

Reading Closely

Discursive Frames and Technological Mediations in Carol Shields' *Unless*

The Framing of Violence in *Unless*

At the conclusion of Carol Shields' final novel *Unless* (2000), the mysterious trauma that has been haunting the narrator Reta's teenaged daughter, Norah, is climactically revealed. A piece of security footage has been retrieved, disclosing Norah's intervention in the self-immolation of "a young Muslim woman (or so it would appear from her dress)" (314). The description of this intervention is graphic and visceral: "Without thinking, and before the news team arrived, Norah had rushed forward to stifle the flames. . . . Stop, she screamed, or something to that effect, and then her fingers sank into the woman's melting flesh—the woman was never identified—her arms, her lungs, and abdomen. These pieces gave way. The smoke, the smell, was terrible" (315). The horror of this scene is framed within the medium of the security footage, a mediation that saturates the passage with uncertainty—the dialogue is guessed at, the woman's identity unknown, and the sensations and smells, readers must assume, only imagined. As a representation of violence, this passage is suffused with the unrepresentability of violence itself.

This scene, and its impact on both Norah and Reta, has given rise to a variety of often highly divergent readings. According to Elleke Boehmer, *Unless* is a novel concerned with the powerlessness of women and "the pain of misunderstanding and exclusion" they experience "on a day-to-day basis—a pain which, the novel tries to claim, connects women in the west with women worldwide" (119). Other critics, including Wendy Roy, Nora Foster Stovel, and Bethany Guenther, have noted the potential for transnational feminist community generated by the links the novel forges

between Reta's suffering over her daughter's trauma, Norah's commitment to live on the streets as a response to the experience, and the unknown, possibly-Muslim woman's tragic death.¹ Boehmer, however, is skeptical of these kinds of claims, and expresses her scepticism through a close reading of "the implications of Norah's intervention [in the self-immolation] as both a cross-cultural and as a gender-marked gesture" (121). The act of throwing herself upon a stranger's body in an attempt to extinguish the flames fails as a moment of "spontaneous, cross-cultural empathy" (120) because of how it is textually framed within the novel. The unnamed but racialized woman is constructed as a trope of "Third World female victimhood" through signs such as "sati" and "the veil"; the effect of this framing is to elide any notion of the woman's protest as political or resistant (121). For Boehmer, the narrative's focus on Norah's actions, and Reta's response to them, "replicates the appropriative moves characteristic of historical colonialism, as well as of certain forms of western feminism" in which white women pride themselves on saving brown women from "native patriarchy" (121).² While she concedes that Norah's actions could have functioned as a sign of transnational feminist solidarity, the narrative's denial of textual agency to either Norah or the unknown woman (Reta speaks for them both) contributes to "the sheer unreadability" of Norah's actions, leading Boehmer to conclude that "the scope does *not* exist for a cross-cultural or transnational solidarity between women to be successfully realised" within the novel (121-22).

Boehmer's argument situates precisely what is at stake in *Unless*: the capacity, or lack thereof, to represent, recognize, and respond to the suffering of others. While Boehmer concludes that the novel fails to allot the unknown woman adequate agency, I propose to complicate her analysis by introducing new ways of productively reading this difficult scene and, in turn, new possibilities for reading representations of violence and suffering. My intervention draws upon Judith Butler's recent work on the power of discursive frames to shape whether "we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured (lose-able or injurable)" (1). Working with the concept of frames, I read the scene of self-immolation not as a failure to move beyond stereotypes of "Third World female victimhood" (Boehmer 121) but as an evocation of the impact that mediation has upon how moments of violence are perceived. Focusing on the interaction between discursive framings and technological mediations of the self-immolation, I contend that the novel constitutes not a representational failure but an exploration of unmediated representation's impossibility. This exploration operates through a textual

engagement with the problem of reading: how does Reta read the self-immolation, and how do her readings shape our own readings? If every event, image, and text is framed by a context that shapes, without determining, its meaning (Butler 10), then scenes of violence like the self-immolation must be read in terms of how each framing and mediation constitutes its own palimpsestic iteration of the same moment. Only in the peculiar conjunction of, and discrepancy between, these various framings does the significance of the scene itself begin to emerge.

