
Article

Subject/ive bodies: the resistance poetics of Chrystos and Mahadai Das

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Abstract

Recent criticism has considered how literary texts harness historical and ideological forces in the representation of the body. However, much of that scholarship focuses on hegemonic structures such as Western medicine, post-human technologies or colonial race theories. This article looks at how two poets from the Americas – Indigenous North American Chrystos (Menominee) and Mahadai Das from Guyana – express representations of the body from a position of marginalisation to emphasise the connections between individual subjectivity and social transformation. I discuss the body as theme for producing a resistance poetry that directly connects desire, disaffection, sexuality and mourning to decolonisation. I perform close readings that emphasise the linkages between intimate relations and social movements. Chrystos and Das speak to a constitutive divide in post-colonial studies between the personal and political in what is called resistance literature. By centring deeply personal perspectives on decolonial struggle within a figurative context that encourages contemplation and complexity, these poets contribute to a diversification of resistance theory that addresses gender, anti-racist, sexual diversity and other movements of the last few decades.

Keywords poetics; the body; sexuality; feminism; decoloniality; pan-American literature; resistance literature

In the body's innate propensity, through its autonomous forms of being, to reinstate ways of knowing and to escape cognitive forms of control, it is perhaps closer to the literary than [it is to] most other disciplines. In confronting us with the legible materiality of the body, literature often provides powerful forms of resistance to socially instituted perceptions and demands.

David Hillman and Ulrika Maude¹

In her landmark collection, *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde makes the connection between the body and political power, through the lens of erotics; she makes the further point that poetry 'forms the quality of light within which [women] predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action'.² She draws a clear line between 'personal' cultural expression and political change, and yet a dogged criticism remains that poetry concerned with so-called intimate realms, such as a focus on the body, is dissociated from protest or the field that Barbara Harlow, following Ghassan Kanafani,³ prominently theorised as *resistance literature*. Elleke Boehmer has more recently identified the perseverance of this disconnect when she points to the fact that 'any shift to the indeterminate and the non-instrumental would have meant falling into the polarized divide between the inwardness and seeming purposelessness of a poetics ...and the end-directed sphere of political resistance'.⁴ Boehmer reminds us that the tensions which surround the social relevance of literary texts serve to enact a false dichotomy that cleaves literary themes and tropes like the body from the tangible stakes for bodies in public life.

Literature about the body is still relegated to the realm of the private, the subjective, the unpredictable, the unreliable – focused on what Leela Gandhi has deemed 'the small pleasures of subjectivity; its content almost entirely shaped by personal journeys, attachments, memories, losses'.⁵ Poets who use the body as a symbol or signifier are deemed too subtle for the polemics of resistance literature, disconnected from efforts to shore up those who are 'adherents and partisans of given organizations with national identities'.⁶ By looking at two anti-colonial poets from the Americas with reputations for political activism, I seek to connect those 'pleasures of subjectivity' to acts of resistance, to subverting a false dichotomy of personal versus political – a gendered dichotomy – in favour of extending the (sometimes rigid) boundaries of resistance literature to include the complex and ambiguous renderings writ large in poetry concerned with the body. A poetics of the body reflects and reconstructs lived experience in a way that can affirm readers' opposition to colonialism and patriarchy and explore connections between personal experience and political transformation.

Comparing the works of Chrystos, a Menominee poet, and Mahadai Das, an Indo-Caribbean Guyanese writer, may seem unusual due to their geographical and identitarian differences, but within a broader context of anti-colonial women poets of the Americas they share a reputation for sometimes nakedly political poetry – both have been directly involved in social movements – but also for reflection on social justice practice that is transgressive and defiant. In a review of Chrystos's oeuvre, Victoria Brehm argues that the poet is 'often anthologized piecemeal: as an American Indian protest poet, as a Lesbian, as an apologist for the underclass and discriminated against of any race other than white, as an environmentalist'.⁷ Donelle N. Dreese, in 'Reterritorializations of Self and Place in the Poetry of Chrystos', claims that 'Chrystos deliberately establishes a threatening relationship with particular members of her audience and characters in her poems knowing that survival on her battlefield entails destroying that which has armed oppression'.⁸ The political, even oppositional context of Chrystos's work is thus established in the critical response, but the deeply personal nature of her poetry is usually viewed as separate from her activism.

