly, in the work of Janet Frame, Sara Suleri and Arundhati Roy, written a century later, one finds precisely the same representational conjunction of death and maternity in nations constructed in a postcolonial context.

From the earliest moments in *An Autobiography*, Janet Frame associates maternity, death and nation in a description of her own birth:

> I was delivered by Dr. Emily Seideberg McKinnon at St. Helens hospital, Dunedin, where I was known as 'the baby who was always hungry'. I had a twin, which did not develop beyond a few weeks. Twins were hereditary in Mother's family, and she would often quote the poem by (I think) her grandmother, whose two sets of twins died in infancy: 'Four little locks of gold'. Mother's memory of my birth always had two repeated references—her boast that I was delivered by the first woman medical graduate in New Zealand and her pride in the abundance of milk that enabled her to feed myself and other babies. (10)

Frame situates her birth in two explicitly female historical contexts: the matriarchal history of her own family, and the national history of the "first woman medical graduate in New Zealand." Notably, embedded in the narrative of her own birth into a female-marked New Zealand is the simultaneous death of a twin and reference to the deaths of four other children; infant mortality is thus equated, as much as infant birth, with the birth of a nation. There is also a reference to nursing and mother's milk here, as in the Susanna Moodie citation, implying that the mother's body nurtures and mourns in equal measure.

Two of the most significant events in Frame's life are the deaths of her sisters, Myrtle and Isabel, both by drowning. In the case of the first drowning, it is the mother who predicts the death of her daughter when she receives

developed photos in which Myrtle looks transparent; in the same moment the mother conflates the geography of New Zealand and a national epidemic of "infantile paralysis"(83) with predictions of the death of her daughter:

> When the photographs of Rakaia were developed, Mother gave a gasp of horror when she saw that in one of the photographs Myrtle appeared to be transparent: all except Myrtle had taken flesh and blood photographs. It made her feel afraid, Mother said, everything coming at once, the death of Grandma Godfrey, the beautiful Rakaia River, snow-fed, flashing green and blue, the Southern Alps with their autumn snow, the epidemic that filled the country with sadness and dread, and the sight of the victims who'd escaped severe paralysis, walking about with their leg irons to support them; all combined to bring to the surface the buried fear that Myrtle might die at any time. (84)

The final line of this passage is interesting in that it refers to the burial not of Myrtle's body but rather of the mother's fear for both her own child and all the children of New Zealand: the grave itself is represented here as the locus of a mother's understanding of her role both as the mother of children who emerge from her own body and as a symbolic "Mother New Zealand," like the "Mother England" in Moodie's work, or the "Mother India" we shall encounter in Roy's work; that is, the mother here makes an unconscious analogy between her relationship with her children and the relationship between the landscape of New Zealand and her children, her vulnerable child-citizens. After Myrtle is buried, the ritual markers of mortuary are quickly eroded, and the grave sinks into the earth of nation: "And soon the rain rained on the flowers, and the ink on the cards was smudged, and the coloured ribbons frayed and rotted, and the grave itself sunk until it was level with the earth" (86-87).

When, some ten years after the death of Myrtle, a second sister, Isabel, also drowns, Frame again links the death to a sense of nation: "This new death came as an epilogue to the old stories and a prologue to the new, in our own land where the 'great sea' and the rivers would speak for us and we would 'speak for ourselves'" (208). This passage immediately follows references to the work of T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Hardy and the Bronte sisters, and so Frame clearly equates the emergent voice of a post-

colonial national literature with the death of her sister. As I suggested earlier, modern constructions of death tend to foreground the discursive qualities of mortuary ritual and mortality itself; child mortality becomes implicated in a female-centred representation of nation where the mother is not a generalized or archetypal "mother Earth" but rather is an historically situated "mother nation/state," actively engaged in nation-making through reproduction. As Charles Sugnet points out in an article about Zimbabwean writer Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel Nervous Conditions, when a writer (most often a woman, undoubtedly) "refus[es] the usual terms of heroic, masculine, national narrative" and "center[s] on a particular, dynamic woman" (as does *Nervous Conditions*), then the text "is in no danger of producing a univocal Woman, who can be allegorized to serve the national purpose." Sugnet's further comments about *Nervous Conditions* apply equally to all of the texts included in this study:

> ...because the narrator is the writer of her own account and therefore in some senses a maker of history and a producer of knowledge, the novel connects the "old deep places" of childhood, homestead, and inner self with history, change, and agency, rather than isolating them in some eternal essence of Woman/Landscape/Nation. (42)

• This is an important point to make: because the particular construction of nation which I am delineating here is so firmly grounded in the grave and in the bodies of mothers and their children, it is not the monolithic, homogenous or jingoistic sort of representation one usually associates with constructions of nation. Indeed, it is made abundantly clear in these texts that the cost of the construction of national mythologies for mothers in postcolonial contexts is horrendous: Frame writes that after the drowning of her second daughter, "Mother's burden was unthinkable" (208) and further on that "Mother was bewildered, her eyes were frightened and her hair beneath the 'picture hat' of straw had turned from brown-grey to white" (209). It is as though through the deaths of her children, Frame's mother has merged with the landscape of New Zealand itself, taking into her body "the beautiful Rakaia River, snow fed" and "the Southern Alps with their autumn snow" (84).

