

**MANIFESTATIONS OF HYSTERIA IN THE WORK OF  
BERNI SEARLE AND DIANE VICTOR**

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## Chapter One: INTRODUCTION

Penny Siopis' work, *Dora and the Other woman* (figure 1, 1988), serves as point of departure for this essay. In this work, Siopis situates hysteria within a postcolonial context, something that this research would similarly attempt to achieve. In the work, an important, if much criticised, relation between racial and sexual discrimination is identified.<sup>1</sup> Siopis relates the history of Saartjie Baartman to that of the archetypal hysteric, Dora (pseudonym for Ida Bauer). Saartjie Baartman symbolises for Siopis the manner in which black women's sexuality has historically been interpreted in both a sexist and racist manner (Coombes 1997:120). Dora was diagnosed and treated by Sigmund Freud, who represented her desires as a pathology (Siopis, quoted in Coombes 1997:121). Siopis (1999:248) interprets hysteria as a condition that exists as reaction to patriarchy, and accordingly describes it as "the disease of the 'other'".



Figure 1: P Siopis, *Dora and the Other Woman*, 1988  
Oil and pastel on paper, 152 x 120 cm  
(Williamson 1989:22).

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<sup>1</sup> Okwui Enwezor, the artistic director for the 1997 Johannesburg Biennale, raised a concern regarding who has the right to representation, referring specifically to the "appropriation" of the black body by white artists. The ensuing debates were published, in *Grey Areas*, by Atkinson and Breitz (1999:42).

Siopis connects the histories of Saartjie and Dora in terms of their common status as other.<sup>2</sup> Siopis (1999:248) refers for example to their mutual status as “dark continent”, and speaks of the “colonisation” of Dora’s body (Williamson 1989:21). She also associates the histories of both women with scopophilic objectification, pointing out that, with both women, visual signs of their difference (racial or sexual), were fetishised (Siopis, quoted in Coombes 1997:121). Coombes (1997:111) identifies this as “paradigmatic of a western scopic impulse”. However, while Siopis compares the situations of the two women in order to comment on patriarchal oppression, she does not wish to suggest that either the precise nature of their suffering or the extent thereof, were identical (1999:245). Rather, Siopis (quoted in Coombes 1997:111) speaks of a “double subjection for black women”.

Siopis (1999:250) comments on the objectifying nature of representation, as it has historically been employed in coding difference negatively. In *Dora and the Other woman*, she implicates the traditional medium of oil painting in the process of objectification: the painting, for example, refers to representation itself. The photographs of Saartjie, referring to her objectification, emphasise the pernicious effects of representation itself. Siopis, employing the medium in order to critique representation itself, endeavours to expose the “politics of representation” (Williamson 1989:20-1). This aspect of the work correlates with the focus of this research as well, as hysteria is a disease which similarly engages with the limitations of representation.

Issues such as the right to representation, the objectifying nature of the gaze, possible correspondences in the experiences of those subjected to colonialism and those repressed by a patriarchal system, and, specifically, hysteria as response to such subjection and objectification, are examined in this essay. Siopis’ extensive linkage of the histories of the two women, precipitates the question: is it possible to posit hysteria as a postcolonial strategy – as a strategy not just viable for contesting patriarchy, but also racist oppression? That is what this research would like to uncover. In this essay, hysteria is approached from a psychoanalytical, feminist and postcolonial perspective. The theories of the French feminists, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva will be placed in a dialogue with the postcolonial perspectives of Homi Bhabha and Franz Fanon.

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<sup>2</sup> The term, other, is derived from postcolonialism, specifically from Edward Said’s discourse on Orientalism.

## 1.1 History of hysteria

Contemporary medicine classifies hysteria as histrionic personality disorder, a disorder which is identified by emotional excitability, theatricality, or other attention-seeking behavior (Yarom 2005:[sp]). It could entail sexually provocative behaviour, as well as linguistic disturbances and extreme suggestibility. Other symptoms that are associated with the condition include: fainting, breathlessness, asthma, hysterical paralysis and eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa or bulimia (Grosz 1994:40). Modern medicine acknowledges that hysteria is, in essence, a reaction to stress (Yarom 2005:[sp]). No underlying physiological cause for the malady can be identified. Hysteria, due to the suggestibility of its sufferers, can even be categorised as an imagined disease, according to Diane Hunter (1983:485). Contemporary feminism in general interprets the condition as a reaction to repressive structures, which fail to acknowledge fully or sanction female sexual desire (Bernheimer & Kahane 1985:5; Justice-Malloy 1993:133). A brief overview of the history of hysteria is provided below, in order to clarify the manner in which the condition has functioned historically, and to demonstrate the manner in which hysteria may comprise a subversive reaction to patriarchal attitudes.

The term, hysteria, originated in early Greece, where the disease was viewed as an exclusively female state of mind, as may be inferred from the fact that the word, hysteria, is derived from the Greek word, *hyster* - uterus (Peters 2005:124). Physicians ascribed the malady to the existence of a migrating womb; the result of the sufferer's violation of ancient sexual and reproductive prescriptions (Yarom 2005:[sp]). Accordingly, this affliction was seen as treatable only if the sufferer submitted to marriage and exhaustive childbearing (Bernheimer & Kahane 1985:2).

During medieval times, hysteria was often associated with the practice of witchcraft, as sufferers displayed suspicious symptoms that included partial anesthesia, "convulsions" and "mutism." The superstitious fear these women engendered provides an intimation of the formidable, if unmanageable nature of the disease (Bernheimer & Kahane 1985:2,3).

By the nineteenth century, the French physician, Phillippe Pinel (1745-1826), chief physician at the Salpêtrière asylum for women, proposes that no organic cause for the disorder exists. However, Pinel ascribes the presence of the disease to wanton sexuality and immorality. His enlightened position is undermined by his treatment of patients: he underscores the importance of enforcing the age-old remedy of marriage and reproduction, or, in extreme cases, recommending clitoral cauterisation or ovariectomies (Bernheimer & Kahane 1985:4).

The Victorian period in particular, may serve to illustrate the contentions of this essay. The most extensive and acute eruption of hysteria takes place during the nineteenth century. This is possibly because of the severity of patriarchal attitudes during the Victorian era, as suggested by Hunter's (1983:485-486), correlation of the condition with patriarchal repression. The treatments of two important Victorian figures, namely Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893) and Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) are outlined subsequently, providing a preview of those aspects in the history of the condition that are most relevant to this essay in terms of eliciting a hysterical reaction. These include: a faith in the authority of vision in ascertaining knowledge, the desire for perfectly transparent representation, and the projection of patriarchal, prejudiced conceptions onto the female other.<sup>3</sup> The reactions of the hysterical patients will be explored more thoroughly in the following chapter, in order to develop a clear picture of hysteria in terms of its destabilising potential.

The Victorian attitude is exemplified by the treatments of the neuropathologist, Jean-Martin Charcot, who compiled a history of case studies of hysteria in the 1870's, entitled *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (De Marneffe 1991:72-8). Charcot's overriding desire in his treatments lay with determining a physiological cause for the hysterical condition. However, his own prejudiced perceptions and actions prevented him from succeeding in this endeavour. While Charcot acknowledged that hysteria indiscriminately attacked both sexes, for example, he also attributed hysteria to female spuriousness, female "coquetry" (De Marneffe 1991:90). Charcot's treatment of the disease was ocularcentric, centering on the assembly of his *Iconography*. His typical treatment for hysteria entailed the photography of the hysterical acrobatics of his patients and the private visual observation of their naked bodies. This treatment was privileged to such an extent over actual interaction with patients that the latter was almost wholly abandoned (Du Preez 2004:48).<sup>4</sup>

Charcot, aided by his photographic equipment, endeavored to systematically categorise his patients at the Salpêtrière by employing the clinicoanatomic method that had been prevalent

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<sup>3</sup> Representational transparency refers to the establishment of an equivalence between signifier and signified.