Similarly, Das is seen through two seemingly separate lenses as both a political operative and a poet of the senses. In an article in *Anthurium*, Joy Mahabir argues that Das's poetry 'emphasizes those capitalist relations that exploit women's labour'.⁹ According to Denise De Caires Narain Gurnah, in the introduction to Das's collection *A Leaf in His Ear*, the poetry 'charts from nationalism to disillusionment'.¹⁰ Beyond the critical reception of their work, both poets share thematic concerns that reveal the body as a site of relation between poetics of the subjective and resistance poetry: the linkages of pain and sexuality, erotics and injustice. And this may be no coincidence: both poets have experienced considerable physical afflictions. Das struggled with heart disease and died prematurely,¹¹ and Chrystos has mobility

problems, which she explores, for example, in the poem 'I Walk in the History of My People'.¹² Concerns of the body are therefore conspicuous in their own lives, and a point of focus in their creative expression.

Other biographical details about both poets can additionally offer some insight into the value of a comparative study of their poetry. Das's critics often point to her involvement in and subsequent exile from the Guyana National Service (GNS) under the leadership of Forbes Burnham¹³ as the source of the shift to disillusionment in her poetry. Chrystos's own voice is more readily available through the multiple interviews and public appearances in which she speaks directly to her participation in social struggle, the forging of political movements and her assertions about the political value of art,¹⁴ but she is also sharp in her critiques of those movements:

I feel I have failed utterly to affect [sic] social change, because there is still war, still rape, still prisons, still starvation, still clear cuts, still sexual abuse of children, still torture, still rampant injustice of all kinds. The world hasn't changed nearly enough to suit me, the Empress, as I joke. When I was young, I believed we (and there was a nation of us, then) would change the world. I didn't notice that many of us were there to get laid, dominate instead of cooperate, get back at indifferent parents, use drugs, etc.¹⁵

Chrystos's direct critique of members of the social movements she has participated in signals the critical gaze she brings to bear upon activism and organising in her work. She shares with Das not only a sense of disillusionment but one of critique in favour of an ultimate goal of decolonisation beyond national sovereignty, and in particular a recognition of gender and sexual liberation that is traditionally absent or muted in the nationalist movements of Indigenous North America and the Caribbean.

In this article, I examine comparable poems in two collections, Das's *A Leaf in His Ear* and Chrystos's *Not Vanishing*. Each poem uses the body as a signifier for social relations, contextualised by colonial patriarchy. Numerous studies have been produced which discuss the body in literature and literary theory, such as Rosamond S. King's *Island Bodies* and Tanya L. Shields's *Bodies and Bones*.¹⁶ Bodies in the poems considered here are subjected to racialisation, are regulated by gender binaries in ways that render the body itself as a public site, are connected to structures of domination, and are resistant to acts of governance and containment. Dreese's discussion of Chrystos divides the poems in *Not Vanishing* into a 'stark contrast between the love poems ... and the poems of resistance',¹⁷ thus, in my opinion, misreading the effect of her work by cleaving romantic arenas from political struggle. Lorde re-establishes that connection when she argues that 'the one reason the erotic is so feared, and so often relegated to the bedroom alone, when it is recognized at all' is because 'once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of'.¹⁸ Here Lorde makes explicit the journey from the body's liberation to revolutionary political change. Her discussion of the erotic is easily connected to an overall sense of the body's role in a politics of resistance and the poetry discussed here traces the complexities of those relations.

Das and Chrystos lay their poetic concerns over the sensual potentialities of the body in a palimpsestic way, where the body is haunted by a context of oppression. Pain, anger and disappointment are overriding themes linked to the bodies in these poems, but so too are beauty and indulgence and eroticism. Together, these poems demonstrate that social transformation in the Americas has many layers and, in particular, that the (feminine, queer, sickly, dying or energised) body can act as symbol, as signifier, as site of oppression and resistance.

As symbols, bodies connect speakers to wide range of readers. Chrystos and Das use poetic form to de-individualise experience and join it to a broader social context; comparing the poets extends such an effort to the similar struggles taking place across the American continent. King discusses the symbolic potential of the body at outset of her book:

The Caribbean body has consistently been exploited for its labour, in previous centuries through slavery and indentureship, and more recently through cheap labour for multinational corporations ...[and] sexual labour [and] sexual tourism. But Caribbean people have persistently used their own bodies for pleasure as well as work.¹⁹

The central role of the body in Caribbean life makes it an important focus of poetry concerned with social transformation. Similar relevance applies to Indigenous bodies in North America. Referring to Chrystos, Lynda Hall suggests that

to be at home in her present body requires dealing with past pain through representing the experiences in words, and opening the words to others who offer witness to her traumas. The healing process involves others and thus forms community. Writing shares experiences and forges connections, refusing isolation.²⁰

Bodies do representational work to symbolise structures of domination and the work of healing and resistance that crosses the boundaries of local, national or other identities, affecting both Indigenous and diasporic peoples opposing settler colonialism in the Americas (an opposition that is not without regional distinctions, but which also shares an overriding goal of decolonisation).