In *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* Butler offers an analysis of how frames regulate our “affective responses” (39) and our “moral responses” (41) to the suffering of others. While her focus on war photography emphasizes media-specific representation, her argument implies an expansion of this concept to encompass the very parameters of “the interpretive scene in which we operate” and through which the differential recognizability and grievability of lives is constructed and rendered normative (71). By recognizability Butler refers not simply to perception or apprehension, but to the production of a life within particular “schemas of intelligibility” that render it “intelligible as a life” (7). Grievability refers to the production of a life not only as recognizable but also as a life that matters. As “a condition of a life’s emergence and sustenance” (15), then, differential grievability reveals that not all lives matter equally within certain epistemological frames, such as those that render the enemy less grievable than one’s own nation’s soldiers. The regulation of affect “disposes us to perceive the world in a certain way, to let certain dimensions of the world in and to resist others” (50), thus shaping our sense of those to whose suffering we respond. Butler emphasizes the importance of critical consciousness of frames alongside consideration of how they govern our affective responses to the suffering of others, not attempting to move beyond representation but calling for a new way of reading with attention to the discursive production of recognizability and grievability.

Unless is the first-person narrative of Reta Winters, a successful author, mother of three teenaged daughters, and doctor’s wife living in a lovingly-described brick house in Orangetown, a fictional town north of Toronto. At the beginning of the novel, it is revealed that her oldest daughter Norah has, for reasons unknown to her family, taken up silent vigil on the corner of Bathurst and Bloor in Toronto holding a sign inscribed with the single word “goodness.” It is only at the end of the novel that the cause of Norah’s “dereliction” (120), as the novel describes it, is revealed to be her intervention in the unknown woman’s self-immolation on that very corner. The moment

is described in detail only once, though it is mentioned in passing at several other points in the narrative. Each of these references and descriptions is framed and mediated through newspaper (41, 117-18) or videotape (309). They are also framed discursively in ways that shape potential readings of the event in terms of either "Third World female victimhood," as Boehmer argues (121), or the privileging of Norah's suffering at the expense of the unknown woman's subjectivity through the description of the event as something that happened to Norah.

Surveying critical responses to *Unless*, Alex Ramon has described the diverse readings produced by these discursive frames; while some critics read the moment as "a destructive encounter with an anonymous ethnic 'Other' who remains entirely objectified by the text," others maintain that "the Muslim woman's 'exclusion' from the text" can be read "as a reflection of a wider cultural exclusion, an attempt to highlight the nature of silence imposed upon ethnic voices, rather than as a mere participation in that silencing" (172). The question of how to read the unknown woman's silence—as objectification or as a representational argument about cultural exclusion—is clarified by connecting the two types of framing. Attention to how the self-immolation is mediated sheds light on how it is discursively framed, as both reinforce how "genre and form" shape "the communicability of affect" (Butler 67). The narrative focuses on how characters' readings of the self-immolation are constrained by the media through which the event is framed, encouraging attention to the influence of similar constraints on how, or even whether, interpretation takes place. Thus, when Reta reflects retroactively that the event "was reported in the newspapers, though we didn't read closely about it for some reason" (309), the emphasis on close reading, as well as the ambivalence of her "for some reason," encourages a self-reflexive reading practice attentive to how the self-immolation is or is not read or rendered readable. In turn, this attention to the framing and mediation of scenes of violence calls for a critical approach that moves beyond accusations of representational guilt or innocence to understand how texts themselves inscribe and interrogate the act of interpretation.

The self-immolation is mentioned three times in the novel, each reference providing both additional detail and ambiguity such that the closer the narrative gets to understanding this event, the more mediated and uncertain it becomes. The first, passing reference mentions "a Muslim woman [who] had set herself on fire in Toronto. I read something about it in the paper" (41). The significance of this event is recognizable by neither narrator nor

reader—nothing connects it to Norah—while the identity of the unknown woman is framed as entirely recognizable. She is simply “Muslim.” The second reference occurs during a conversation about responsibility that Reta has with girlfriends at a coffee shop, in which the self-immolation becomes one of several examples of female suffering deployed as a generalized trope. This conversation offers enough detail to begin making the pivotal connection while also introducing greater uncertainty; the identity of the woman is still described as “Muslim” but only because of her “traditional dress”: “They never found out who she was” (117). Later, in a climactic revelation, the self-immolation is framed clearly as something that happened *to Norah* rather than to the unknown woman, whose unidentifiability is marked parenthetically in her description as “a young Muslim woman (or so it would appear from her dress)” (314). The ambivalence of the woman’s identity increases as the significance of her self-immolation becomes more overtly constrained by the narrative centrality of Norah. Such representational tension foregrounds the framing of the event as well as *Unless*’ concern with the impact of language on how subjects experience and interpret the world.