<sup>4</sup> Charcot had particular faith in the objective nature of photography in facilitating a scientific methodology. De Marneffe (1991:79) explains: "Photography was ... established as a more perfect extension of the clinician's eye, a means of [a metaphor for] recording objective truth and knowledge." Charcot's penetrative gaze was objectifying, and served to make the gap between himself and his patients wider. The use of the camera only reinforced the objectifying distinction which separated the physician from his patients. The camera ultimately "disavow[ed] the observer's perspective in the process of fashioning reality" so that Charcot underestimated the influence of his own prejudiced point of view in his treatments (De Marneffe 1991:106).

since the late eighteenth century (De Marneffe 1991:73). This method entailed the rigorous classification of appearances and gestures according to types, in order to identify physical stigmata for hysteria: Charcot sought to identify a biological cause or a hereditary defect that could be seen as responsible for the condition, to determine universal laws that it would be subject to (Du Preez 2004:48; De Marneffe 1991:75). However, as will become apparent, Charcot's scrutiny was only met with "improper" and mystifying representations on the part of his patients: the symptoms of the patients were incongruous with their biological cause, or rather, lack thereof (Grzanic 1999:[sp]). De Marneffe (1991:76) points out that Charcot's unrelenting, ocularcentric pursuit of an underlying physiological cause was based upon the fundamental assumption that the internal may be surmised by the close observation of external appearance. She compares this process to the dehumanising system of phrenology, which similarly dismisses surface in favour of depth. The disease confounded Charcot's desire for representational transparency: the simulated or imaginary symptoms, rather than bearing evidence of deep-lying physiological problems, merely served to mystify the physician. This is typical of the condition, as the symptoms of hysteria do not refer to a signified inner content, but are, rather, representations of repression itself (as will be clarified). Grzanic (1999:[sp]) indicates that this *trompe l'oeil* aspect of hysteria, where symptoms are simulations, divorced from an internal signified, serves to discredit the authority of vision, to call into question its ability to perceive and know. This characteristic of hysteria, where symptoms confound those who believe in transparent representation, will be examined more thoroughly in this essay, according to the concept of poetic language.

The photographs that Charcot took, far from providing him with objective evidence of real hysterical symptoms, did little more than suggest the hysterical tendency towards mimetic over-compliance – as is apparent in the many exhibitionistic erotic poses and exaggerated bodily contortions that adorn Charcot's Iconography (figure 2, 1870). The patients obliged the doctor's desire to document symptoms to the point of exaggeration, and the resulting embellishment of symptoms resulted in imagery wholly unsuitable to any scientific endeavour, as pointed out by De Marneffe (1991:73; Du Preez 2004:49). Note that the over-compliance and suggestibility of the hysteric may also manifest in other ways, as will be demonstrated according to the concept of abjection, in the following chapters.





Figure 2: J.M Charcot. *Hystéro-épilepsie – Contracture*  
from *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière*, c. 1870  
(De Marneffe 1991:82).

Charcot's attempt to find universal rules that the disease was subjected to, was further confounded when, in 1870, the hospital was restructured and his hysterics were placed in the same ward as epileptic patients: the suggestible hysterics, be it consciously or not, perfected their elaborate sequences of the hysterical attack by mimicking the seizures of their fellow epileptic inmates (De Marneffe 1991:74). The aspect of the condition, mimicry, has been valorised by feminists such as Luce Irigaray, and will be examined accordingly in the following chapters.

Sigmund Freud, Charcot's contemporary, initially interpreted hysteria and its symptomatic episodes as being re-enactments of memories of sexual trauma (De Marneffe 1991:93). He would, however, soon discover that the narratives of his patients were, for the most part, fictional, abandon this seduction theory and attribute the symptoms such as mutism, paralysis and theatricality to the repression of desire (Toews 1991:511).

In contrast with the precedence that Charcot gave to visual observation and the pursuit of a biological cause, Freud used verbal interaction in his therapeutic practice and sought a psychological basis for the disease (De Marneffe 1991:91). Freud interpreted hysteria as a longing for the pre-oedipal subject position, a tendency which he considered to be psychologically regressive.<sup>5</sup> In his treatments he emphasised the necessity of entering the social and cultural domain by relinquishing one's relation to the maternal and the bodily (Oliver 2000:5). Although Freud's treatment was less objectifying than that of Charcot, he still endeavoured above all to translate everything into knowledge, to translate the desires of his patients into coherent narratives; he sought to reconcile their desires to the Symbolic Order.<sup>6</sup> This overwhelming desire, to form a coherent narrative for each case, inhibited an accurate interpretation of hysterical symptoms, according to Dove (1992:67), as the disease, by its very nature, falls outside the grasp of the Symbolic system, which cannot adequately account for feminine desires.

The more recent view of the psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) also does not adequately acknowledge and condone the existence of the desire of an other outside of the Symbolic (as will become evident in his delineation of this system, discussed subsequently). Lacan interprets hysteria as a neurosis. This implies that the hysteric actually desires the desire of the other, and therefore actively constitutes herself as that which the other desires (Fink 1997:54). Lacan indicates that the hysteric constantly attempts to suppress Symbolic regulation, the paternal law, which, in turn, accordingly, excessively, reasserts itself in an attempt to deny the hysteric *jouissance* (whereof the hysteric nevertheless occasionally experiences eruptions).<sup>7</sup> The ostensible result of this internal conflict is that the hysteric's libido is channeled from her body as a whole to a few erogenous zones. Fink (1997:97) suggests that, in terms of Lacan's account, the physical body of the hysteric, save for the few erogenous zones still experiencing *jouissance*, animated by the Real, should consequently be called a corpse: it is so extensively overwritten by the Symbolic Order, that its bodily drives and desires are wholly dissipated.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Freud's interpretation of hysteria as an evocation of the pre-oedipal period is echoed by many contemporary feminists (Yarom 2005:[sp]; Rose 1985:136), who value this period of maternal symbiosis.

<sup>6</sup> The Symbolic Order is the term developed by Lacan to refer to the linguistic realm – it has a specific meaning within psychoanalysis, which is retained in this essay. A definition is provided later in this introduction.

<sup>7</sup> The term, *jouissance*, refers to an experience of bodily drives, a specifically feminine form of bodily pleasure. Kristeva uses the term to refer to pre-oedipal pleasure (Jones 1984:59). If the word is interpreted literally, it means orgasm (Rose & Mitchell 1985:32).

<sup>8</sup> This interpretation is reiterated by Foucault, who interprets hysteria as the total infiltration of a woman's body by power (Grosz 1994:157). The term, Real is described by Lacan as the part of the human psyche

The preceding chronology suggests that hysteria, to some extent, defies the patriarchal desire to dismiss the other and the corporeal. It poses a challenge to those who discount the superficial or corporeal in favour of depth; that is, it challenges the belief in transparency. This aspect, faith in representational transparency, structures the Symbolic Order, as will be clarified below.

## 1.2 The Symbolic Order

Lacan uses the term, Symbolic Order, to describe the whole social and linguistic realm (Boothby 1991:18). The Symbolic Order is marked by regulation and repression; a subject enters the Symbolic Order, that is, is integrated into society itself, only once he or she has assimilated its laws (Taylor 1987:89,98). The concept of the Symbolic Order is central to this essay. The exclusionary aspect of the Symbolic is posited as stimulating the hysterical reaction in the first place (this is based on the principle that hysteria comprises a reaction to patriarchal repression). As will be demonstrated, hysteria is fundamentally a condition which is concerned with destabilising and expanding the Symbolic. Furthermore, as both postcolonial and feminist discourses endeavour to question the limits of the Symbolic order, this concept will provide a link, later in this essay, between the two concerns.