Bodies also act as signifiers, as representations with multiple possible resonances, that move beyond shared corporeal understanding and are refracted by the context of reception in the reader. Bodies are thus representations of multiplicity, evoking aggressions and exploitations but also pleasures and desires. The authors considered here represent bodies as complex figurations, sometimes chained and restrained, other times inconvenient and bothersome, and at yet other times formidable and beautiful.

In the close readings that follow, I focus on the ways that Das and Chrystos use the body to reconfigure our understanding of the subjective in poetry to address, consider and interrogate more overt forms of protest. Their articulations are acts of resistance even when the polemic is eschewed for the intimate. The analysis here is in some ways a recuperative effort, intended to demonstrate how crucial personal relations are to political readings of literary texts.

Creating meaning: beauty and erotic poetics

In the poems 'Bones' (1988) and 'I Could Carve' (1988), Das and Chrystos engage with questions of beauty and erotics, respectively, and connect them to political liberation. Feminist perspectives challenge cultures of patriarchy that exist both within a larger context of settler colonialism and within the romantic and personal relationships that exist in Indigenous and/or diasporic communities. By representing the body as symbolic of feminine beauty standards or lesbian sexuality, each poet offers a literary challenge to the reduction of personal concerns to mere subjectivities that lie outside a practice of resistance. The speaker in Das's poem uses the trope of 'skeletons in the closet' to explore a feminist resurgence that is embedded in the body and its sartorial decorations, while Chrystos's speaker also navigates the tactile and sensuous revolutionary potential of the body through same-sex desire. As Shields points out, feminist engagement is

not merely the recognition of 'the feminine', or the betterment of women, or attending to the representation of them; rather, feminism is a refashioning of the role gender plays in all our lives, in our worldviews, in our political presents and presence. It is about constructing a world across, between, among, and in spite of colonial legacies and histories.²¹

Poetic representations of the body, then, confront the gendered structures of oppression through the interplay of femininity, identity, beauty, erotics and pain. Gender is written on the body, to invoke Jeanette Winterson,²² and written into these poems through the explorations of these themes.

First published in Das's collection of the same name, 'Bones' (1988) affirms not only the various ways in which women's bodies are constricted, but also suggests pathways to their escape from the patriarchal spaces represented by the speaker's 'closet'. Closets are spaces that contain the implements of gender performance; they act as metaphors for sexual repression and secrecy; and they are claustrophobic crucibles in which discarded items lie dormant and forgotten. Beginning with the word 'grotesque', Das's speaker immediately associates her skeletal 'jewels' with the construction of femininity: 'prom dresses' and 'red pumps'.²³ But they are also petrified, their flesh having fallen away, and unburied. These bones defy a complete erasure; they represent gendered hardship and silencing, but their defeat is incomplete. 'After all', the speaker reminds us, 'it's not that they dwindled/into dust altogether'. By connecting gendered images to the metaphor of the closet, Das presents patriarchy as powerful, deadly, connected to femininity, but not omnipotent. The trapped figures, who hold the potential to develop into noisy 'golden seedlings',²⁴ continue to challenge the instruments of imperialism, through signifiers of glamour – prom dresses, heels, petticoats – that are associated with social gathering, frolic and budding sexuality, but are also markers of coloniality: the prom and the petticoat are key symbols of feminine life in US

popular culture and British literature, hegemonies which have dominated Caribbean cultural life and are associated with a vapid and pervasive whiteness. Heels are an uncomfortable reminder that Western femininity is predicated on fragility. Bodies in this poem are thus dislocated and resistant to these sartorial adornments as they are encased and reduced to 'bony blades'.

In fact, the bones grow agitated and animated as the poem proceeds, showing the body as the epicentre of resistant uprising. Proceeding to elaborate on the agitation from within the closet, the speaker affirms that their history will not be silenced ('They could tell a tale./They want a say, without doubt') is significant ('Someone should examine their story') and that they desire liberation ('They have no wish to stay in the attic./They want to be part of the world'). The trajectory of the bones in the poem is a liberation not only from the constrictions of the closet, but from a cold place to one of warmth and growth. Signifying both a North–South global dialectic represented by winter and spring, and a conscious emergence from a starved place of death into a realm of love and rebirth, the speaker places her liberation narrative in the body and its relationship to the earth. Bones decompose but are resurrected in the harvest. 'These bones could make more than music', the speaker informs the reader. The transformation becomes more solidified as the bones become implicated in an awakening likened to seasons and planetary renewal, a metaphor for feminist resistance evidence by the gendered nature of the bones' previous confinement.