It is this latter point—that the discourse of nation is firmly rooted in women's bodies in postcolonial women's writing—that becomes most evident in Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days*. In her memoir of the restless and violent history of Pakistan's independence, it is a mother, Suleri's sister, Ifat, who dies. Through the story of Ifat's brutal murder, Suleri's narrative weaves together the history of an emergent nation with conceptions of maternity and death. At the time of her first pregnancy and delivery, Ifat tells Suleri that "Men live in homes, and women live in bodies." Suleri continues,

> For she was preoccupied with the creature living inside her: I could watch her make a dwelling of her demeanor, a startling place in which to live. My heart was wrenched to see her lying there later, with her infant boy next to her side, red and wrinkled as an infant is after living so long in water! Ifat's eyes smiled at me from her bed, as she lay with her beauty and her discourse and now a baby, too. (143)

The homes of men, including their homelands, Suleri suggests, are abstract, constructed entirely outside of their bodies; women know intimately that our first homes are within the bodies of women, and these are the homes which precede nations and from which nations may emerge. In a later conversation, Ifat makes this association between home and women's bodies explicit:

> "Oh, home is where your mother is, one; it is when you are mother, two; and in between it's almost as though your spirit must retract..."—she was concentrating now, in the earnest way she concentrated as a child—"your spirit must become a tiny, concentrated little thing, so that your body feels like a spacious place in which to live—is that right, Sara?" she asked me, suddenly tentative. "Perhaps," I said, "perhaps. But when I look at you, Ifat, I am in home's element!" (147)

Not only does Ifat equate home with maternity in this passage, but the mother (Ifat) becomes a child herself in her concentration, and her spirit, "a tiny, concentrated little thing," becomes necessarily childish in the construction of "a spacious place in which to live," a place like a nation, but a

place which is "your body" above all else. Very clearly, nation is not regarded as an external, rhetorical formula which is taken into the constitution of individual subjectivity; rather, the nation is born from the necessarily female subject. Men may live in a nation, but only women can produce a nation—"Men live in homes, women live in bodies." As Michelle Boulous Walker writes of Melanie Klein's work in *Philosophy and the Maternal Body: Reading Silence*, "While Freud manages mostly to avoid the question of the mother and Lacan erases her almost entirely behind the linguistic operation of metaphor, Klein insists that we think through the mother's body" (141). Walker adds that "we can understand this complex process of object relations in Klein's work only in relation to the real mother" [Walker's italics] (141). The rhetoric of nation can never come close to the immediate authenticity of the maternal bodies of nation, Suleri suggests, because words feed only our minds, while mothers feed our bodies and our minds:

> I am content with writing's way of claiming disappointment as its habit of arrival, a gesture far more modulated than the pitch of rapture. In any case—although I did not know it then—to fall asleep on Ifat's bed was milk enough, to sleep in crumbling rest beside her body. Sometimes like water she runs through the sentences of sleep, a medium something other than itself, refracting, innocent of the algae it can bear and capable of much transmogrification. Her water laps around me almost in reproach: "You were distracted, when I requested your attention. You were not looking. I was milk." (186)

In this passage, it is Suleri who becomes a child, while the memory of her sister becomes the "milk" which nourishes Suleri's narrative.

Furthermore, Moodie, Frame and Suleri all link this representational network of maternity, death and nation with another representational network of water and nostalgia or memory. Moodie longs for England's "wave-encircled shores," Frame recalls "the beautiful Rakaia River," and Suleri imagines that the memories of her sister are like "water" which "laps around" her. In a psychoanalytic context, water may be linked to the womb and the amniotic fluid from which human life is born; the equation between water and memory in these passages further connects prenatal status with prelinguistic formulations of subjectivity. Finally, in each case, the prelinguistic

fluids of subjective ambiguity are also tied to place—to water that encircles or circulates through both the subject and the place where she locates her life, and, by extension, her nation. In Arundhati Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*, the connections between water and maternity are clearly implicated in the birth of India and Pakistan, a birth of two nations which is initiated ironically by the separation and loss of Partition which, in the novel, is symbolized as the death of a child.