The mirror phase is the term that Lacan uses to refer to the phase in a child's psychological development, when the child is approximately six to eighteen months old (Kristeva 1986:100). It marks the transition from the early imaginary phase (where the infant experienced his body as governed by unregulated bodily drives) to the Symbolic Order (Taylor 1987:98). During this phase, the child coordinates itself according to an image of itself in the mirror or by means of his perception of others (normally the mother) (Boothby 1991:18). This image is assimilated in order to form the ego (Grosz 1994:39). The image of the other conveys a sense of coherence and coordination, and the child, appropriating this image, perceives itself to be coherent. However, this recognition of the self as whole has taken place by means of an other or a mirror image, and does not reflect the reality of the child's own body (which is still uncoordinated and not yet a unity) – it is a misrecognition, as the child merely recognises itself as whole because the body it

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which refers to a period prior to the onset of the Symbolic and language, as an experience of symbiosis with the other, a pre-oedipal “lack of lack” that is experienced by the subject in its first few months of life (Kirby 1997:116). It refers to an uncensored experience of the body and an intimacy with and closeness to the mother.

perceives as its own seems to comprise a whole (Grosz 1994:39). It is therefore the image in the mirror, the image of the other, which is responsible for the child's sense of unity – an illusory sense of wholeness.<sup>9</sup> This misrecognition of the self in the other is significant, as the subject attempts to fuse with the specular projection (Jay 1994:351-2). However, the infant soon realises that this desire can never be fulfilled, that it is exceeded by the other – so that the image in the mirror becomes a rival, and the child attempts to control this other (Oliver 1993:107).<sup>10</sup>

Ultimately, it is in the Symbolic where the process initiated during the mirror phase comes to fruition – it is only here that the subject may achieve a semblance of unity and mastery by fully differentiating itself from otherness, superseding its image in the mirror. The process of mastery is perfected here, as otherness is controlled by being exchanged for representations thereof (Taylor 1987:92,163; Kristeva 1986:102). Full entry into the Symbolic Order requires acceptance of the paternal prohibition, which constantly functions to exclude difference (Jay 1994:351-2; Taylor 1987:163). Kristeva (1986:102) indicates that paternal law, the name-of-the-father, functions by designating, nominating and classifying. After the subject's submission to paternal prohibition, and therefore his assimilation of the system of language, the metonymic movement of signification replaces otherness (epitomised by the maternal body), so that a sense of unity can be maintained. The full onset of subjectivity, apparently achieved by entering the Symbolic, is only achieved once the maternal body has been repudiated. The illusion of transparency can only be maintained by means of repression: of the Real, the corporeal, the feminine, that which cannot be adequately represented, in general. The paternal metaphor institutes an irrevocable separation between subject and object, and the subject and the corporeal or maternal. This process is illustrated by Lacan as follows (Fink 1997:93):

Father's name (precedence)

Mother's desire<sup>11</sup> (cancelled)

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<sup>9</sup> In this process, while the child starts to conceive of him or herself as a unity, the child simultaneously also develops an awareness of the limits of his or her body and forms a tentative concept of the self (Grosz 1994:39).

<sup>10</sup> Irigaray particularly criticises the importance that is accorded to vision in the formation of subjectivity in terms of the mirror phase (Jay 1994:531). This is echoed by Oliver (1993:107), who particularly compares the abrogation of otherness inherent in the mirror phase, and the importance accorded to vision in this process, to the Hegelian speculative process. The manner in which the child misrecognises his or herself in the other, the way in which differentiation and identification is still central to the formation of subjectivity, is also compared to the speculative process by Fuss (1994:23).

<sup>11</sup> In this metaphor, maternal desire refers to all otherness, including the Real.

The maternal body and the Real are seen as heterogeneous to signification, and are prohibited by the paternal law, in order to sustain the subject's sense of autonomy (Taylor 1987:163). Lacan maintains that this sacrificial practice is the only manner in which language (the Symbolic Order) can establish any link with the body, the Real, whatsoever (Fink 1997:93).<sup>12</sup> It is deemed imperative that bodily desires, contact with the Real, be sublimated, as any appearance thereof, is said to threaten the subject's sense of Symbolic unity and will be experienced as a trauma, reminding the subject of his fundamental lack (Taylor 1987:92-6; Fink 1997:49).

Oliver (1993:107) refers to the manner in which difference is abrogated in the Symbolic, as follows: "In this way, unity can be maintained since everything that threatens it can be assigned a position outside of the unity. Woman becomes the waste, the sacrifice, but also the 'truth' upon which the unity of the Symbolic Order is maintained". In Lacan's account thereof, the Real can therefore never be adequately represented (Taylor 1987:96). This alterity can apparently only ever appear by endlessly repeating the moment of its disappearance, the original "departure of the mother" (Taylor 1987:94). Lacan consequently asserts that women are radically other, unrepresentable: "Woman does not exist", and "There is woman only as excluded by the nature of things which is the nature of words" (Taylor 1987:112,157). Kristeva (1978:109) directly correlates the subject's entry into the Symbolic with the severance of the maternal, and Irigaray (1985:43) similarly refers to this process of representation as an "exmatriation". The Symbolic Order is actually an essentially phallogocentric economy – the phallus becomes the master signifier around which all signification pivots (Burke 1981:232; Oliver 1993:30). It supplants the subject's direct relation to the maternal body (which will hence be associated with castration) in order to become the symbol of gratification.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Lacan's concept of the Symbolic pivots on absence (Rose & Mitchell 1985:31). Lacan emphasises the necessity of lack, as well as the prohibition of the Real in his delineation of the Symbolic. Because of the subject's lack of a direct relation to the maternal and bodily Real and even to himself (a split between the conscious and the unconscious) the proper subject is also a subject of desire (Taylor 1987:90,102).

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida coins the word, phallogocentrism (an amalgamation of the words, phallogocentrism, and logocentrism) in reference to Lacan. He accuses Lacan (as well as Freud) of transcendentalising the phallus by nominating it the primary signifier upon which signification is based. Whereas the speculative enterprise was sustained by a faith in reason, a similar move of transcendentalisation takes place within the Symbolic Order, only, it is the phallus which is elevated to the position of master signifier. This elevation of the phallus to this position echoes the metaphysical elevation of Logos – it symbolises gratification as well as castration, that is, repression and desire, and therefore functions as the pivot of the whole system of the unconscious (Burke 1981:232; Oliver 1993:30). Hélène Cixous and Irigaray both confirm Derrida's assertion, discerning phallogocentrism in the Symbolic insistence on subdividing the world according to a grid of contentious binary oppositions such as male/female, language/silence, order/chaos and presence/absence (where the first terms of these oppositions will always be associated with one another, and privileged over the others). Hélène Cixous and Irigaray both point out that the Symbolic Order is phallogocentric, as it sublimates otherness and negates the other's desire in its quest for

Identity and a sense of autonomous homogeneity is only achieved once the subject enters the Symbolic Order, and, in Lacan's system, this may only be achieved by accepting paternal prohibition (Rose & Mitchell 1985:36). Therefore, the separation from the maternal, from the bodily Real, is seen as necessary for the full onset of subjectivity (Fink 1997:44). The Symbolic Order, based on paternal prohibition, is therefore based on linguistic mediation, as terms within the Symbolic system acquire meaning in relation to other terms, so that signifiers are loosened from the referent (Boothby 1991:18). The foundation of the Symbolic Order is this division between self and other, signifier and signified, which is itself founded upon the original separation of the mother/child dyad (Taylor 1987:163; Kristeva 1986:102). The indefinite deferral of signification, with signifiers liberated from referential content, makes it possible for an apparent equivalence between signifier and signified to be established. The unbreachable distinction between signifier and signified, itself based upon the division of self and other, supports the illusion of representational transparency. However, this aspect, which forms the basis of the Symbolic, is, nevertheless, itself repressed.<sup>14</sup> This aspect, of the Symbolic, the negation of that which exceeds it, is fundamental to this discussion of hysteria, in relation to the formation of identity, in terms of both gender and race.

The movement of the subject into the Symbolic is regarded as a movement towards autonomy and freedom. This process, where identity and a sense of homogeneity or unity is achieved by means of differentiation, is reminiscent of speculative philosophy. As is the case with the speculative subject, the subject who has entered the Symbolic Order ultimately represses rather than tolerates difference (Oliver 1993:112-13).<sup>15</sup> The process of Symbolic castration (submission to paternal law) is actually construed as a liberation from the body, and from the maternal body in particular. It is not only the desire of the other that is severed in this system of representation; Lacan's distinction between the Real and the Symbolic, implies that the body and language, are likewise oppositional (Oliver 1993:107). This, to some extent, also reiterates

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absolute knowledge (Oliver 1993:171). Irigaray explains that woman's desire cannot be adequately represented in the Symbolic, as her sexuality is seen as merely a mirror to that of the male subject, presenting a threat to the subject's sense of Symbolic unity (Oliver 1993:171; Burke 1981:289).