Avles's review of *A Leaf in His Ear* argues that:

Das's vision for the liberated country and people is mark[ed] by inclusivity of race and gender. It is contrary to politics as practiced at the time (and continues in some circles) that tended to divide political parties along racial lines and relegate women to second-class citizens.²⁵

The body acts simultaneously as a source of memory, lingering in the speaker's closet, and of liberation, singing and speaking into the wind and the heavens. The poet represents this freedom by breaking down the stanzaic form of the poem in its last lines, when the bones' voices take flight:

full shape climbing,
 rising

helium balloon forever²⁶

Sound extends from the bones as flutes – instruments of the indigenous Arawaks – breaking free from traditional sites of burial and constraint in order to soar within the open sky. The resistance emanates and transcends the body; freedom is identified as never-ending by the speaker, forever, in contrast to the failed patriarchy that has tried to conquer the bones in the first place.

'Bones' represents a feminist confrontation with local and global patriarchy. The poet thus uses the (feminine) body to decry spuriousness that coincides with what Michelle V. Rowley has identified as 'the persistent political unwillingness of state-managers to aggressively pursue an agenda of equity for marginalized citizens of the region',²⁷ in which feminist resistance 'has for the past three decades been in a stranglehold of a Westminster system of government, characterized as it is by authoritarian and masculinized forms of "maximum" leadership'.²⁸ Lip service is offered to women as 'mothers' of the nation, but they are silenced as patriarchal coloniality persists in the independence period – a replication of which occurs in Indigenous resistance movements in North America, where Kim Anderson asks 'whether Indigenous male leaders are not only open to listening to but also *taking direction* from their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and their affiliate organizations'.²⁹ Das uses the tools of poetic symbolism – familiar figurative language and archetypal imagery – to demonstrate the political and cultural elision of women's voices in social transformation. Her speaker contests any attempt to bury women's presences, a reflection of the colonial and diasporic politics of Das's social milieu. The poem pushes back at the use of gendered systems that demand women's silence and absence. Focusing on the ways in which women's bodies are sites of subjugation and resistance, Das constructs a profound sense of resurgence and renewal.

Where Das uses the body – or rather its bones – as a symbol or metaphor for the domination and liberation of women, Chrystos seeks a productive expression of revolutionary thought in erotic encounter between women. In 'I Could Carve', Chrystos wastes little time on the oppressor and instead sustains a body-based radical space grounded in sexuality, indigeneity and desire. The poet forsakes traditional punctuation, instead letting enjambment and lacunae organise the words in a seemingly continuous

flow that emphasises sensuality and erotics. As in the Das work, women's bodies are the subjects – and objects – of the poem. Chrystos stresses safety, nourishment, nature, pleasure, connectedness and solidarity within the woman-centred sexual encounter. A resistant space is created that gestures towards the politics of liberation, but offers her readers an intimate relationship where 'no more bones cocks/horses drag [the speaker] in terror'³⁰ – the poem's sole reference to an oppressor. Beyond the predominance of the aroused and loving female body, the space created by the poet is one that is embedded in the natural world – stones, the moon, driftwood, salt water, the sun, feathers, smoke, fire, dust, granite: these elements play in and around the lovers in this lyric poem. The poem therefore traverses a similar terrain to 'Bones', but envisions liberation within a connection between two living bodies, not a lone resurgent one.

The speaker opens by signifying a conventional love practice – inscribing names into enduring surfaces – and juxtaposes that with a contrasting fleshly and sensory imprint. The double reference to the moon, followed by an emphasis on 'mouth fingers' and the rejection of 'cocks', associates the love with women, as does the provocative 'in' centred on its own line, a typographic choice that repeats three times in the poem, which not only signifies penetration, but also domestic spaces. Within the poem, 'in' performs a centripetal movement that adds new territory to resistance struggle; it adds sexuality and erotic life to the terms of liberation by connecting public proclamations of love with a forbidden (or marginalised) sexuality: 'Suns in our bellies as we dream of sleeping next to each other' proclaims the speaker. Struggle is therefore not only about national sovereignty, but about erotic freedom. In the home, in the bedroom, in the body; politics are literally and figuratively moved inside. Where Das's poem pushes the domestic and the feminine into the realm of politics, Chrystos's speaker politicises the domestic and the womanly.