The novel centres on children and their mothers. The mother, Ammu, and her children, Estha and Rahel, are the family at the core of the text. Estha and Rahel are twins who are separated from each other and then from their mother over the course of the novel; on one level, these separations may be linked to the separation of India and Pakistan from Empire (Ammu/Mother England) and then from each other (the twins/India and Pakistan). Partition is often characterized by Indian writers as a violent and tragic separation; when Shashi Tharoor describes Partition in his book *India: From Midnight to the Millennium*, he describes this event through a metaphor which we have seen to pervade postcolonial women's writing, the metaphor of birth:

> If the structures of British rule tended toward the creation of a united India for the convenience of the rulers, its animating spirit was aimed at fostering division to achieve the same ends. This seeming paradox (but in fact entirely logical construct) of imperial policy culminated in the tragic Partition of India upon independence—so that August 15,1947, was a birth that was also an abortion. (15)

In his speech of August 14, 1947, made on the eve of Independence, Jawaharlal Nehru also describes Independence as birth, but with a greater sense of the mourning and loss always already embedded in any birth: "Before the birth of freedom we have endured all the pains of labour and our hearts are heavy with the memory of this sorrow" (i). In *The God of Small Things*, the narrative of the twins is linked to memory, and on one level their memories represent the memories of a nation: "In those early amorphous years when memory had only just begun, when life was full of Beginnings and no Ends, and Everything was Forever, Estahappen and Rahel thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us" (4).

However, as time passes and the twins become alienated from each other, Estha ceases to speak and withdraws into himself, his silence taking the shape of a foetus within a "Spider Woman":

> He retreated into further stillness. As though his body had the power to snatch its senses inwards (knotted, egg-shaped), away from the surface of his skin, into some deeper more inaccessible recess. The silence gathered its skirts and slid, like Spider Woman, up the slippery bathroom wall. (89)

Estha's silence is triggered by several significant events in the novel, but probably the most dramatic is the death of Sophie Mol, a cousin of the twins who has an Indian father and English mother, marking her as the hybrid child of a postcolonial world. The children play frequently at an abandoned house on an estate across the river from their home, referred to both as "History House" and "Heart of Darkness"; it is during a passage across the storm-swollen river that Sophie Mol drowns, her death ironically signalling the end of the marriage of Britain and India, represented by her parents, or the death of empire on the banks of history and the "heart of darkness." After her death, the missing twins are sought by the police, "a pair of two-egg twins, hounded by history" (248). Again, death, nation (history) and maternity are linked in this text, for the children's destination of "History House" is also the destination of their mother, who meets her lover, an untouchable, there, in the "heart of darkness," initiating a series of events which lead to her separation from her children.

The "heart of darkness" itself, a metaphor at the centre of so much of postcolonial literature and theory, may be equated with the body of the mother, as a metaphor of the centre of the "dark continent" (as Freud so notoriously called women) from where the rivers of life and history flow. As Roy writes of "History House"/ "Heart of Darkness," "Rotting beams supported on once-white pillars had buckled at the center, leaving a yawning, gaping hole. A History Hole. A History-shaped Hole in the Universe" (291).

David Spurr has argued that the "heart of darkness" is "a modern trope which treats the colonized landscape as emblematic of the void which surrounds, or lies at the heart of, the human condition" (94). "The great emptiness," Spurr continues, "signified by the blank space on the map

becomes the site of a narrative colonization in Conrad's story, but also the site of the subject's terrifying encounter with his own nothingness" (94-95). Spurr's point about modernity here recalls the beginning of this paper, specifically the argument that mortuary ritual and representation has become more secular and thus more centred on materiality and the body in an epistemological shift which is essentially modernist. Or, as Ralph Houlbrooke puts it, "Some refer to the 'denial' of death in the twentieth century when what they really have in mind is its evasion or concealment" (15). Likewise, the "heart of darkness" is not denied but rather concealed, much as the history of women in the building of nations is understood to have existed but has also been hidden or silenced. As Charles Sugnet says, in practical terms, "nationalism and national liberation movements continue to be criticized for their failure to serve women's needs" (33). In a more philosophical context, Michelle Boulous Walker argues that imagining women in spatial terms—as the interiority of the "heart of darkness," for example—both delimits and silences women: "this spatial alternative is too simplistic as woman simultaneously inhabits philosophy's (empty) interiority while remaining exterior to the practices that would confer subjectivity and voice upon her" (20). And this, in the end, is why it matters that women inevitably must understand nation differently than men, as their physical relation to nation-making is different from that of men: it matters because this alternative place where nation is made not of women (the land being seeded) but rather by women, through their own bodies, is a potential site for the empowerment of women. As Rose Wietz argues in *The Politics of Women's Bodies*, throughout history, ideas about women's bodies have centrally affected the strictures within which women live. Only by looking at the embodied experiences of women, as well as how those experiences are socially constructed, can we fully understand women's lives, women's position in society, and the possibilities for resistance against that position, do)

Perhaps if men and women themselves were to come to believe in the truth of "the embodied experiences of women," including maternal mourning, to understand, for example, that nations are born from the blood and water and babies that emerge from between the thighs of women, then perhaps (but this is too naive to hope for, don't you think?), perhaps then people would be much more reluctant to sacrifice those children (borne within

their mothers' bodies, born from their mothers' bodies, and fed by their mothers' bodies) to those brutal and grotesque myths of nation which are abstracted entirely from the flesh.

NOTE

1. There are obvious associations between masculinity, death and emergent nationalisms, particularly in narratives of war and conquest. What I am interested in exploring here, however, is a specifically female construction of nationality that is represented through links between mothers, children and death.