I am certainly not the first to note that Reta’s narrative is decidedly writerly and that an adequate reading must be mindful of her “tendency to view the world in narrative terms” and the resulting representational instability (Ramon 167). This instability is perhaps most readily exemplified by the telling gaps in Reta’s imaginative construction of her world. A revealing example is her fondness for imagining the previous tenant of her house, Mrs. McGinn. When Reta thinks of Mrs. McGinn—“I’ve never discovered her first name . . . but I speculate it might be Lillian or Dorothy or Ruth, something like that” (55)—she imagines her as “a woman of about my size and age. . . . Some essence has deserted her. A bodily evaporation has left her with nothing but hard, direct questions aimed in the region of her chest” (56). When Reta’s mother-in-law Lois (in a passage still narrated, of course, by Reta) reveals the “real” *Crystal McGinn* (297) it becomes apparent that the woman Reta had imagined functioned as a means through which she worked out her own anxieties about the oppression of women. This example might encourage readers to carefully consider other narrative fissures.

Similarly, the novel draws attention to the “structuring constraints of genre” (Butler 67) through its focus on Reta’s own writing practice, particularly her composition of a light comedic novel. *Unless* engages with its own fictional status primarily through the voice of Danielle Westerman, the well-known feminist scholar and poet whose memoirs Reta translates and whose “suspicion

of fiction" (105) increasingly infects the narrative, until Reta finds herself wondering "what really is the point of novel writing when the unjust world howls and writhes?" (224). Danielle's belief in "the consolation of the right word perfectly used" (102) influences Reta's attention to the capacity of language to shape meaning, and her explicitly feminist interpretation of Norah's crisis becomes another key discursive frame (218). The extent of Danielle's influence is evident when, mere pages from the end of *Unless*, Reta reflects on the completion of her own novel: "Everything is wrapped up at the end, since tidy conclusions are a convention of comic fiction, as we all know. . . . but what does such fastidiousness mean? It doesn't mean that all will be well forever and ever, amen; it means that for five minutes a balance has been achieved at the margin of the novel's thin textual plane" (317-18). Reta's meditation on the untrustworthy constraints of genre casts a suspicious light on the tidiness of Shields' own ending, in which the Winters family is reunited in the safety of their home. Reta's writerly narrative thus invites a reading that pays as much attention to what is said as to what proves unsayable, what remains at the edge of "the novel's thin textual plane."

Of equal interest is the iterativeness of Reta's narration, its tendency to re-narrate the same events with slight variations. Norah's presence on the corner of Bathurst and Bloor, for example, is repeated multiple times, often in the form of imagined letters that Reta composes in her mind (136, 165, 220, 248, 273, 309). In these passages she experiments with how to frame the traumatic event—sometimes as an illness, other times as a direct response to Norah's experience of gender inequity, or simply as an inexplicable tragedy. Reta's struggle to frame her loss in a way that renders it meaningful recalls Butler's insistence that there is no representation without framing. While these "categories, conventions, and norms" (5) are "iterable" and must "break from themselves in order to install themselves" (12), such breaking does not eliminate the framing altogether or offer some sort of unmediated access to a "material reality" (29). What the iterability of the frame suggests is simply that, through these iterative breakages and reinstallations, "other possibilities for apprehension emerge" (12). Thus Reta's framing and reframing of Norah's experience reveals her struggle to manage or comprehend an incomprehensible event. A similar framing operation is at work, I argue, in the novel's handling of the self-immolation.

At the heart of the narrative of *Unless* is the loss of a life that is ultimately framed as ungrievable, but in a way that foregrounds its very framing as such. Instead, the question of what happened to Norah is the almost-obsessive

narrative centre of the novel. Both Wendy Roy and Nora Foster Stovel have pointed out how the novel shapes Reta's quest to recover her missing daughter as a mystery with no readily apparent answer, although "[t]heories abound" (Stovel 53). Reta's overt critique of the desire for closure and teleology implied in the conventional ending of comic fiction, in which "[e]verything is neatly wrapped up" (317), extends to her doctor husband's desire to diagnose Norah. She describes diagnosis as "a rhythmic arc of cause and effect that has its own built-in satisfactions" (264) but that, compared to the "slow, steady accumulation of incremental knowledge" (269) (revealed through the novel's iterative narrative patterns), is simply too easy. If the novel's happy ending, in which Norah is safely returned to the family home, is presented as a narrative trope to be looked upon with suspicion, to be "read closely" as it were, so too is the "diagnosis" of Norah's trauma that the self-immolation seems to offer. Consistently framed and mediated, this solution to the mystery of Norah is rendered unstable and unsatisfying, demanding a reconsideration of what we, as readers, can actually know about this or any moment of unspeakable violence.