Physical desire is at the core of the speaker's words, but it is not only a sexual desire; liberation, the desire for freedom, undergirds the poem. The speaker seemingly creates a space that is deeply intimate, where only she and the addressee are present:

[...] I could weave
your name through every muscle of my body black with longing to be
in
you Have your mouth fingers take me farther than the moon

Yet there is a sense that this desire, in fact the relationship itself, has emerged out of thwarted past. 'No more bones cocks', 'buckets of salt water to douse forgotten flames' and 'suns in our bellies as we dream of sleeping besides each other' all speak to a separation between these lovers that has been overcome. This can be read literally and simply mean that the speaker and the addressee were in prior relationships that kept them apart; or we can explore the figurative possibility that heterosexism's prohibitions and boundaries have been overcome. Reading the space of this poem as resistant need not involve direct and overt references to protest. Its creation of a woman-centred erotic space is an act of political resistance. Dreese has suggested that

the erotic poetry in [*Not Vanishing*] employs language that is highly sensual and imagistic with a centred, symmetrical presentation on the page suggesting a sense of order not always discernible in the other poems [which] provide[s] a site of refuge, a safe community, on [Chrystos's] battlefield where she can exist within an atmosphere that is loving and pleasurable.³¹

The poem is indeed centred on the page, organised in the pattern of a shapely body, its uneven pace and intermittent lacunae are suggestive of an emotional and physical struggle. What is key about Dreese's statement is not the division between the types of poems in *Not Vanishing* – which I have critiqued above as a false dichotomy – but rather her assertion of a single battlefield that represents a multifaceted terrain of resistance – overt, figurative, erotic, polemic. Despite the intimacy of the poem, 'I Could Carve' still takes place on the field of resistance by challenging hegemonies and enacting a transformative sexuality.

The racial politics of the poem are subtle; the poet works colour into her phrasing and diction to question presumptions of whiteness about the two lovers. In addition to 'black with longing', which immediately disrupts the colonial association between blackness and evil, the speaker uses blackness and darkness to soften, to offer a liberatory vision of erotics between women of colour. Black becomes the adjective for silk, a sexy and luxurious fabric; the women's thighs are smoky, not only from being at a fireside referred to earlier in the poem, but as a signifier that defies presumptions of whiteness. The

sensual and passionate environment between the women is rich with darkness, on skin and in imagery. Far from the notions of the civilising mission, this darkness is associated with an affectionate desire that is in fact slowed down, savoured, by the speaker. Breaks in the text arrest the feverish pace observed in the opening lines, disrupting representations of a 'hypersexual savage' without denying the erotic potential between the two women. The poem reroutes dominant sexual, gendered and racialised knowledges to emphasise the sexual lives of Indigenous women and women of colour that are politicised by the context of settler colonialism; yet can resist constant reference to dominating structures. The subtle but insistent method the poet uses for this emphasis articulates a feminism that marginalises forces of oppression.

Sites of destruction and healing: pain-full bodies

In her narrative poem 'Ya Don Wanna Eat Pussy' (1988), Chrystos uses images of the body to deliberately foreground the complicated interpersonal relations that exist under settler colonialism. The poet intersects various marginalised figures that reproduce colonial thinking in a domestic setting. Like Das, Chrystos connects emotional responses to the body as a site of oppression and resistance. In choosing to expose the contradictory effects of misogyny, heterosexism and racism, Chrystos deliberately engages with a decolonial interrogation of patriarchy. Moreover, the poem offers a shifting notion of solidarity that must often cross the barriers of gender and culture in a frenetic and difficult way. The italicised, all-caps rendering of a title that acts as vulgar joke instantly problematises identitarian logic in the poem:

YA DON WANNA EAT PUSSY
that Chippewa said to that gay white man who never has
Ya don wanna eat pussy after eatin hot peppers he laughed³²

