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# Experiences of Modernity: Reading the Female Body in J.G. Sime's *Sister Woman*

KATIE MULLINS

JESSIE GEORGINA SIME's short story collection *Sister Woman* (1919) offers a vivid and candid exploration of modern issues as experienced by women. Lindsey McMaster considers the figure of the urban working girl in Sime's writing and argues that the collection "reveals the critical links between modern technology, urbanism, and women's work" (21). Similarly, Ann Martin, in her brief essay "Mapping Modernity in J.G. Sime's *Sister Woman*," explores the collection's presentation of twentieth-century modernity through her examination of conflicts between Sime's female characters and the literal space — the workplace, the home, and the city — they occupy. In her longer paper "Visions of Canadian Modernism," Martin focuses more specifically on how Sime's writing engages with the complexities of modern female experiences in relation to urban spaces and communities. K. Jane Watt also points out the collection's "commanding feeling of space, or lack of space" and the ways in which Sime presents such space as a "formidable, palpable presence indexing complex issues of power and individual agency" (290). In fact, common to each of these readings is a focus on Sime's depiction of the fraught interaction between women and the spaces they inhabit.

In spite of critics' largely feminist approaches to reading *Sister Woman* and their frequent focus on environment and space, little, if any, attention has been given to female characters' occupation of the most intimate and complex "space" that Sime presents: the body. I will examine how Sime's epistemological focus and her depictions of experiences of crisis, fragmentation, and incoherence are focused around an experience that is lived through the female body. The collection explores a tension between the female body as a site of power and sexual freedom, and the female body as constrained and possessed within patriarchy and the heterosexual matrices of marriage and reproduction. In challenging such social boundaries, Sime's stories often depict the body as serving a fundamental, productive role in her female characters' confrontation

of oppression and in their attempt to move toward a new era of liberation and self-autonomy; as Susan Bordo argues in her discussion of the female body, “conditions that are objectively (and, on one level, experientially) constraining, enslaving, and even murderous, come to be experienced as liberating, transforming, and life-giving” (93). Although they do not always fully transcend such conditions, Sime’s characters psychologically and physically confront the social (and bodily) ideals of chastity, purity, cleanliness, and youth that are presented in the collection. By examining several stories in *Sister Woman*, I will show how Sime presents the female body as a register of the conflicts of modernity and how reading the body may enable a new way of reading female subjectivity and identity in her writing.

*Sister Woman* may be seen to make reference to the female body even in form. Gerald Lynch observes that the twenty-eight stories in the collection are “organized to reflect either the phases of the moon or the flux of hormones (estrogen and progesterone) in the progression of a woman’s menstrual cycle” (236). His central idea points toward Sime’s interest in depicting a female experience that has at its centre a focus on the body. Through this focus, Sime reasserts power and authority over her text by connecting it to a specifically female experience. In doing so, she pre-emptively reconfigures the notion, as articulated over fifty years later by Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text*, that writing is “male” and the text an expression of the male body. Lynch’s response to this reflection of the female body in the collection’s form is telling: “the excessive number of stories in *Sister Woman*,” he writes, “also contributes most to its few aesthetic flaws. There are simply too many short stories” (237). What Lynch reads as excess may also be read as Sime’s aggressive reaction to the marginalization of female writers; the collection *is* excessive, *is* too much, because, like the female body, it has a history of oppression to overwhelm. The “excess” exhibited by the collection in both form and content (one might describe Sime’s unrelenting focus on female experiences as excessive) also resonates with Mikhail Bakhtin’s assertion that “exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness are generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style” (303) and with his discussion of the grotesque body as being one that is “unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits” (26). Such intersections point to the transgressive nature of Sime’s collection, which, although it may not exhibit an overtly experimental form

of writing, challenges convention in subversive ways. Sime's "recurrent tendency towards sentimentality" (Lynch 237) might be read as such a challenge. The lack of critical interest surrounding Sime's writing prior to the 1990s suggests that *Sister Woman* may have suffered from the "degradation of sentimental writing, made to represent the emotional fakery of women's pleadings, [which] has covered over the transgressive content of the sentimental, its connection to a sexual body, and its connection to representations of consciousness" (Clark 7). Yet *Sister Woman* insists we acknowledge such transgressions. Indeed, Watt argues that there is a "subversive, explosive" power in Sime's text that rejects the "alleged strategy of gentleness" in her writing (290). Not only does Sime draw our attention, perhaps excessively, to the female sexual body in the layout of her collection, but her female characters also demand that we recognize the important role of the bodies they occupy in the psychological conflicts they face.