Goodness, Feminism, and Memorialization

The first detailed account of the self-immolation occurs in a scene in which Reta and her close friends Sally, Lynn, and Annette are discussing the problem of goodness. Sparked by the word Norah has emblazoned upon her sign—the word that has become her sole, opaque utterance—this conversation considers the gendered dimensions of goodness in terms of moral responsiveness to the suffering of others. Contradicting Sally's claim that women are excluded from the realm of "moral authority" because of their gender, Annette argues that such exclusion may be deserved insofar as they have failed as ethical subjects by not responding to the suffering of others:

Remember that woman who had a baby in a tree? In Africa, Mozambique, I think. There was a flood. Last year, wasn't it? And there she was, in labour, think of it! . . . [W]hat did we do about that? Such a terrible thing, and did we send money to help the flood victims of Mozambique? Did we transform our shock into goodness, did we do anything that represented the goodness of our feelings? I didn't. (116-17)

The examples that follow Annette's argument suggest that the women are thinking through their ethical failure in terms of very particular forms of suffering. They discuss "that woman who set herself on fire last spring . . . right here in our own country, right in the middle of Toronto," debating

where she was from—"Was she a Saudi? Was that established?"—and how she was dressed, in a "chador" or "veil" or "burka" (117-18). The other example is a "young woman in Nigeria who got pregnant and was publicly flogged" (118). These unnamed women are obliquely racialized, through references to "Africa" or a generalized "Muslim" identity, and the focus on their gendered bodies evokes the neo-colonial feminism alluded to by Boehmer, in which "[t]he western feminist's typical reading of the Third World woman as the victim of native patriarchy . . . is generally followed by an attempt benevolently to intervene on her behalf" (121). These unnamed women are implicitly victimized by a patriarchal culture metonymically signified by a veil or a public flogging. And the conversation does, as Boehmer suggests, circle around the possibilities and limitations of benevolent intervention.

The friends disagree about the extent to which they are responsible for, or ought to respond to, these kinds of crises. Speaking of the woman who was publicly flogged, one friend emphasizes the impotence of the kinds of interventions they feel are within their power, such as letter-writing: "A lot of people did write, they got quite excited about it—for Canadians, I mean—but she was flogged anyway" (118). While Sally insists that "we can't extend acts of goodness to every case" (117), another replies with an example of someone who did extend such an act toward the unnamed veiled woman: "someone did try to help her. I read about that. Someone tried to beat out the flames. A woman" (118). In the midst of a conversation about the impossibility of meaningful benevolence in the face of suffering, this single act of compassion emerges as a beacon of hope, suggesting the possibility of real and transformative goodness. The "someone" in question is, of course, Norah, as we later learn, but the framing of her intervention as exceptional sets the tone of the conversation, which centres on the familiar outcry: "but what can we do" (Ahmed, "Declarations" par. 56). Sara Ahmed discusses the politics of this question, which she calls "a white response" to "hearing about racism and colonialism." For her the question "is not necessarily misguided, although it does re-center on white agency." Ahmed writes that the pervasive question "can be both a defense against the 'shock' of hearing about racism (and the shock of the complicity revealed by the very 'shock' that 'this' was a 'shock') and "it can be about making public one's judgment ('what happened was wrong')." Further, Ahmed argues, "the question, in all of these modes of utterance, can work to *block* hearing" and it can "move away from the object of critique, or place the white subject 'outside' that critique" ("Declarations" par. 56). Ahmed's nuanced analysis links the question "but what can we do"

to a position of privilege and political outrage, complicity and compassion, while implying that these seemingly opposed positions are in fact part of the same complex of neoliberal white guilt that seeks to overcome its hegemonic position through an acknowledgement of this very hegemony. Many of these dimensions are evident in the conversation between Reta and her friends. They certainly express their shock at the suffering experienced by these unnamed women, while acknowledging some level of complicity in the failure to translate this shock into action; they attempt to align themselves with the women through the shared experience of oppression under patriarchy, but they also move themselves out of a position of responsibility by associating these atrocities with a generalized condition of injustice: “God, this is a brutal world” (118). The conversation about responsibility and intervention reframes the lives of those racialized women as ungrievable insofar as their loss cannot be translated into political action and insofar as they are deployed as tropes or examples rather than recognized as subjects. For Reta and her friends, the real problem is their own gendered oppression and how it restricts their capacity to respond to these subaltern women (119). The friends thus garner the moral authority to speak about the possibilities or impossibilities of ethical action through their “alleged distance from power” (Henderson 15).