<sup>14</sup> The desire for transparent representation, can be discerned in the Symbolic desire to represent perfectly, without apparent remainder - an integral component of the speculative enterprise.

<sup>15</sup> This philosophical perspective is associated with GWF Hegel. It is related to the abrogative pursuit of knowledge, is objectifying, and entails a process of representation hinging on absence. According to this perspective, the subject believes himself to possess a constitutive consciousness and views the object world, as well as others, as mirror-images of himself (Taylor 1987:63-65). The speculative subject is by default white and male (Jay 1994:31-3). Elizabeth Grosz (1990:64) points out that Lacan is indebted to Hegel; that Lacan develops his notion of desire, hinging on lack and repression, from the philosophy of reflection, particularly from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

the dualistic privileging of mind over matter inherent in the speculative enterprise. In the Symbolic Order, where language serves as stand-in for the Real and as substitute for access to the other, representation can serve to homogenise difference. As will be demonstrated, while Lacan maintains that the Real and the maternal are outside language, hysteria comprises precisely the articulation of such difference within language.

### **1.3 Theories of the body**

Hysteria, by expressing repression in terms of physical symptoms, as will be illustrated later, exemplifies the manner in which mind and body intersect. In order to understand the nature of the condition, it is therefore necessary to provide an overview of those theories of the body which may be applicable, including the concepts of social inscription, the mutual interpenetrability of discourse and materiality, and the semiotic.

Rather than being natural, the body is always already a representation. The particular body is conceived of, based on its morphology, according to society's norms and values (Grosz 1994:142). This representational process is so extensive, that Elizabeth Grosz (1994:118,120) asserts that the body is in fact emblematic of the standards of society, with social values "etched upon the subject's body". This process is referred to as social inscription. An extreme and overt form of social inscription may, for example, occur where a person is physically restrained by being incarcerated. However, the social inscription of the body is normally far more subtle and insidious: people, according to their specific physical attributes, are categorised into groups, and assigned value within a hierarchy. Grosz (1994:142) suggests that corporeal inscription is itself not a natural process, but functions ideologically, and that processes of regulation and control are facilitated by the marking of bodies. Grosz (1994:18) asserts that the body is an "object of systems of social coercion, legal inscription, and sexual and economic exchange." The bodies of both women and the racial other, for example have been inscribed as signs of difference. Both the female other, and the other encountered in the colonial situation have been conceived of in terms of corporeality. Importantly, the narrow association of the other with corporeality may have served to rationalise colonialism as, within Western discourse, the body is itself conceived of as being without value, and without agency (Boehmer 1993:270).

The term, introjection, describes materiality as an effect of discourse, and can be related to the concept of social inscription – as comprising an unquestioning assimilation of the values of the

Symbolic. Introjection is associated with the feminist concern that phallogentric representations of women have a harmful impact on the female body itself (Bray & Colebrook 1998:49,51). According to this notion, male representations of the female body are seen as prescribing the assimilation of certain distorted self-images and indeed effectively inscribing the body itself (Bray & Colebrook 1998:51).<sup>16</sup> Phallogentric representations of the female body, images of containment and inhibition, are therefore iconoclastically read as harmful to the female other.<sup>17</sup> From this perspective, the Symbolic order described by Lacan has come to epitomise this representational logic which realises and perpetuates stereotyped visions of otherness. In terms of this point of view, the Symbolic inscribes the matter of the body, unilaterally.

Perhaps this tendency to ascribe a productive capacity to discourse far superseding the significance of matter itself, can be attributed to a desire to avoid endorsing biological determinism. As Bray and Colebrook (1998:41,42) point out, in order to avoid subscribing to such a limiting notion, feminists have subscribed to an opposite notion of a body that is an effect of representation.<sup>18</sup> However, not attributing discursive abilities to the bodily Real can be equally damaging to the feminist endeavor. While the body is inscribed by external forces, it does not follow that it should be conceived of as infinitely malleable, a passive *tabula rasa*. Such a Cartesian concept of the body as wholly divorced from mind, pre-discursive, should be avoided. Grosz (1994:18) emphasises that the inverse is equally true; that the body should be conceived of as itself inherently linguistic, generative, as well as social and cultural in nature – therefore able to pose resistance to social inscription. Grosz (quoted in Cheah 1996:122) asserts: “If bodies are objects or things, they are like no others, for they are the centers of perspective, insight, reflection, desire, agency. . . . Bodies are not inert; they function interactively and productively. They act and react.” This notion, describing a process contrary to the concept of introjection, is exemplified by the condition of hysteria, as will be demonstrated.

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<sup>16</sup> Bray and Colebrook (1998:42-3) suggest that Judith Butler’s discourse on performativity, which describes the body as an effect of discourse, exemplifies introjection. Materiality, in Butler’s account of performativity, is produced and reconfigured by language, as may be inferred from the theorist’s description of bodily performativity (Butler, quoted in Meijer & Prins 1998:277): “the mimetic or representational status of language, which claims that signs follow bodies as their necessary mirrors, is not mimetic at all. On the contrary, it is productive, constitutive, one might even argue performative, in as much as this signifying act delimits and contours the body.” Butler’s contention can indeed be easily compared to the feminist concern that phallogentric representations of the female body may in fact impact directly on women’s relation to their bodies. In her account, while language seems to impact materially upon the body, the body does not seem to be accorded with its own ability to represent, as pointed out by Bray and Colebrook (1998:42-3).

<sup>17</sup> Bray and Colebrook (1991:51) refer, for example to Hilde Bruch, Kim Chernin and Marilyn Lawrence, in this regard.

<sup>18</sup> Here Bray and Colebrook (1998:42) again refer to Judith Butler specifically.



Elizabeth Grosz, as well as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Vicky Kirby, describe the body in terms of the interpenetrability of discourse and materiality, inner and outer, self and other. Their views of the body all serve to undermine the Cartesian view of the body as passive, pliable by culture and society. Kirby's (1997:155) description of the interpenetrability of discourse and materiality, for example, evokes an appealing vision of a body that incorporates and in turn engenders knowledge. She envisions the body as a space ruptured by representation and by otherness (Kirby 1997:78,89). Grosz subscribes to the view that there exists a "bidirectional causal relationship" between discourse and materiality (Cheah 1996:122). This notion is emblematised by her description of the subject in terms of the möbius loop. Grosz's motif of the möbius loop represents the manner in which external forces impinge upon the subject, but are also resisted and disrupted by the body (Grosz 1994:189). Grosz (quoted in Cheah 1996:122) indicates that mind and body, self and other, inner and outer, interpenetrate to such an extent that there is a section (where the "loop" rotates from one "term" to the other) where these "oppositions" become indistinguishable from one another – she uses the concept of a "third term" in this regard, in order to suggest the degree of liminality that is involved. This notion echoes Merleau-Ponty's description of the embodied subject in terms of a chiasmus and "gaping wound".<sup>19</sup> The concept of the chiasmus is used to describe subjectivity as an envelopment and intersection of opposites, interiority and exteriority (Taylor 1987:70-72). Merleau-Ponty's notion of a chiasmic folding into one another of opposites entails a body and subject that seems to be turned inside-out - a mutual two-directional, double enfoldment. He describes this process as a doubling up of a surface over itself with a hollow in-between – a "body-subject" that is both interior and exterior, flesh and language, subject and object. This envelopment is also referred to by Merleau-Ponty as invagination (Taylor 1987:72-74).