Although I do not wish to suggest that Sime presents an archetypal or inveterate female body<sup>1</sup> that can be easily interpreted, I will show that she presents the female body as a site that both provides insight into her characters' individual psychology and subjectivity, and registers the complex issues of modernity she presents. Certainly, Sime presents a range of bodies that hold different kinds of, and sometimes multiple, subject positions in terms of class and occupation, and, in doing so, she emphasizes the diversity of work options available to modern women, even as she confronts the difficulties of having such options. Prostitutes, mothers, typists, factory workers, and privileged women at "home" all appear as transgressive bodies who confront their individual experiences of oppression and the constrictions of existing in a specific social class. By presenting a constellation of classed bodies, Sime suggests the multiplicity of modern experiences that women may live through. If one deconstructs the duality of the body and mind — as Alison Crawford, Eric Cassel, and Michael Lambek (among others) have encouraged in their varying disciplines<sup>2</sup> — then the body can be read as an expression of the complex and varying psychological processes induced by such experiences. For example, at the end of "An Irregular Union," the reader is forced to conduct a critical reading of Phyllis Redmayne's body in order to understand the conflicts and emotions she experiences. Although the narrator tells us that Phyllis is desperately enamoured with Dick Radcliffe, whom she fears is dying in a hospital, she also imagines

herself to be fiercely “independent and free and modern” (Sime 54). Phyllis earns her own money and owns her own house, and while she feels the pressure of the “tradition of centuries past” and experiences “moments where she almost certainly” wants to be a wife, she, a “modern Business Woman,” does not “want to be mixed up with things like that” (55). When she receives the news that her lover is healthy, her heart “swells in love and gratitude” (60) and she feels “blessed” (61). However, her bodily reaction to the news appears to contradict this rhetoric of elation:

She looked out through her little window at the early evening sky. She sat watching the lovely evening clouds going their majestic peaceful way. And suddenly — no one could be more surprised than she herself — she laid her head down on her two outstretched arms — and she sobbed and sobbed. (61)

Separated from the outside world by the window, Phyllis looks out at the moving sky, which metaphorically suggests the freedom from domestic life she so desires but cannot fully achieve as “Dick’s mistress” (61). Phyllis’s involuntary and ambiguous bodily reaction might be seen to indicate her relief, but the sense of restriction that is communicated as she looks through the “little” window from inside the house, and her troubled desire to be “an independent creature” (59), suggest that her sobs be read as a physical expression of her repressed internal conflict between fulfilling the traditional role of domestic caregiver and her desire for independence: an embodied experience of the contradictions of the modern world.

Narratives such as these, as well as Sime’s so-called conventional maternal feminism (Lynch 245), have lead Misao Dean to argue that Sime’s collection only serves to “redefine and reconstruct women in the role of passive partner in heterosexual reproduction with a relentless and predictable reiterative force.” Moreover, “Rather than representing a step into a liberatory narrative of subjective agency,” writes Dean, the stories “reiterate women’s subjection to linguistic norms” (234). Such a reading, however, seems to ignore some of the nuances of Sime’s writing. Although Sime undeniably promotes child rearing in her stories, she does so in a way that often challenges heterosexual traditions; for example, men “really don’t exist” for Sime’s Tryphena, who presents a mode of mothering that entirely excludes, at least for her, childbirth