Jennifer Henderson, writing about the life narratives of Canadian settler women, argues that the moral authority of white women is not antithetical to their perceived distance from official power but is rather constituted by it. These women, she argues, “occupied the site of the *norm*,” a position central to the operations of a normalizing state (4). She points out the tendency of literary criticism to narrativize women’s writing as “irreducibl[y] exterior[] to the machinations of power” (8) and links this tendency to “a liberal politics of reading” that praises the individual narrative as a sign of agency without locating it within the social histories that determine its possibilities (4). While disenfranchised and property-less women may historically have been excluded from politics proper, they extended their authority via the social, particularly through a moralistic imperative to “improve” the lives of racialized others (a process that inevitably constructs the “racial distinctions” it purports to overcome) (10). There is thus racial work being done in the image of the white woman attempting to improve the lives of others. The voicing of moralistic concern alongside a claim to powerlessness, in my reading of this scene, seems to frame Reta and her friends as *more* moral because of their lack of agency (a framing that will be complicated, or even

critiqued, in later scenes). The only form of agency that seems available to these women is that of selective memorialization.

The passage echoes with the language of memory. After Annette asks her friends to “Remember that woman who had a baby in a tree,” Lynn responds with her own memory of “waking up in the morning and hearing on the radio that a woman had given birth in a tree” (116-17). The other characters begin to offer their own memories, filtered through the media (radio or newspaper) from which they first learned these stories. Their language calls for an act of group memorialization, with the memories more often phrased as questions than statements, as a call-and-response through which they piece together what they know of these lost lives. While this act of memorialization suggests the kind of grievability with which Butler is concerned, critics have complicated the relationship between memory and the ethical responsiveness that Butler associates with the framing of a life as grievable. “Perhaps,” Susan Sontag suggests, “too much value is assigned to memory, not enough to thinking” (115). Judith Halberstam echoes this concern: “memorialization has a tendency to tidy up disorderly histories. . . . Memory is itself a disciplinary mechanism that Foucault calls ‘a ritual of power’” (15). Whereas thinking invokes a mode of critical awareness that might help us “[t]o learn to see the frame that blinds us to what we see” (Butler 100), memory places atrocity in the past and beyond the reach of action. It also, to repeat Ahmed’s argument, risks “plac[ing] the white subject ‘outside’ that critique in the present of the hearing” (“Declarations” par. 56). The moment in which Reta and her friends remember the suffering of these subaltern women is fundamentally divorced from a moment in which they could have been moved to respond.

Significantly, Reta and her friends discuss not the moments of violence themselves but their mediations, framed within discourses that shape the possibilities of responsiveness. The women’s affective reactions to these stories of suffering are mediated and thus, as Butler argues is the case with all affective responses, “they call upon and enact certain interpretive frames” (34). The mediating power of the various literal and discursive frames through which Reta and her friends recall the self-immolation (e.g., newspaper or radio, “goodness” or gender oppression) becomes particularly clear when the same incident is re-described via different frames and in a decidedly different affective register. The shift of the same incident between different frames, and the clear impact of these frames upon Reta’s affective response to the self-immolation, constitutes a moment of productive breakage. As

Butler notes, “[w]hen those frames that govern the relative and differential recognizability of lives come apart—as part of the very mechanism of their circulation—it becomes possible to apprehend something about what or who is living but has not been generally ‘recognized’ as a life” (12). As the self-immolation circulates through different media, Reta’s interpretation of the self-immolation shifts from a generalized example of women’s oppression to the cause of her daughter’s trauma. In the process, the operations of the frames that render Norah’s life more recognizable and grievable than the life of the unknown woman come into view.

Mediation, Spectrality, and Abjection

The final, and most detailed, account of the self-immolation is also framed in multiple and complex ways. The passage offers a self-reflexive representation of the unrepresentability of the suffering of the other, emphasized by its bookending between two discussions of the eponymous conjunction “unless” and its mediation through video footage serendipitously acquired. The stylization of this scene productively clashes with the affective resonance of a mother’s desire to spare her daughter pain, rendering the passage a fraught interrogation of representation despite its narrative framing as the solution to the mystery of what happened to Norah.