These models of the body, which describe the interaction between discourse and materiality in terms of bi-directionality, serve to evoke the possibility of resistance to social inscription, which would complicate power-relations, processes of regulation (Grosz 1994:188). Julia Kristeva's concept of the semiotic also describes a process where the body itself functions in a linguistic manner. It refers to both the process of social inscription and corporeal resistance. Kristeva supplements Lacan's notion of the Symbolic, to include semiotic processes as well. While her definition of the Symbolic is very similar to that originally delineated by Lacan, she distinguishes

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<sup>19</sup> This description of the subject as a "wound" is merely an exaggeration of his motif of the chiasmus. Both notions serve to illustrate Merleau-Ponty's notion of the radical interpenetration of internal and external, self and other (Merleau-Ponty, quoted in Taylor 1987:70). This concept is used to describe the fragmentation of the subject, and his or her liminal position, which is marked by an "openness" and vulnerability with regard other subjects (Taylor 1987:69).

between the Symbolic Order itself and symbolic *processes* that support this system – the Symbolic is comprised of both semiotic and symbolic processes, which are antithetical (Oliver 1993:10).<sup>20</sup>

The term, semiotic, refers to the manner in which the body is physically affected throughout life by familial and social factors - constraints that mark the body, and regulate it (Kristeva 1986:93). According to this notion, where the social is seen as influencing the physiological, Kristeva describes the semiotic as the “bio-social element of language” (Oliver 1993:96). This notion of the semiotic is developed by Kristeva to make evident that the body is not purely natural, but is itself always experienced as a representation – that it is part of language. The semiotic simultaneously describes the opposite process where the body itself functions in a generative manner. Kristeva indicates that the body, even the pre-oedipal body, has an inherently linguistic, social structure, as it functions by rejecting and incorporating heterogeneity (Oliver 1993:32). This process is, for example, visible in processes such as the material rejection of excess matter. Kristeva describes the semiotic as “bio-logical”, in order to describe how the material processes of the body itself also possess the “logic of signification” (Oliver 1993:3). This process of bi-directionality implied by the concept of the semiotic is analogous to Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Elizabeth Grosz’s approaches to the body, as both authors similarly emphasise the mutually constitutive nature of discourse and the body.

The semiotic represents the body in the Symbolic Order, and therefore also allows for the articulation of instinctual drives, the Real, in language (Kristeva 1980:146). The semiotic therefore refers to an otherness that has been excluded from Symbolic language, representing that which does not signify “properly” (Ziarek 1992:93-4). As will be clarified, hysteria implies that the discursive nature of the body can enable the subject to express repression. The concept of the semiotic is integral in terms of the discussion of hysterical symptoms subsequently, and will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter. This essay attempts to demonstrate that hysterical symptoms can, in fact, serve to re-inscribe the body, that hysteria comprises precisely such a process where the body writes itself in opposition to inscriptions from outside.

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<sup>20</sup> Though the semiotic retrieves aspects of signification antithetical to the Symbolic, it is nevertheless, seminal to all linguistic processes (Oliver 1993:45-6). As Oliver (1993:45-6) explains, according to Kristeva, it is not so much paternal prohibition (a symbolic process) as the semiotic which stimulates infantile mastery of language in the first place: “Material...rejection [the semiotic process] causes the human animal to give way to speaking being. Through the jolts and starts of material rejection, the expulsions of the semiotic body became the negativity that allow the would-be speaking being to metonymically replace its privation and excess with a signifier.”

## 1.4 Postcolonialism

A central focus of this essay is to determine the viability of hysteria as a postcolonial strategy, based on its ability to destabilise the Symbolic Order. Postcolonialism is a critical orientation concerned with the exclusionist nature of Western modernity (Scott 1996:4). Parry (1997:4) suggests that the prefix “post” is descriptive of the fact that the theory, though tainted with colonialism, also breaks with this condition. Postcolonialism endeavours to discredit the authority of those Enlightenment ideals that informed modernism and colonialism, for example instrumental rationality, and the reductive emphasis on unity (Scott 1996:10). It is characterised by a distrust of what Lyotard has termed metanarratives, (for example conservative political theory) and the assumptions that ground Eurocentrism (Scott 1996:10; Dirlik 1994:336). A fundamental point of concern for postcolonialism is the manner in which the West constructs a definite distinction between self and other. Edward Said’s critique of the West’s construction of the Orient is seminal in informing this postcolonial perspective. Said makes evident the manner in which the Orient has been constructed as the West’s mute “Other” (Said 1985:93). Otherness, the desire for representation, which is a central concern for postcolonialism, is a significant aspect in this essay, providing a vital link with hysteria. This is because the female project to question the limits of the Symbolic echoes the postcolonial fight against marginalisation.

Postcolonialism comprises a critique of the representational system by means of which Western colonial discourse is able to establish the illusion of authoritative knowledge (Scott 1996:6; Said 1985:106). It involves making the ambivalence and contradictions inherent in this justificatory discourse, visible, and is therefore described as a deconstructive strategy by Parry (1997:4; Bhabha 1992:46). If the authority of the Western system of representation is called into question, this would make possible the similar questioning of those “grand narratives” used for justifying colonialism (Bhabha 1992:49). Those identities that it had been constructed for and imposed upon the colonised subject could therefore be exploded.

In this essay, hysteria is interpreted in terms of the artworks of Berni Searle and Diane Victor, where the hysterical strategy seems to have been adopted by various races and both genders, indiscriminately. This essay focuses on these artists’ portrayals of the suffering body, where reminiscences of past traumas – racial or gender-related anxiety - surface in the form of symptoms that reflect hysteria. The second chapter of this essay examines hysteria in terms of

gender, providing a feminist interpretation of the condition, in order to underscore its destabilising potential. The third chapter examines the applicability of such a strategy in a postcolonial context.

## Chapter Two: HYSTERIA DISCURSIVE

### 2.1 Introduction

In the introduction, the repressive, exclusive nature of the Symbolic Order was pointed out. This chapter posits the hysterical disposition as comprising an attempt to scrutinise and expand the limits of the Symbolic Order. In chapter three, this capacity of hysteria, to test the limits of the Symbolic, will be compared to the postcolonial struggle against marginalisation. This comparison is necessary for determining the viability of hysteria as a postcolonial strategy. However, in order to do this, it is first necessary to analyse the subversive potential of hysteria more closely. Therefore, the various ways in which the condition may manifest, are identified and examined subsequently. These aspects include hysterical mimicry, and the two concepts associated with Kristeva's semiotic; poetic language and the abject. The various manifestations of the condition are not mutually exclusive but are narrowly related to one another, however, for the sake of clarity, the three aspects are discussed separately, as though they were distinct from one another. The following artworks, all by Diane Victor, are interpreted in terms of these three manifestations: *White Women* (figures 3 & 8, 1999) and *Strip* (figure 4, 1999), are related to hysterical mimicry; the works, *Trojan* (figures 5 & 6, 2004) and *Joan* (figure 7, 2004) are examined as examples of hysterical poetic language; *Joan*, along with *White Women*, will also be examined in relation to the concept of the abject, along with *Learning Posture* (figure 9, 2004), and *Strip*.

### 2.2 Hysteria as reaction to the Symbolic Order

Irigaray (1985:51,72) suggests that the exclusive nature of the Symbolic Order necessitates that the female other either comply with those images prescribed for her therein, or resist inscription by becoming a hysteric. This section examines hysteria as a reaction to the repressive Symbolic Order. The definition of the term, hysteria, is also re-valourised in terms of the feminist interpretation thereof, in order to highlight its ability to destabilise the Symbolic system.

The exclusive nature of the Symbolic Order is illustrated by Irigaray in terms of the psychoanalytical concept of identity formation during the mirror phase. Irigaray (1985:113) indicates that the process of misrecognition and narcissistic sameness initiated in the mirror stage of the subject's development persists into adulthood. She suggests that the adult male subject continues to conceive of woman in terms of his own reflection (as being a poor copy of

himself), and that the female other is expected to return an undistorted image of sameness back to him (Jay 1994:532). A process of reciprocity on the part of the woman is described by Irigaray (1985:113) as follows:

When it really comes down to it, then, woman will not choose, or desire, an 'object' of love but will arrange matters so that a 'subject' takes her as his 'object'...Woman will therefore borrow from him or from them as much as she can, if she intends to sustain the 'subject's' desire. If she wants him to love himself in her, (by the detour) through her.