and male involvement (“The Bachelor Girl” 192). Tryphena “lives in a manless world” and adopts a baby girl whom she intends to leave with nuns until she can earn enough money to keep her independently (192). In focusing on the presentation of bodies in the collection, it is possible to locate in Sime’s characters other aspects of “subjective agency” that Dean sees as missing from the collection. For instance, in “Munitions!,” Bertha’s perceived economic freedom in her new job appears inseparable from her acknowledgement of her physical body as strong and powerful: “She was earning money — good money — she was capable and strong. Yes, she was strong, not fragile like the little thing beside her, but a big, strong girl” (29). This awareness of her body and her increased independence awakens Bertha’s sexuality, which is expressed exclusively through a bodily description: “Her breath came short. She felt a throbbing. She stopped smiling — and her eyes grew large” (32). Although Bertha’s arousal is triggered in part by the thought of male contact, she experiences the sensation of her body autonomously. If Sime’s transgressive characters, such as Phyllis, are not always *fully* liberated from the conflicts or oppressions they face, it is because Sime chooses to depict the complexity and contradictions of modern subjectivity, which, as Martin asserts, “does not involve a transcendence of society, where the individual can disregard the limitations of existing class or gender or economic barriers” (“Mapping Modernity” 282). Locating instances of conflict, oppression, and transgression in the body, then, is one way to begin to recover Sime’s depiction of subjective agency.

Sime often sets up a bodily dialogue between her characters that replaces language with the reading of bodies. In “Adrift,” for example, the young former prostitute Émilie, who works as a seamstress for the narrator, expresses her hardships not through language but through her eyes: “we talked a little — a very little. It was her blue eyes that kept talking, saying all kinds of unsayable things to me. They had seen life on its difficult side. And when they met other eyes that could understand — they spoke” (17). As interpreters of the narrator’s experience with Émilie, Sime suggests that we, as readers, should be the “other eyes that could understand,” and that our task of “reading” Émilie, or other characters in the collection, should not be confined to reading spoken language, but should also take account of the body that expresses the verbally “unsayable.” Indeed, the narrator relentlessly reiterates how “Émilie [looks at her] intently” (23), and how her eyes “said things” (25), but does not relay

what she thinks is being said. The ambiguity of Émilie's communication implies that her eyes express an emotion that is inexpressible, "unsayable," in language; as Barbara Korte suggests in *Body Language in Literature*, "although body language in literature is necessarily conveyed with the use of words, it may still imply the 'unspeakable' elements of many emotions" (41). Émilie's and Phyllis's unspoken emotions communicate Sime's interest in human psychology. Émilie's veiled attempts to communicate with others who "understand" are also, perhaps, clues as to how we should read female subjectivity in Sime's collection as a whole:

Non-verbal behaviour transmits even the finest nuances of interpersonal attraction or repulsion. In the context of speech, it also plays an important role in regulating the conversation; it communicates the listener's reactions to the speaker and can either complement, replace, or contradict a spoken message. (Korte 27)

When Émilie talks to the narrator, her eyes repeatedly take over the verbal dialogue she shares with her: "her eyes looked into mine," the narrator relates as Émilie talks to her, "they had begun to speak again" (24). Like Phyllis's aforementioned unclear reaction to her lover's recovery in "An Irregular Union," the ambiguity of Émilie's emotions prevents a clear interpretation of her psychological state, but in being indefinite they also reflect the confusion and turmoil of living in the modern world; as Korte insightfully suggests, "body language which resists an unambiguous interpretation by the reader may support the impression of a paradoxical and inexplicable world" (87). Émilie's body, then, becomes as important in communicating her emotions, and Sime's themes of alienation, subjectivity, and conflict, as her speech.

Émilie's body, in fact, appears as a centre of conflict and contradiction: she has a "young body" (Sime 17) and laughs a "child's laugh," but her face is "full of past experience" (19) and she "looks old" (25). That Émilie is described in terms that recall both an old woman and a child suggests the binary of constraint and freedom within which she operates. Through prostitution, Émilie finds a way, temporarily, to transcend her poor, working-class status — in which she "earned nothing" (21) — in order that she might afford the "pretty things" she desires (19). Although she admits that it "is droll that for such [pretty things] we women sell our — souls" (19), she also makes clear to the narrator that she uses her body in order to get what she wants. Employing a dress-

making analogy, Émilie explains her desire: “You make yourself a dress — a little robe. You make it. How? You have no money and no time. And yet you make it. . . . You make a dress like that because you *want* it” (24). In her explanation, Émilie makes clear that selling her body is not merely the act of slavery that the narrator claims it to be, but rather the only way she can regain power and autonomy in her life and avoid the fate of her own mother. She may be slave, but she is also master:

“What is that word?” she said

“*Esclavage* — slavery, my dear,” I said to her.