By the end of the narrative, Norah has been hospitalized for pneumonia, her self-imposed exile has ended, and her secret has been revealed. The chapter that discloses this secret begins with a reflection upon the writerly craft involved in the discursive framing of events: “A life is full of isolated events, but these events, if they are to form a coherent narrative, require odd pieces of language to cement them together” (313). While “unless” is introduced as one of these “little chips of grammar” that cement a narrative, the conjunction’s actual function in the chapter that follows is to disrupt and splinter the narrative by introducing the spectral presence of an alternative, untold history. “The conjunction *unless*,” Reta writes, “with its elegiac undertones, is a term used in logic, a word breathed by the hopeful or by writers of fiction wanting to prise open the crusted world and reveal another plane of being, which is similar in its geographical particulars and peopled by those who resemble ourselves” (313-14). “Unless” introduces alternate possibilities, the otherwise that undermines the illusion of inevitability.

Contingency, coincidence, and alternate possibilities are powerful structuring forces in the description of the self-immolation, when it finally appears:

Unless. Novelists are always being accused of indulging in the artifice of coincidence, and so I must ask myself whether it was a coincidence that Norah was standing on the corner where Honest Ed's is situated when a young Muslim woman (or so it would appear from her dress) . . . stepped forward on the pavement, poured gasoline over her veil and gown, and set herself alight. (314)

Reta did not witness this scene, nor has Norah narrated it to her. She has received this information by chance and through media:

If the firemen hadn't pulled her away in time, if Honest Ed's exterior security video hadn't captured and then saved the image of Norah, her back anyway, her thrashing arms, instantly recognizable to members of her family, beating at the flames; if they hadn't turned the video over to the police, unless, unless, all this would have been lost. (315)

The hesitancy of the first description betrays its reliance on conjecture, while the deliberate foregrounding of literary "artifice" is a reminder of the shaping force of Reta's authorial voice (and of Shields' voice behind hers).³ Once it is clear that Reta has accessed this information through security footage, the specification that Norah's actions took place "before the news team arrived" (315) both emphasizes the event's mediation and opens up a space that precedes and even exceeds that mediation, a space of immediacy that is gestured toward but that cannot be described. This scene is thus riven by a tension between the visceral immediacy of Norah's encounter on the one hand and the impact of various mediating and framing forces on the other.

Immediacy is evoked not only by the insistence that Norah acted outside the realm of representation but also by the image of her hands penetrating the flesh of the other woman, suggesting the possibility of an unmediated encounter. But in the very moment that Norah's fingers penetrate the nameless woman's body, that namelessness erupts again, as though refusing the appropriateness of knowledge: "her fingers sank into the woman's melting flesh—the woman was never identified" (315). Norah can touch the other but cannot know her, and for Reta—as well as for readers—even that touch cannot be encountered directly but is narrated at several removes. The woman escapes the literal grasp of Norah and the representational grasp of Reta by becoming an abject body that challenges the norms of intelligibility. Through its evocation of the untouchable body of the stranger, this scene recalls Ahmed's argument that there is no such thing as a pure touch in the present: the skin is materialized through a history of touches that determines what we already know about others (*Strange* 155). This mediating history is not unlike Butler's frames; both insist that other lives can be accessed only through filters that shape the possibility of recognition,

grievability, or touch. Ahmed wonders, then, how one is to “get[] closer to this other’s skin” without fetishizing her as a stranger (158). Her answer is that the other is encountered through her abjectness:

This other presents itself as vomit, as violence spat out into the world. This other leaks as pus, as infection spreading outwards from a wound. This other fails to be contained in her skin. The fluids which seep across my hands are not simply from inside you; they are the trace of the encounters that have already violated you before the skin-to-skin of this reading could take place. (160)

This insistence that the other is encountered as the abject is a logical extension of Ahmed’s refusal of an ontology of the stranger that would grant her a being outside the history of encounters that have constructed her as stranger (3). The abject other is beyond the signifying system that constitutes her as a knowable hence assimilable entity, and thus cannot be reduced to a trope or an example, as the unnamed subaltern women were in Reta’s conversation with her friends. In the moment of encounter this other dissolves into sheer unidentifiability.