The line is revealed to be both homophobic and sexist, mocking the bodily pleasure of women – it is directed at 'Two Native women chopping onions pickles/to make tuna fish sandwiches/for these six men ...' – and undercutting a sexual act that is often associated with sexual equality and women's erotic self-determination (a counterpoint to the expectation of fellatio by most heterosexual men). What complicates this act of aggression is its utterance by a Chippewa man, disrupting any presumption of racialised or cultural solidarity between him and the two women. The speaker is silenced by this misogynist moment between the men of different colours: 'I stared in the white sink memorizing rust stains/He nodded in the general direction of the windows behind us.' The lacuna that follows 'I stared' demonstrates the impact of the joke on the speaker; the description of the sink connects the comment to whiteness and decay, signifiers that traverse colonial relations with Indigenous cultures. The white gay man is situated in a contradictory space – he shares a marginalised sexual status with the women, and his own initial silence indicates a reluctance to join in the jocularity, but he is distanced from their racialised, gendered and, as the poem emphasises, sexual experiences. The poet thus demonstrates how the body acts as a site through which the disconnections exposed by colonial heteropatriarchy are represented even within and across Indigenous communities. Men can bond across racialised boundaries over their disgust at women's bodies, which shows the entrenchment of patriarchy as a pillar of settler colonialism embedded in men of all backgrounds.

The community and cultural disconnect with which the poem begins also disrupts an easy notion of solidarity. The women enact quiet domestic roles, their bodies having been rejected as sexual objects; they are instead rendered as cooks and nourishers, using their hands to provide for men who show no indication of reciprocating those comforts in or out of the bedroom (not that either woman would be interested, as the line 'Close to my tribe he'd probably guessed we're lesbians' indicates). The Indigenous characters in the poem have familiarity but not solidarity, a colonial condition addressed when the speaker explains 'Ya don wanna take offense at an Indian man's joke/no matter how crude/in front of a white man.' Adopting the diction of the Chippewa man underscores their shared 'tribal' community even while the speaker cannot abide the sexism of his bawdy humour. Yet the women do not simply accept the man's coarseness either, as the exchange leading up to her explanation indicates:

He said *Ya didn't hear that did ya* *Good*
She answered *I chose to ignore it*
I muttered *So did I*

A quiet resistance pervades the women's actions, suggesting the depths to which this invocation of bodily assault affects them. They register an objection, but the aura of heterosexism and violence, indicated by the man's potential 'guess' about their sexuality compels them to 'keep on doin what we had been doin' both then and when the gay white man calls the Chippewa a drunk: 'we both stared at a different floor/in a different silence just as sharp/ hot'. The threat of harm, instigated by the opening lines of the poem and fuelled by a context of settler colonialism, creates a pervasive environment around the women that requires strategic resistance. Pain is seen not only in the joke itself, but in the 'sharp hot' silence, the subtlety of the women's objections.

Discomfort is the prevailing feeling evoked by the poem. From the rough texture of the phrase 'ya don wanna eat pussy' to the awkward relations among the characters in the poem, the reader is made deeply uneasy. Relations in the poem are fraught and difficult, with shifting allegiances and scattered expressions of oppression. The only grounded figures are the two women, but their resistance is restrained and their pain is writ large in the images and feelings throughout the poem. The minefield of colonial patriarchy bursts in various moments throughout the poem with the women destabilised in spite of their potential solidarity: 'That Chippewa said *Not too much [tuna] for me Don eat fish/probably another joke we ignored.*' Buffeted on all sides, the women absorb emotional and physical impacts, foregrounding the sensory ways that coloniality plays out. Given the poem's typography – dialogue offered in italics, stressing its power; lacunae offering silence both contemplative and fearful; the identification of nameless characters by their racialised markers, sexual orientation, or national affiliation only; the appearance of the turtle at the end of the poem, which is present for the most personal poems in the collection – one can see how the fraught territory of the poem's subject matter is supported by its form. Bodies are both targets of ridicule and sources of comfort in 'Ya Don Wanna Eat Pussy'. The female erotic is denigrated by sexist humour, while the motions of the women present are rendered routine – 'chopping onions pickles'; 'doin what we had been doin'; 'stared at a different floor' – and stymied, set in a stance that is some ways contrary to sensuality. The challenge of disengaging from colonial patriarchy shrouds this poem, speaking to a more complex resistance strategy that pays greater attention to all elements of the colonial matrix, to economics, gender, sexuality and race, rather than relying on nationalistic impulses that seek to end colonialism while maintaining patriarchy.

Just as 'Ya Don Wanna Eat Pussy' explores the complexity enacted upon the body by colonial patriarchy, Das's 'Resurrection' (1988) is steeped in contradictory intersection of pain, memory, persistence and devastation wrought through the body. A body is described that nevertheless refuses to be consigned to oblivion.³³ In 'Resurrection', Das uses the body as a site of emotionally and physically painful degeneration, much like the figurative body in 'Ya Don Wanna', but also as a site of uprising and resurgence, a sign of the will to overcome. The opening stanza presents a body that is both 'triumphant' in resurrection, but also 'thin', 'weak', 'exhausted' and unable to 'claim glory for [its] victories'.³⁴ From the outset, a complex tension between revival and mortality contests easy triumphalism, glory and victory. This narrative poem, told in the first person, dwells on personal slights and petty angers as much as it does a longing for liberation and resurgent decolonisation.