“Ah,” she said; and sat and thought a minute.

“Yet,” she said, “always to see those things. Always to wish and wish — and gain so little. No change — no chance. Marry — and lead a life like Maman? *Esclavage*, ça! No. . . .” (Sime 25; ellipsis in orig.)

Suggesting that a poor married life is more a form of slavery than is prostitution, Émilie states that her decision to prostitute herself is “a choice” (25), which she makes wilfully and defiantly in order to remain self-sufficient. Of course, her position is a double bind: although prostitution allows her to live financially comfortably and autonomously, such freedom is only possible *because* of her relinquishing her body to men. The final line in the story, which describes the oppressive snow that drifts “up against the window pane,” seems to suggest this sense of entrapment (25). Still, Émilie’s position, however compromised, remains one of transgression and independence.

Sime’s presentation of the “modern” prostitute is heavily reliant on Victorian ideals of purity and cleanliness, which she renders in the dialogue between the transgressive Émilie and the socially “conventional” narrator. Indeed, Émilie’s admission into the narrator’s home may be seen to resonate with Peter Stallybrass and Allon White’s observation that “the ‘contamination’ of the prostitute seeped into the respectable home” (137). In addressing concerns of the previous generation, Sime’s depiction of Émilie blurs the boundary between prostitute and liberated woman, thus presenting a modern rewriting of a formerly despicable female “profession.” Although the narrator, who appears as a representative of an older generation, allows Émilie into her home and offers her an alternative form of employment as a seamstress, she appears to be deeply concerned with the “dirtiness” of Émilie’s behaviour, her “ugly, unsavoury tales of *uncleanliness* and dishonour” (Sime 19; emphasis

added). The narrator admits that she “[likes] to have [Émilie]” in her home (21), and yet is compelled to cry out in response to her deviant lifestyle: “Émilie, how can you live there? How can you live like that?” she asks, to which Émilie responds, “[one] lives as one can” (19). In light of Mariana Valverde’s argument that “for many Canadians prostitution was *the* social evil, the most important of a long list of social problems ascribed to modern urban life” (77), the narrator’s concern may be read as representative of a larger national concern about prostitution in Canada as experienced by the preceding generation. In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas defines dirt as “matter out of place” (44) and relates threats of pollution to social life by arguing that “ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience” (4). Émilie’s resistance to the narrator’s efforts to “civilize” and “tidy” her behaviour, her refusal to give up prostitution, exemplifies her transgression of an expected social order. As Émilie chooses prostitution in order to acquire a certain freedom, Madame Sloyovska in “A Woman of Business” also prostitutes her body in order that she might “keep [her] daughter *pure*” and “*unspotted* from the world” (143; emphasis added). Through their “unclean” behaviour, Émilie and Madame Sloyovska appear as polluting subjects who disrupt the conventional social order for their own independent purposes.

Often, Sime’s disruptive characters appear to embody conflicts that arise out of the tension between old and new, history and modernity. In “The Child,” Dolly, who becomes pregnant out of wedlock, fears that she, like Émilie and Madame Sloyovska, will be marked in society as “dirty” if she reveals her secret: “She knew if she broke her silence to anyone — any human being in the world — that creature had a right to turn from her in disgust and horror — almost as if she were an *unclean* thing” (98; emphasis added). Dolly’s fear of being treated as an object of “disgust and horror” may be read through the lens of Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection: the alarm caused by the loss of distinction between self and other, “the place where meaning collapses” (2). According to Kristeva, the abject is “what disturbs identity, system, order [and] what does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4); as an unmarried pregnant woman, Dolly may be read as an abject body whose defiance of social ideals situates her outside the realm of the socially, and humanly, acceptable. Additionally, Dolly’s maternal body appears as a physical symbol