As Kirby points out (1991:15), this process of reflection enables the male subject to anchor his identity, but, if the reflection is to be perfect, requires absence on the part of the other. Irigaray (1985:51,72) proposes that this ho(m)osexual process may be challenged by means of hysteria.<sup>21</sup> She interprets hysteria as a woman's refusal of the injunction to negate her own desire, asserting that it enables her to still engage with the Symbolic, but to work from within the system of the Symbolic, to disrupt and expand its limits.<sup>22</sup>

Irigaray therefore suggests that the phallocentrism of the Symbolic Order, if women do not wish to be compliant, necessitates a hysterical reaction. Kristeva (quoted in Oliver 1993:109) confirms this contention: she indicates that women are only allowed access to the Symbolic Order in terms of those identities already assigned to them, pointing out that the full assimilation thereof would entail the renunciation of the maternal and the rejection of a close relation to the body. She indicates that women are therefore forced into a double bind – having to choose between entry into the Symbolic; male identification (which would sustain an illusion of homogeneity on the part of the male subject) or a partial withdrawal from the Symbolic - choosing a "silent underwater body"; hysteria (Oliver 1993:111-12).

Irigaray describes the manner in which the hysterical reaction is elicited, by appropriating the metaphor of the mirror from the philosophy of reflection.<sup>23</sup> She re-interprets this motif to describe the manner in which the hysteric refuses to reflect back perfect sameness (1985:51): "If woman

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<sup>21</sup> The term, hom(m)osexual, describes a phallogentric economy where the subject does not allow the representation of desires other than his own, but severely inhibits *other* (Irigaray refers specifically to female) desires (Irigaray 1985:51).

<sup>22</sup> Women would not be able to figure at all in a position entirely outside language and it is therefore not a viable option.

<sup>23</sup> The philosophy of reflection is associated with the speculative philosophy of GWF Hegel (Taylor 1988:54).

has desires other than 'penis-envy', this would call into question the unity, the uniqueness, the simplicity of the mirror charged with sending man's image back to him – albeit inverted. Call into question its flatness." She therefore indicates that the hysteric is able to shatter the signifying economy itself. Irigaray (quoted in Jay 1994:533) suggests that women should refuse the Symbolic injunction to return images of sameness, but rather disrupt such representations: "One solution would be to shatter the mirror...For on the other side of the mirror, behind the screen of male representations, is an underground world hidden from the surveyor's categorising gaze...Here is what resists infinite reflection: the mystery... that will always remain modestly *behind every mirror*." Hysteria therefore enables the hysteric to disrupt the representational system, in order to evoke absence, and therefore the possibility of a feminine subjectivity, from within. Irigaray, therefore, interprets hysteria from a feminist perspective, as a strategy by means of which the female other may contest patriarchal authority. This view of hysteria as a reaction to patriarchal attitudes, is corroborated by Hunter (1983:485-86), who indicates that hysteria is an oppositional reaction correlative to regulatory social conditions. Lucien Israel (quoted in Hunter 1983:485) similarly suggests that hysteria is a frustrated form of feminism, a reading echoed by Bernheimer and Kahane (1985:29), who describe hysteria as the "dis-ease of women in patriarchal culture".

As has been mentioned, Freud interpreted hysteria in terms of psychological regression – as a repudiation of the Symbolic in favour of a pre-oedipal period. Lacan similarly maintains that the hysteric attempts to circumvent Symbolic regulation. However, in Lacan's account, the hysteric is nevertheless ultimately wholly incorporated into the phallogentric Symbolic, her body "overwritten by the symbolic" (implying introjection thereof) (Fink 1997:54). It seems that the Freudian and Lacanian interpretation of hysteria does not adequately refer to the positive subversive potential of the condition. The definition of the term should therefore be supplemented. If, as Lacan suggests, the hysteric resists the repressive and patriarchal Symbolic system, this should be read not as a deviant reaction or neurosis, but as a necessary gesture of liberation. The hysteric's body has been described as a corpse, entirely over-inscribed by the Symbolic. This minimises the importance of those points of rupture in the hysterical body, where the Real is able to break through the containing grid of the Symbolic.<sup>24</sup> It is true that hysteric responds to just such limiting projections by holding still to the point of "playing dead". Is the apparently subdued, apparently inanimate body described by Lacan truly

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<sup>24</sup> The bodily drive of a hysteric cannot be wholly censored by the Symbolic, so that repression thereof is communicated by means of symptoms, which are made visible physically (Kristeva 1986:93; Irigaray 1985:113,124).

of no import - does it truly signify nothing – or does even this refusal signify? Lacan may be announcing a victory over the repressed body somewhat prematurely – an apparent prostration may actually merely be used to mask a covert, and therefore more feasible, form of subversion, as indicated by Irigaray. The hysteric's miming of inscription by the Symbolic, in itself, signifies: this withdrawal enables her to become the very image of absence.

## **2.3 Hysterical strategies**

The new reading of hysteria, above, has highlighted its destabilising potential. The following sections explore this capability more closely, by identifying three manifestations of the condition, namely mimicry, and two aspects of the semiotic disposition, namely poetic language and the abject.

### **2.3.1 Hysterical mimicry**

A mirroring-reaction is symptomatic of hysteria. Hysterical mimicry can be illustrated, by referring to the hysteric's suggestibility with regard to notions of femininity during the Victorian period. At this time, femininity was associated with sensitivity and fragility. These existing notions typically determined the manner in which hysterical sufferers acted during their attacks – they complied with societal expectations by enacting and exaggerating these prescribed images (Bernheimer & Kahane 1985:5). The hysterics of the Victorian period seem to have chosen to occupy a compromise position rather than be altogether ostracised from society: in this manner, feminine frailty and the absence of self-restraint could be blamed for transgressions.<sup>25</sup>

A contemporary manifestation of hysteria, as has been pointed out, is anorexia. According to the perspective of introjection, one may conceive of anorexia as an overzealous assimilation of such phallogocentric images that idealise feminine trimness. The phenomenon of anorexia may accordingly be interpreted in terms of Suzie Orbach's description of the assimilation of a "false body" (Bray & Colebrook 1998:53). Orbach modifies Winnicott's (object relations) theories

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<sup>25</sup> Bernheimer and Kahane (1985:5) point out that this is not an isolated phenomenon, but that hysterical enactments may, across the history of the disease, be similarly correlated with the dominant myths of society.



concerning a “false self” into her theory of a “false body”. Bray and Colebrook (1998:53) explain:

Like the false self, the false body is fashioned as a narcissistic defence against a threatening exteriority; thus women develop a false body image because they internalize a ‘bad object’ that Orbach specifically identifies as an objectified representation of the female body.... The development of a corporeal sense of self thus depends on an act of consumption or internalization. For Orbach, the false body does not provide the subject with a stable identity but rather a ‘malleable’, ‘fluid’, ‘manipulable’, ‘physical plasticity’.

Orbach’s concept of a “false body” acting as decoy or as an adaptable camouflage donned by a vulnerable subject, rings true, and the concept of a false body would involve one of the most important symptoms of hysteria; namely that of mimicry. However, while the condition is characterised by hyper-suggestibility and hyper-impressionability, the hysterical body is not unilaterally pliable, as Orbach seems to suggest. Hysterical mimicry merely resembles perfect mirroring - it perverts introjection. Hysterical mimicry does not present the body of the subject as mannequin, adjustable to self-sufficient hom(m)osexual projections, but as the inverse; as capable of producing of an off-register, deviant reflection, which calls precisely such attempts at mastery into question, as will be made evident in what follows.

Irigaray emphasises the potential of the condition to articulate women’s repressed desires, albeit in an unobtrusive manner. She indicates that the phallogocentric Symbolic Order has not permitted the female subject her own voice; has not given her access to a means by which to adequately articulate her own desires (Oliver 1993:170-1). Irigaray (1985:70) describes this exclusion as follows:

She [woman] functions as a hole ...in the elaboration of imaginary and symbolic processes. But this fault, this deficiency, this ‘hole’, inevitably affords woman too few figurations, images, or representations by which to represent herself. It is not that she lacks some ‘master signifier’ or that none is imposed on her, but rather that access to a signifying economy, to the coining of signifiers, is difficult or even impossible for her because she remains an outsider, herself (a) subject to its norms.

As one inevitably cannot attempt to figure one’s desires outside the Symbolic, Irigaray (1985:72) contends that hysterical miming is one of the only ways in which female desire will not be completely repressed. Women may only represent their desire at all by means of camouflage, by resembling those images that have been assigned to them (Irigaray 1985:344). Hysterical mimicry generally functions by resembling the representations of femininity prescribed by the

dominant masculine representational system. As has been indicated previously, while hysterical mimicry functions by resembling these representations, it does not, however, comprise compliance: acquiescence is merely a disguise masking resistance or subversion. It entails resuscitating those very terms associated with a patriarchal tradition and covertly giving them a new meaning (Oliver 1993:170-71; Irigaray 1985:60). Mimicry becomes subversive by challenging the authority of vision and representation, or by evoking repression.