The speaker's troubles are not hers alone: 'I ponder my history,/I see it in sullenness of roofs,/the droop of the willowtree.' A historical and geographical context is offered which allows for more than one reading of this body's marvellous and horrifying journey. References to Columbus and Jesus in different stanzas gesture towards the colonial context of the narrative (indeed, the poem plays directly with aspects of Christianity, such as forgiveness, the forsaken, divine knowledge, sacrifice and charity by dampening its resurrection with atrocious representations of memory and history). Meanwhile, the highly figurative use of such things as undertakers who 'pinion [the speaker's] dreams' and 'rejoice' in her death, while worms and maggots 'dare ...impunities' on her rotting body give rise to any number of resistant readings.³⁵ The body in this poem is a source of weakness and strength, at once a burden and a 'conqueror' of death that can brazenly 'engineer the morning'.³⁶ The poem's pathos evokes betrayal, malice and indignity while activating its readers' senses with moments of rot, encasement and pollution before turning to a hopeful and clear resurrection, a survivance tempered by ignominy.

Das uses the dawn to represent hope and renewal, much in the way Chrystos evokes eroticism, but as with the women in Chrystos's poem, a scarred optimism is offered here. Damaged by the indignities of the grave, but persistent in rising 'from this tomb', the speaker plays

an elegiac flute in silver hours
of a misty morning, calling birds with songs,
early grasshoppers, awakening the population

at your farm

I draw the sun out of his milky horizon
with invisible strings, as if I were a puppeteer,
and with my skill, I engineer the morning.³⁷

A complex uprising is depicted here. The speaker is marked by the horror experienced in 'death' and still laments her losses, despite 'hav[ing] reason/to blow trumpets'. Therefore, the freedom experienced by the last stanza is tempered and uneasy. She emerges and regains her powers, but not without the wounds of battle. Memories of defilement plague her, leaving the future hopeful but uncertain. By constructing this semi-triumphant journey, the poet uses the body to make space for uncomfortable truths and painful histories. By offering a body that is so thoroughly ravaged, Das deftly contemplates many questions that face questions of decolonisation in the Americas: survivance and resurgence, sectarian and interpersonal betrayal, unfinished independence and lost or reconstructed identity.

The speaker is represented as powerful, but her alienation is clear. Faith, belief and understanding are complicated for her:

The moon's fullness, its perfection, the deep
significances of its circles, elude me.
It is too round. My beliefs stick faster
with professors of worlds, penny-like and flat.

A highly figurative passage that exudes an alienated self that struggles to see what most others seem to (the perfection of the moon), while gravitating towards a more obscure affinity, such as writers or philosophers (professors of worlds) whose views are not so apparent. The speaker herself is therefore opaque, and dwells in opacity – at one point, in 'earth's opaque jar'³⁸ – as 'neither helmsman nor sailor',³⁹ eschewing a navigational role in favour of a pensive one that includes 'dwell[ing] upon [her] entombment'. There is political allegory in here, certainly, but also a figure that cannot be free without painful memory. Violence, betrayal and mockery – 'In my burial robes, they adorned me/with jewels from junk-shop disposals/and backyard sales'⁴⁰ – are enacted on the body, just as it is for the living women in 'Ya Don Wanna Eat Pussy'.

The speaker offers the experience of entombment as an acknowledgement of the obstinacy of domination. The two-line stanza 'I dwell upon my undertakers' faces/their elevated hopes that I may rest in peace' sets up a political and emotional reading before the reader is led through a litany of ritual ill intentions, foul sensations and improper violations by people and creatures that have reduced the speaker to a 'bloodless whiteness'.⁴¹ The unbearable details, such as maggots replacing a lover's mouth by suckling at the childless woman's decaying breasts, among other places on her body that she 'guarded with passion and suffering',⁴² reminds readers that the 'return from the abyss' is no easy achievement and that its memory haunts her. A divine and grim knowledge – 'I understand the libations/at the feet of the gods'⁴³ – reflects in the inflictions of history on freedom struggle. The pathways offered by 'Resurrection' are uneasy and precarious, muted and filled with demonic visions. Yet the speaker arises triumphant, so the poem is not without hope, but the journey is highly affective and therefore emphasises an aesthetics that does not achieve an unproblematic freedom but is nevertheless grounded in a sensual confluence between physical pain and the scars that remain even unto liberation.