of her social transgressions. Deeply conflicted, Dolly oscillates between experiencing a “tumult of remorse and fear” for her “dirty” behaviour and “revolt” against feeling such shame (Sime 100). Although we learn of these conflicts through the omniscient narrative voice, they are also embodied in the figure of the unborn child, who is both Dolly’s “enemy and . . . her salvation” (100). In this way, Sime locates dilemmas of sexuality and social expectations *within* the female body. Although Dolly’s “revolt” against social expectations of purity is not fully realised, it is part of an ongoing narrative of resistance against normative, oppressive restrictions on women’s liberty that runs throughout the collection. Indeed, Suzanne Clark exposes abjection at the narrative level by claiming that sentimental discourse “participates in the psychology of abjection” and that “Western culture has developed a logic which is at work constantly to purify itself of unreason” (10). Sime’s arguably sentimental writing may be seen to be participating in such a “psychology of abjection” and mirrors the content she presents through its challenge to patriarchal discourses of male power and sexuality.<sup>3</sup> The collection’s stance in both form and content against the purification of “unreason” points to its daring transgressive nature.

In “Polly,” the eponymous protagonist’s dialogue with the narrator, whose house she has come to clean, suggests a resistance to purification that translates from a literal to a social level. Complaining to the narrator of a woman who was so obsessed with the cleanliness of her home that she would “root up the very flagstones . . . to see if there’s dirt underneath” and “have the paint washed with the pure soap” (Sime 186), Polly defends the presence of dirt in spite of the narrator’s remonstrations: “faith, aren’t we told we’re made of the dust? And won’t it be ourselves scattering bits as we go that’ll make the trouble yourself is speaking of? We’re one with the dust, glory be to God” (186). Explicitly connecting the body to dirt and dust, Polly goes on to suggest the social implications of her argument by connecting purification and cleanliness to a specifically female domestic experience:

“It’s a hard thing,” said Polly, “when a woman has to fight her way after what men has done before her, getting her fingers in where there’s no room left for fingers to go, and rooting out the dust and the dirt out of their cracks and their crevices. All a man thinks of is how it’ll look when he leaves it at the first . . . and then the woman comes in at the door and battles with it all the rest of her life.” (187)

Although Polly's statement may be read on the simplest level as a commentary on women's work in the home, her earlier defence of dirt and dust as relating to the body implies that the "battle" also involves issues of purity and cleanliness on the social level to which Douglas and Valverde connect them: "if uncleanness is matter out of place, we must approach it through order. Uncleanness or dirt is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained" (Douglas 50). Polly's rebellious words, then, imply a resistance to a patriarchal system that imposes order on the body as well as the home. A similar connection between the cleanliness of the home and the tidiness of the body appears in "The Social Problem," where Donna's concern about the purity of her home and her body are conflated in the same sentence: "the masseuse who came regularly to keep the skin smooth and unwrinkled, the scalp specialist who worked at her hair, the manicurist who sat patiently over her nails — the . . . scrubwoman who came on Saturdays to get down on her hands and knees to scrub the basement" (146). The importance of maintaining order in the home and the body is brought into question in both stories: as Polly attempts to justify the presence of dirt, Donna's question to the narrator — "What's it all *for*?" — suggests a similar concern (149).