Diane Victor's *White Women*, (figure 3, 1999) may be interpreted in terms of hysterical mimicry. The work depicts women on whose skins racial and sexual insults have been written. The women are abrading their own skins, evoking trauma by showing the desire for cleansing (Victor 2007). The title serves to underscore the whiteness of the women's skins and their gender; this emphasis suggests that their skin and femininity is the source of their unease. The work therefore evokes a sense of sexual and racial anxiety and guilt – it refers to bodily control and similar sacrificial practices used to attain social sanction.

The women appear to be faced with having to refuse the reality of their own skins, the physical inscription of which may be related to a more insidious process of social inscription as well. This



Figure 3: D Victor, *White Women*, 1999  
Pastel on paper, 120cm x 80 cm  
(Photograph provided by artist).

process evokes the conflict between desires related to the body and external demands: the artwork refers to the bodily articulation of trauma derived from Symbolic constraints, a hysterical phenomenon.<sup>26</sup> In *White women*, Victor, as is typical of her work, explores the link between the physical characteristics of the body and subjectivity and identity. In this instance, it is almost as though the women are attempting to abrade their own skin in order to conversely hide their identity, which had been determined by the Symbolic in the first place. The women communicate their position physically, rather than indulging the Symbolic prerogative of giving voice to a coherent narrative. The women therefore choose to communicate by the very means that has been repressed and negated – a process which only ultimately serves to emphasise their bodies. While the women are ostensibly complying with the social mandate that their own desires and fleshiness be contained, this is also mimetically exaggerated to the point where the process becomes subversive. The work also implicates the viewer in this severe process: the desire to regulate and negate the desires of these women is met with compliance to the point of absurdity, to the point at which the women render themselves abject.

The subversive potential of mimicry is exemplified by processes where the observer is observed, where the authority of vision is challenged. Hysteria is narrowly associated with vision – not only with objectifying vision of the male subject, as will be illustrated, but also with a return of the gaze. The process of mimicry inherently requires a close observation of the repressor and his projections – a reversal of the gaze. In this process the mime presents the viewer with a disconcerting “gaze of otherness...where the observer becomes the observed” (Bhabha 1984:129). The sense of sameness and unity created by the Symbolic is disrupted by this gaze of the other, which it cannot account for.

The subversive reversal of the gaze and the process of mimetic over-compliance is a prominent aspect of the work, *Strip* (figure 4, 1999), by Victor. The corrosion of skin which takes place in *White Women*, is continued and exceeded in *Strip*, which depicts a woman also intentionally stripping her skin away. The work allows various interpretations: Victor refers to the process of seduction in the title, which evokes associations with an erotic striptease, as well as violence. Because of her submissive posture of revelation, the figure also reminds of depictions of the Virgin Mary. *Strip* is suggestive of the few roles assigned to women in the phallogocentric Symbolic. It comprises a peculiar synthesis of the traditional binary of sacred and profane love –

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<sup>26</sup> Hysteria expresses the conflict between internal and external forces, as internal conflict and feelings of repression may result in the surfacing of hysterical symptoms (Grosz 1994:78).

both virginity and promiscuity are implied. The Symbolic prescription of the figure's self-image as woman, may perhaps have precipitated the manifestation of corporeal symptoms.



Figure 4: D Victor, *Strip*, 1999  
Charcoal and pastel on paper, 120cm x 80cm  
(Photograph provided by artist).

Kirby (1997:57) has pointed out that hysterical mimicry may manifest in terms of mirroring of the desires of others. The exaggerated indulgence of the other's desire in this work, as well as the important role played by corporeal communication, may therefore be interpreted as a hysterical response. The gaze of the viewer has been inscribed in the image so that the work recalls Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863), which similarly implies the perspective of the viewer in order to stimulate self-consciousness on his part. This process is extended in *Strip*, where the viewer has been implicated in the woman's suffering. The woman returns the viewer's gaze both literally and in terms of having observed, and gratified the viewer's desire. It is also interesting that *Strip* is part of a diptych – its companion piece is *Tease* (figure 10, 1999): a process of mutual mirroring is suggested, as the two figures are responding to each other's gaze. In *Strip*, viewing pleasure is abruptly interrupted by the realisation that the woman has complied with scopophilic desire to the point where her raw flesh has been exposed. The seductive ultimate strip-tease becomes merely a hysterical mimicry/mockery of the images projected onto her. Voyeuristic enjoyment of what superficially resembles the classical female nude, therefore acts as a lure for the viewer – who realises too late that he is implicated in the mutilation of this woman. This two-fold strategy of attraction and repulsion is characteristic of Victor's work in general: the seductive aesthetic qualities of the work serve to establish communication, to attract the viewer, so that the viewer only realises once he or she has been drawn in, that the actual representational content of the image is repulsive.<sup>27</sup> The image cautions the viewer to be careful in what he desires, as gratification might prove to be dreadful (Victor 2007).

As has been suggested at the beginning of this chapter in terms of the psychoanalytic mirror-encounter, vision also plays an important role in the differentiation of self from other, a tendency which can be traced back to the Hegelian philosophy of reflection.<sup>28</sup> Hysteria ultimately works to undermine the authority of vision, which may serve Symbolic processes of differentiation. This is because the symptoms of hysteria, though they are articulated corporeally, are not derived from

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<sup>27</sup> A tension is evoked between the formal elements of the work and the representational aspect thereof. On the one hand, the viewer is attracted by the seductive aesthetic qualities of the work (the sensual application of, for example colour and tone) and, on the other, repulsion because of the representational, narrative, qualities of the work. In *Strip*, the narrative, representational aspects of the work can be interpreted in terms of the Symbolic. On the other hand, Kristeva (1980:167) describes those stylistic elements that are conventionally described as non-representational, or non-descriptive, for example, gestural marks, tone and rhythm, in terms of the semiotic. In this sense, the movement between attraction on the level of seductive aesthetic qualities (aesthetic use of aspects such as rhythm and tone) and repulsion because of the representational, narrative qualities exemplified in *Strip*, may perhaps be likened to the tension between the semiotic and the Symbolic.

<sup>28</sup> Oliver (1993:107) particularly compares the abrogation of otherness inherent in the mirror phase, and the importance accorded to vision in this process, to the speculative process. In this economy, vision is important in terms of establishing difference, which will only ultimately be negated (Taylor 1988:57).

an underlying physiological cause. In fact, hysteria, due to the suggestibility of its sufferers, can even be categorised as an imagined disease, according to Diane Hunter (1983:485). The relationship between the objectifying gaze and the hysterical mimetic reaction may be illustrated by referring to the treatments of Jean-Martin Charcot in the nineteenth century. Charcot relied unreservedly on the authority of vision as a source of truth. He attempted to accurately and objectively delineate a sequence of distinct stages of a hysterical attack, using vision to determine the existence of a universal rule underlying the disease (De Marneffe 1991:76). De Marneffe (1991:106) ascribes Charcot's ultimate inability to understand the disease, and the fact that he was eventually discredited as a physician, to this faith in vision: Charcot's patients, rather than displaying symptoms derived from a stable inside, simulated their symptoms, mimicking the symptoms they observed in epileptic patients. Hysteria is, by its very nature, characterised by ambiguity and mystification, as simulated symptoms, which do not refer to a stable inside or to actual physical problems, only serve to confound vision. The *trompe l'oeil* aspect of hysterical symptoms, comprises a subversive mimetic aspect of the condition.