Conclusion: embodied sites of resistance

With the figurative use of the body in the poetry collections discussed here – embodying the power identified by Lorde and challenging the dichotomy of poetics and politics identified by Boehmer – Das and Chrystos conjoin women's bodies to historical and cultural resistances in a way that confounds any attempt to relegate issues of gender, identity or sexuality to a personal and apolitical realm. Merging the political complications of issues such as misogyny, homophobia and colonialism with physical explorations of how history and uprising score the body and hinder its participation in an easy decolonisation serves an important purpose: to conjoin the personal, the subjective, the intimate, with public life, political struggle and social transformation.

The poems startle with their horror, their sadness, their violences. Yet they are no less militant or brave in their challenge to oppression. To unearth a resistant meaning within these lines is not to impose a polemical voice in aid of a particular social movement or protest activity, but serves rather to tease out an important and often overlooked (or disparaged) strategy of literary inquiry – the political reading – and render it more relevant, more complex and more important than ever before.

Notes

- ¹Hillman and Maude, *The Cambridge Companion*, 4.
- ²Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 37.
- ³Harlow, *Resistance Literature*. Harlow credits Kanafani's *Literature of Resistance* for her terminology. Cudjoe's *Resistance and Caribbean Literature* pre-dates Harlow's book.
- ⁴Boehmer, 'Revisiting resistance literature', 41.
- ⁵Gandhi, 'Postcolonial Literatures', 115.
- ⁶Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, 46.
- ⁷Brehm, 'Urban survivor stories', 73.
- ⁸Dreese, 'Psychic reterritorializations', 42.
- ⁹Mahabir, 'Poetics of space', 11.
- ¹⁰Gurnah, 'Introduction', 12, 13.
- ¹¹Gurnah, 'Introduction', 13.
- ¹²Chrystos, 'I Walk in the History of My People', *Not Vanishing*, 7.
- ¹³Alves, 'Review', 211; Gurnah, 'Introduction', 12.
- ¹⁴Bealy, 'An interview with Chrystos', 11–17.
- ¹⁵Richards, 'Chrystos'.
- ¹⁶King, *Island Bodies*; Shields, *Bodies and Bones*.
- ¹⁷Dreese, 'Psychic reterritorializations', 45.
- ¹⁸Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 57.
- ¹⁹King, *Island Bodies*, 1.
- ²⁰Hall, 'Writing selves home', 99–117.
- ²¹Shields, *Bodies and Bones*, 13.
- ²²Winterson, *Written on the Body*.
- ²³Das, 'Bones', *A Leaf in His Ear*, 66.
- ²⁴Das, 'Bones', *A Leaf in His Ear*, 67.
- ²⁵Alves, 'Review', 212.
- ²⁶Das, 'Bones', *A Leaf in His Ear*, 67.
- ²⁷Rowley, *Feminist Advocacy*, 1.
- ²⁸Rowley, *Feminist Advocacy*, 8.
- ²⁹Anderson, 'Affirmations', 86 (emphasis added).
- ³⁰Chrystos, 'I Could Carve', *Not Vanishing*, 93. All references to this poem are from this page number.
- ³¹Dreese, 'Psychic reterritorializations', 45 (emphasis added).
- ³²Chrystos, 'Ya Don Wanna Eat Pussy', *Not Vanishing*, 36. All references to the poem are from this page number.
- ³³Das, 'Resurrection', *A Leaf in His Ear*, 71.
- ³⁴Das, 'Resurrection', *A Leaf in His Ear*, 71.
- ³⁵Das, 'Resurrection', *A Leaf in His Ear*, 72–3.
- ³⁶Das, 'Resurrection', *A Leaf in His Ear*, 73.
- ³⁷Das, 'Resurrection', *A Leaf in His Ear*, 73.
- ³⁸Das, 'Resurrection', *A Leaf in His Ear*, 72.
- ³⁹Das, 'Resurrection', *A Leaf in His Ear*, 71.
- ⁴⁰Das, 'Resurrection', *A Leaf in His Ear*, 72.
- ⁴¹Das, 'Resurrection', *A Leaf in His Ear*, 71.
- ⁴²Das, 'Resurrection', *A Leaf in His Ear*, 72.
- ⁴³Das, 'Resurrection', *A Leaf in His Ear*, 73.

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