Polly's body, in fact, poses a threat to such order. Her experience, as a whole, is registered in her body: the narrative voice meticulously catalogues Polly's physical appearance from the colour of her hair, her size, and the texture of her skin to her intelligent eyes with "the fine network of wrinkles and little criss-cross lines all about them" (185). It is often tempting to read this voice (which persistently draws attention to the female body and to experiences of conflict) as Sime's own, especially given the overt parallel between Sime and the authoritative female writer character, whose appearance in the prologue and epilogue frames the collection, and whose voice seems to reappear to anonymously narrate several stories.<sup>4</sup> Although this voice frequently directs our attention to the transgressive bodies of other characters, it often appears as a voice of convention, whose ideas are challenged by the very bodies it highlights; this is the case, as previously mentioned, in "Adrift." As such, the dual function of the narrative voice often suggests Sime's own simultaneous engagement with and desire to break from previous literary traditions. As is the case with many characters presented in the collection, it is Polly's *eyes* that most obviously record her past experi-

ences and suffering; the male doctor she visits informs her that she has “scars on [her] eyes” but “take them off was what he couldn’t do” (188). Emphasising her age and the condition of her body, the narrator stresses that Polly’s experiences are both bodily and psychological, and encourages us to read her aging, worn body in place of an overt description of her life; it is Polly’s *body* that reveals the physical (and therefore psychological) “scars” from her lifelong “battles.” This bodily description exemplifies the collection’s relentless presentation of the aging female body,<sup>5</sup> which highlights concerns about social expectations that women should remain attractive as they age: “men’s well-worn faces are thought to convey maturity, character, and experience. A woman’s face, on the other hand, is valued for staying the same. Ideally, it is a mask” (Cruikshank 147). Certainly, and in spite of her rebellious assertions, Polly “[resents] age, and [fights] it tooth and nail” (Sime 185). The “untidiness” of the aging female body — for example, the erratic lines that run across Polly’s face — connects to aforementioned ideas of disorder; by this, I mean that we can read the aging body as part of what Douglas refers to as an “untidy experience,” as a kind of “[d]irt [that] offends against order” (2). In the context of Sime’s collection, the concept of the aging body becomes synonymous with Sime’s focus on the disruption of order; by persistently presenting aging rather than youthful bodies, Sime suggests her desire to resist social ideals and instead to depict transgressive, untidy bodies and the conflicts they suffer. In doing so, she presents another aspect of the tension between the body as both a liberated and socially controlled site.

The friction between ideals of superficial bodily beauty and the beauty of freedom is overtly presented in the aptly named story “The Social Problem.” Although Donna’s “dark hair and her luminous eyes and her unlined skin . . . and her round, smooth neck and her supple body and her arched foot” (Sime 147) appear to make up a veneer of bodily perfection, the ugliness of her internal dissatisfaction makes her seem “curiously old” (150). Like the caged “beautiful tropical bird,” Donna appears trapped in her obsessive pursuit for physical perfection (the standard by which she measures her worth) and a suitable man to replace the husband who left her (150). Certainly, “Sime was acutely aware that ‘new women’ had to cope with new difficulties as well as old models and rules of conduct that could still censure them” (Campbell 219). As part of her commitment to maintain her physical attractive-

ness, Donna decides not to become a mother because of the potential detrimental effects it may have on her body:

“If I had a baby,” she said, “I’d want ut [sic] to be an elegant one, you bet your life. But you can’t. . . .” She stopped. “Well,” she said after a minute, “you can’t. You’re all in if you have a baby. It plays merry hell with you.” She continued to look at me — and the thing behind her eyes gazed out steadily on life. “And so I guess you’d best leave well alone,” she said. (151; ellipsis in orig.)

Here, the conflict between Donna’s implicit wish to become a mother and her overriding obsession with her perceived physical appearance is explicitly connected to the body. Although she avoids becoming a “passive partner in heterosexual reproduction” (Dean 234), Donna does so for reasons that prioritize social expectations over her own desires, and thus prove just as confining and oppressive.