The abjectness of the unknown woman is linked to her unrecognizability and her ungrievability. Whereas “the woman was never identified,” Norah herself is “instantly recognizable to members of her family,” even from behind, and the framing of the self-immolation makes Norah’s trauma seem both more recognizable and more grievable. It is described as a tragedy that has “usurped the life of a young woman” (309)—of Norah, that is—and it is on Norah’s grief that Reta’s narration focuses: “But it’s all right, Norah. We know now, Norah. You can put this behind you. You are allowed to forget. We’ll remember it for you, a memory of a memory, we’ll do this gladly” (315). Reta’s assurance frames the self-immolation as something that happened to Norah, and tries to displace the visceral immediacy of the incident even further by offering to take on the memory such that it becomes “a memory of a memory.” If Norah needs to forget this incident it is because the unknown woman constitutes a threat to Norah’s well-being that must be expelled. Yet this unrecognized subject cannot be so easily purged; she continues to threaten the boundaries of recognizability, to render visible the frames that govern differential grievability. She resembles what Butler describes as the “specter that gnaws at the norms of recognition” and that, in so doing, “figures the collapsibility of the norm” (12). Unrecognizable, unnamed, and both physically and representationally ungraspable, this woman is a spectral presence in the novel that reveals the limits of recognizability by being pushed beyond them.

Like the unknown woman, “unless” is frequently associated with the spectral presence of alternatives. In her first extended meditation on the word, Reta emphasizes the force of contingency:

Unless you're lucky, unless you're healthy, fertile, unless you're loved and fed, unless you're clear about your sexual direction, unless you're offered what others are offered, you go down in the darkness, down to despair. *Unless* provides you with a trapdoor, a tunnel into the light, the reverse side of not enough. *Unless* keeps you from drowning in the presiding arrangements. (224)

The “presiding arrangements” refers to contingencies like wealth, opportunity, and luck, the latter emphasizing the arbitrariness of privilege. Despair, on the other hand, is associated with “not enough.” In the midst of this passage, “unless” turns back on itself. In the first sentence it points toward those outside the circle of privilege: the conditions of luck and happiness are so over-determined and exclusive that “unless” seems to lead directly “down in the darkness.” In the next sentence it has become its own opposite, “a tunnel into the light.” This reversal suggests the interconnection of darkness and light, luck and despair, introducing into the image of the “lucky ones” the spectral presence of the unlucky. This is the spectre of the unknown woman bursting into the narrative again, insisting that the privilege of the “presiding arrangement” demands its supplement, those others who reside in despair.

If Reta seems to suggest that Norah should forget the self-immolation, that it should be re-framed as “a memory of a memory,” “unless” points toward the impossibility of such a tidy solution. Her promise to “do this for you gladly” is followed immediately by the introduction of uncertainty: “Unless we ask questions” (316). The implicit object of questioning is Norah and the self-immolation, suggesting that the event cannot be forgotten or displaced. The absence of a clear grammatical object, however, implies a more general state of questioning that, in its contrast with Reta’s promise to memorialize the event, recalls again Sontag’s distinction between thinking and remembering. Memory, as in the coffee shop scene, is a form of framing that determines the possibility of affective response. Attempting to reduce her daughter’s ongoing involvement with the self-immolation, Reta reframes the event as manageable. Such a framing, and the suggestion of its impossibility introduced by the word “unless,” recalls Slavoj Žižek’s differentiation between “*symbolic history*” and “the unacknowledgeable ‘*spectral, fantasmatic history*’ that ‘tells the story of a traumatic event that ‘continues not to take place,’ that cannot be inscribed into the very symbolic

space it brought about by its intervention . . . (and, of course, precisely as such, as nonexistent, it continues to persist; that is, its spectral presence continues to haunt the living)” (64). Reta’s offer of memorialization suggests the attempted circumscription of a spectral history that continues to inscribe itself even as it is foreclosed—in this case, by a happy ending. In the novel’s generically comedic conclusion, both Reta’s suspicion of how genre curtails meaning and the spectral memory of the self-immolation haunt the enclosed space of the household, reminding readers that happiness is only “the reverse side of not enough” (Shields 224).