Like *Émilie*, Donna repeatedly communicates her discontent through her eyes as well as through language; the ambiguous “mournful thing [that the narrator sees] behind her dark and luminous eyes” suggests a desolate unhappiness (151). Donna’s attempts to “lose herself” by acquiring possessions appear as efforts to escape her internal conflicts, but just “as soon as she purchased the thing and got it home and put it on, then the unconsciousness — the losing of herself in it — vanished” (147). As her desire to “lose herself” suggests the severity of Donna’s internal crises, the “thing behind her eyes” is revealed to be more than a mere look of discontent (151). In fact, the unnamed “thing” — her repressed desire for freedom — appears completely disconnected from Donna’s conscious state: *it*, not Donna, gazes out on life. The implication here is a fracturing of identity, a split in Donna’s sense of self in which she and “the thing” are separate consciousnesses in the same body. This doubling suggests an embodied expression of the disjointed and incoherent experience of modernity. As the narrator watches Donna’s reflection in the mirror (a symbol of her doubleness), Donna’s dissociated identity becomes overtly apparent: “The thing behind her eyes sank back — and back. . . . It was like watching something go down through clear water to fathomless depths to sit looking over her shoulder at the reflection the glass gave back” (151; ellipsis in orig.). Donna, motionless and focused on her physical appearance, drowns her desire for liberation in the image of her perceived perfection. This ten-

sion between Donna's repressed yearning for freedom and her inactivity highlights another kind of doubleness, which Watt describes as "hope and action always in opposition to a stifling kind of stasis" (290). It is this narrative technique, Watt argues, that points to the explosive, transgressive undercurrent that runs through the collection (290). Donna's resulting fragmented sense of self, which we understand through the narrator's reading of her body, reflects her experiences of the fragmentation of modernity, but also subtly alludes to the conflict between convention and liberation with which Sime contends as a woman and a modern writer.

By examining the "fragmented and shifting nature of modernity and its effects on women's identities" in this way (Martin, "Visions" par. 7), it becomes apparent that Sime's depiction of the female experience of modernity, as lived in the body, sometimes borders on the traumatic. The collection highlights "the disproportionate suffering of women in an era of social change," regardless of its simultaneous valorization of women's sexuality and love (Campbell 219). In "Modernism, Trauma, and Narrative Reformulation," Suzette Henke draws parallels between wartime traumas suffered by men and trauma suffered by women through her examination of several modernist texts by women writers;<sup>6</sup> for women, she states, "traumatic events may cluster around experiences of sexual violation and/or pregnancy loss — physical or metaphorical wounds that devastate the psyche" (556). As *Sister Woman* was published the year after the First World War armistice took place, it is difficult to ignore the likely influence of large-scale death and loss in Sime's writing. ("Munitions!," of course, firmly situates the collection in the wartime period, and acts as a contextualizing story.) As Henke suggests, and as I have attempted to demonstrate thus far, such traumas cannot be separated into physical or psychological categories, but rather each informs the other; indeed, Alison Crawford has noted "the importance of the body, as a site for registering and continuing to register traumatic experience" (708). Although Sime does not explicitly refer to the trauma of the First World War, overtly traumatic incidents as experienced by women, such as Dolly's miscarriage, are presented throughout the collection, and seem to draw implicit analogies between experiences of death and trauma that are specifically connected to the female body and those experienced by men during the war. Sime's focus on women's

experiences appears as a refusal to leave the female body outside of discussions of trauma in post-First World War Canada.

In "Alone," in which death has an overwhelming presence, Hetty Grayson's bodily actions provide a way to read the trauma of the female position that Sime presents. In the opening page we learn that Hetty's lover, also her employer, lies dead downstairs, and later in the story it is implied that Hetty was forced (perhaps by him) to abort a child because of their secret and "illegitimate" relationship: "If she hadn't ever . . . had to lose it . . . there needn't ever have been any trouble" (Sime 14; ellipses in orig.). The "trouble" to which the narrator refers appears to be a deep depression, in which Hetty acts "so unlike herself" (14) and is not even "half-happy" (15). Frustrated at not being able to make public her relationship with this man, and facing his death as well as the death of her unborn child, Hetty feels a compulsion "to see a human face, if it was only the reflection of her own" (15-16). Yet, like Donna, the face Hetty sees in the mirror does not appear to be her own; the face is "stern and white, and its cheeks were wet with tears, and its swollen eyes looked at her as if from a great distance" (16). While she continues to look at her reflection, Hetty's dissociation becomes fully realised as she watches a "figure raise its arms and coil up the heavy hair that hung all about it, and make itself neat . . . rapidly . . . unself-consciously" (16; ellipses in orig.). Hetty does not control or register her own bodily actions, but rather passively watches them occur as though they belong to another: "She seemed to be just watching it; she had no connection with it" (6). Martin reads Hetty's "ruptured identity" as suggestive of "the pitfalls of domestic space, where the power of the master represents the power of the society that, if challenged, leaves the individual divided and conflicted" ("Mapping Modernity" 280).

Although I agree with this reading, it is also important to acknowledge the central role of the body, which is both oppressed and transgressive, in such conflicts. When she is forced to abort her child, Hetty's body is effectively controlled by her lover; as she recalls, it "was a choice between it and him" (14). It is not surprising, then, that Hetty's experience of dissociation is centred around the formally "controlled space" of her body. Martin locates a subtle resistance to the forced secrecy of Hetty's relationship in the words uttered by Hetty's reflected self: "she saw its lips move, and she seemed to see — or was it hear? — the words somewhere: 'and then it'll not be a secret any more!'" (16). Similarly,

Martin views Hetty's final act of lying next to her dead lover wearing a wedding ring as a "subversion of the law," and therefore as "a moment of resistance to the power dynamics of the household" (279-80). Common to both moments of resistance is the physicality of these acts. Hetty's *body* reorganises her physical appearance and speaks the words she sees or hears — note that even spoken language takes on a physicality — without her consciously directing it. If we refuse to separate the body and mind, then her body's physical reorganisation, its making itself neat, also translates to a certain psychological reordering. Similarly, Hetty's choice to position her body next to her lover's is a physical performance. Following Michael Lambek's theory of how psychological conflict engages the body, the agency of Hetty's body suggests that her mental uncertainty is "displaced and resolved by the certainty of [her] body" (737). Although Hetty chooses to lie beside the patriarchal body of her lover, the wilful actions of her body, which operate outside of any conscious awareness, may thus be read as a reclamation and reorganization of not only the "domestic space," but also of her bodily space.

Reading the female body in Sime's collection, then, allows us to recover the *experience* of modernity, and to identify strategies in Sime's writing that allow her to depict the "unsayable" aspects of this experience. In her work on trauma theory, Crawford argues that in order to give meaning to experiences of trauma or conflict, the body should be "allowed or encouraged to add to the narrative of experience or to add its own form of narrative" (718). Certainly, the bodies of Sime's female characters are central to the "narratives of experience" she presents, and reading these narratives reveals embedded modes of resistance that provide us with a new rhetoric of transgression. Recognising such embodied experiences enables an engagement with the complexities and contradictions of modernity as experienced by the female characters that Sime presents, and invites us to reconsider our critical understanding of subjectivity in *Sister Woman*.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Purdy insists that "[the] body' is *not* monolithic" and warns that critics should be careful to avoid blurring distinctions and simplifying issues concerning this line of study; rather, Purdy asserts that complicating issues of the body and exploring its presentation in literature may "open up new avenues of research" (5-6).

<sup>2</sup> Psychiatrist Alison Crawford argues for the "importance of attending to the body" (703) in trauma theory, and medical doctor Eric Cassel has similarly argued for a "rejection

of this historical dualism of mind and body” in relation to the understanding of suffering (640). In his work on spirit possession, Michael Lambek questions the separation of body and mind, and suggests that “states of body” are as important to human understanding as “states of mind” (725).

<sup>3</sup> For key theoretical discussions of modes of writing “through” the female body, see Hélène Cixous’s *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975), Luce Irigaray’s *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985), and Elaine Showalter’s article “Writing and Sexual Difference” (1981).

<sup>4</sup> In her biocritical discussion, Sandra Campbell asserts that the “persona of the narrator in *Sister Woman* and many of its thematic concerns are rooted in Sime’s own life” (209).

<sup>5</sup> This concern about old age appears in most of the stories in the collection, although it is perhaps most overtly presented in “Waiting,” “The Cocktail,” and “A Woman of Business.”

<sup>6</sup> The narrative excerpts Henke selects and introduces are by Hilda Doolittle, Dorothy Richardson, and Virginia Wolfe.

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