Conclusion: The (Im)possibilities of Representation

Unless is a novel of interpretation, demanding readerly attention to the ways in which discursive framing curtails affective, and thus moral and political, response on the part of both characters and readers. The unknown, possibly-Muslim woman is a spectral figure who exposes the work of the frames through which differential grievability is produced. Her unidentifiability is underscored by the heightened mediation of her and Norah’s encounter, both through newspapers and video footage, and through discourses such as “Third World female victimhood” (Boehmer 121). This emphasis on mediation and illegibility invokes the ethics of the encounter with the other. As Ahmed argues, the other cannot “appear in the present as such” because she is always mediated by “that which allows the face to appear” in the moment of the encounter (*Strange* 145-46). Drawing on Spivak, Ahmed refers to this mediation in terms of untranslatability, “the impossibility that pure presenting, pure communication can take place” (148). The trope of translation thus suggests both the impossibility and the possibility of ethics; the encounter leads not to complete knowledge or perfect empathy “but to a sense of the limits of what can be got across, to a sense of that which cannot be grasped in the present” (148). It is in terms of untranslatability that Boehmer reads Norah’s sign, inscribed with the multiply-signifying word “goodness,” which she interprets “less as a claim of goodness for herself, than as . . . a confession to the impossibility of translating the other body-in-pain” (120-21). Untranslatability, like illegibility, points to an otherness that foregrounds the frames that generate differential recognizability.

The novel, however, explores translation as a fraught yet necessary “creative act” (3). When Reta expresses to Danielle her concern about claiming her translation work as original writing, Danielle objects: “Writing and translation are convivial, she said, not oppositional, and not at all

hierarchical" (3). *Unless* does not treat the creativity of translation as a betrayal to the text or event being translated, but neither does it attempt to elide their difference. Translation instead becomes a new kind of creative act, one capable of opening up a gap between event and memorialization. As Halberstam argues, the refusal of memorialization "unleashes new forms of memory that relate more to spectrality than to hard evidence" (15). The continued mediation and translation of the self-immolation renders the unknown woman more spectral than real, but also invites a reading attentive to the productive possibilities and ethical challenges of spectrality.

The self-immolation that troubles *Unless*, and that has troubled critics' readings of the novel, is difficult to read in part because it participates in an objectification of racialized bodies that arguably perpetuates the violence inflicted upon the unnamed woman. Rather than celebrating the novel as an ode to transnational feminist solidarity or repudiating it as an example of white liberal feminist constructions of "Third World female victimhood" (Boehmer 121), I read its deployment of various discursive and mediating frames as a means of emphasizing what Ahmed calls the "ungraspability of the pain of others" (*Cultural* 30-31). Refusing the idea that we can fully understand the body in pain as a sign of racialized violence, she asks how we can "bear witness to injustice and trauma without presuming that such witnessing is the presenting or ownership of 'the truth'" (*Strange* 158). *Unless* denies readers access to "the truth" of who the unknown woman was or how her act of self-immolation signified. Filtered through Reta's narrative voice and the unreliability of news media, this event becomes unspeakable and ungraspable at an ontological level (we cannot know what happened) that powerfully reproduces the ethical imperative to relate to the other without indulging in fantasies of perfect comprehension. The ontological ungraspability of the event, and the woman at the centre of it, in turn emphasizes the epistemological frames that shape what can and cannot be recognized or grieved.

Unless thus calls for a different set of reading practices attentive to the materiality of technological mediations and the entangled genealogies of discursive framings. In *Writing at the Limit: The Novel in the New Media Ecology*, Daniel Punday interprets the inscription of other media within novels as a means of exploring the constraints and possibilities of contemporary literature within an increasingly complex media ecology (37-38). Read alongside Butler's articulation of the impact frames exert on whether lives are recognizable or grievable, Punday's argument emphasizes a

critical shift toward understanding how novels engage with and are enfolded within other signifying regimes. The image of the video camera outside Honest Ed's, for example, raises the question of how the contemporary urban novel participates in or resists the production of knowledge as a means of securing capital; Lynn's reference to hearing on the radio about a woman who gave birth in a tree invokes the historical conjunction of Canadian nationalism and new media. A reading attuned to frames and mediations, and to what they reveal about the limits of representability, opens an interpretive space in which to ask what we, as readers and critics, have failed to read closely.

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NOTES

- 1 See Roy 131-132, Guenther 161, Stovel 69 n.19.
- 2 Boehmer is alluding here to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous equation of colonialism with "[w]hite men saving brown women from brown men" (50). For more on the critique of western feminism and its link to colonialism see Mohanty; and Razack, Smith, and Thobani.
- 3 While a discussion of the relation between Reta's narrating voice and Shields' authorial voice is beyond the purview of this paper, various critics have pointed out how difficult it is to distinguish between them (see Guenther 148, Roy 130, and Stovel 51). For the purposes of my argument I read Reta's voice as distinct from that of the implied author, while acknowledging how tenuous this distinction often appears.

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