Hysteria should in fact be read as a reaction against a speculative project such as Charcot's, which endeavours to establish transparency – that is, to establish equivalence between signifier and signified.<sup>29</sup> The variable corporeal simulations of the hysteric are far removed from direct presentations from which genuine internal processes may be adequately surmised. The hysterical condition, where the body itself produces symptoms, therefore subverts the notion that an equivalence between signifier and signified exists. The corporeal symptoms of a hysteric merely represent frailty, silence, and images of femininity which have been produced by dominant, phallogocentric discourse in the first place. Such a body, over-inscribed, therefore becomes merely a signifier of signification itself, rather than ever designating a fixed signified content. Rather than an internal physical cause being directly reflected in the outer, the symptoms are themselves, subversively, representations of representations (Du Preez 2004:58, Taylor 1997:58). The hysteric embodies Taylor's (1997:12) description of metonymic signification: "Hide hides hide, which hides nothing...nothing but other hides".<sup>30</sup> The skin and

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<sup>29</sup> Historically, the Western concept of the body has been informed by Cartesianism: the body is seen as a passive vehicle expressing the subject's inner psychical content without itself mediating (Grosz 1994:9). The body is therefore seen as transparently facilitating the communication in terms of the signifier/signified (body/mind) structure. This perspective is associated with speculative philosophy.

<sup>30</sup> In opposition to the philosophical quest of knowing the inner by means of the outer, with hysteria, in particular, "depth" is exposed as being mere illusion, and an awareness is stimulated that one may in reality ever only come into contact with surfaces and representations of representations (Taylor 1997:12; Du Preez 2004:58).

body of the hysteric, which represents that which is reflected on her, is itself similar to a mirror in this respect. If the signifier of the hysteric's body is subordinated to the desire to know his or her "signified content", one will only be baffled. The subject who privileges vision as a mode of unadulterated knowledge, believing in the possibility of immediacy and presence, is confounded in this process (Baker 2002:77). The desire for transparency has been met by an exaggerated complaisance in *Strip*. The desire to know and penetrate and be stirred by full disclosure is complied with; met with the ultimate exposure. The viewer may be able to see everything – yet can still see nothing. The hysteric actually lays bare nothing of herself – she exposes only absence and withdrawal.

The ability of the hysteric to withdraw, is another significant aspect of mimicry. The option of becoming a hysterical "outlaw", comprises the assumption of a position partially outside the Symbolic order. Coherent communication is accordingly necessarily relinquished in favor of the indefinite and the inchoate. Hysteria is for the most part characterized by silence – aphonia, sometimes even silence to the point of physical paralysis (Oliver 1993:108,111-3). Oliver (1003:108) describes the anaesthetised sensation that attends the hysterical condition. She describes the hysterics as: "hold[-ing] themselves back, sullen, neither speaking nor writing, in a permanent state of expectation punctuated now and then by some kind of outburst: a cry, a refusal, an 'hysterical symptom'." As the Symbolic Order only figures women as absence, Irigaray proposes that this image be mimetically appropriated: if women are not allowed to represent themselves fully, and are in any case believed to be unable to represent themselves adequately, this position of exclusion can be evoked mimetically (Winnubst 1999:26). This position is echoed by Boehmer (1993:272-3), who also indicates the subversive potential inherent in the transformation of imposed silence, into an instance of self-expression where repression is actually represented. Absence is therefore re-interpreted by Irigaray as an unrepresentable excess, which points to the inadequacy of the phallogocentric representational system itself (Winnubst 1999:26). Taylor (1992:318) has suggested that otherness appears by means of withdrawal. The figure of the hysteric does precisely this: she enables otherness to appear by withdrawing, by figuring precisely the movement of repression.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> According to Taylor (1992:318), repressed otherness cannot in fact be represented as such (it "withdraws by approaching"), but can be evoked by this subtractive process whereby a representation is disfigured.

### 2.3.2 The relation between hysteria and the semiotic

Though hysterical symptoms are virtual, and do not refer to a physiological cause, hysteria is still a condition centered on the body itself. In this section, corporeal aspects of the disease are clarified in terms of Julia Kristeva's concept of the semiotic. The semiotic, as mentioned in the introduction, is included by Kristeva in the Symbolic Order, as a force functioning in an oppositional manner to symbolic processes. While symbolic processes are associated with designation, nomination, and classification, the semiotic describes those processes not traditionally considered to be part of signification, those that do not subscribe to the signifier/signified binary, to "proper" semantics (Taylor 1987:163). There is a constant oscillation between the heterogeneous semiotic and symbolic dispositions, where the former, the symbolic process, is marked by the compliance with the Symbolic law, and the latter, the semiotic process, with the contravention thereof (Oliver 1999:10). The semiotic questions and renders the boundaries that support the Lacanian Symbolic permeable – boundaries such as: discourse/biology, culture/ nature, subject/other (Oliver 1993:107). Kristeva's concept of the semiotic therefore also makes space for the Real to figure in language – it is no longer conceived of as being wholly and immediately censored, as would be the case in Lacan's exclusive system.

The concept of the semiotic enables one to conceive of the body as both discursive and physical. Such a bi-directional interaction of the discursive and the biological is exemplified by hysteria. With hysteria, symptoms are not evidence of an underlying physiological cause, but are derived from psychological tension – so that hysteria therefore communicates the psychological physiologically. Irigaray (1985:113-4) explains that the hysteric, unable to represent her desire in the Symbolic, will withdraw into her body, and preserve only a fragile link to the Symbolic Order (Oliver 1993:108-13). It is because her relation to the Symbolic is tenuous, that the hysteric is still able to articulate *jouissance*: to express repressed desire. Her desire can be given vent at least partially – appearing in a "script of body language" or hysterical symptoms, "enigmatic 'somatisations'"; that is, hysterical symptoms derived from unregulated and uncontrollable bodily drives (Irigaray 1985:113,124; Oliver 1993:171). The desire of the hysteric may therefore be articulated in a compromised, but not wholly censored, manner. Because hysteria represents symptoms physically, Grosz (1994:139), as well as Irigaray interprets hysteria itself as a kind of inscription. With hysteria, the body which has been inscribed by the Symbolic, is re-written by an infusion of the heterogeneous semiotic, with excessive *jouissance*.



The semiotic may be articulated variously. Both poetic language and the abject (both associated with the pre-oedipal), are part of the semiotic, and both aspects may also be related to hysteria, as will be clarified in the following paragraphs.

### 2.3.2.1 Poetic language

Kristeva's concept of poetic language refers to a process whereby the semiotic is evoked by disrupting the Symbolic. Poetic language evokes drive processes from within language itself (Kristeva 1980:136).<sup>32</sup> It is associated with the evocation of the pre-oedipal phase, recalling the "echolalias of infants as rhythms and intonations anterior to the first phonemes, morphemes, lexemes and sentences" (Kristeva 1980:167). While the symbolic process is comprised of semantic language, and is seen as fulfilling the function of predication (involving "meaning" and "sense"), the semiotic phase of poetic language is associated with non-signifying, a-logical elements, such as tone and rhythm, gesture, colour, elisions, and other stylistic elements (Kristeva 1980:167; 1986:96).<sup>33</sup> In opposition to syntactical (symbolic) communication, a poetic language does not always refer to a signified meaning, but contravenes the "limit of *sentence-meaning-significance*" that is integral to Symbolic discourse (Kristeva 1980:133-5,167).

Poetic language breaches the opposition between the signifier and signified, as well as the opposition between subject and object, self and other (Taylor 1987:180; Kristeva 1986:103). It calls attention to the ambiguity and arbitrary nature of language and comprises a partial "*heterogeneousness* to meaning and signification" (Kristeva 1980: 133-5).<sup>34</sup> Kristeva believes the semiotic is also evoked by means of the ambiguity and evocative signification which comprises poetic language, which functions to disrupt the apparent unity and wholeness of

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<sup>32</sup> While poetic language may often appear meaningless, it still functions linguistically, functioning to disrupt the Symbolic system from within. The heterogeneous tension between the semiotic and Symbolic system, is vital to its operation – it needs to encounter opposition in order to react, in order to renew signification, and, perhaps, expand the Symbolic (Kristeva 1986:104). Poetic language is a tenuous communication which attempts on the one hand to keep Symbolic prohibition at bay, while on the other hand attempting to not give way to complete psychosis (which is when the semiotic succeeds in totally subverting Symbolic law (Kristeva 1980:139). The tension between the semiotic and the Symbolic must be maintained in poetic language– neither relinquished entirely for one or the other (Kristeva 1980:139).

<sup>33</sup> In terms of visual art, this may be interpreted as a focus on the formal properties of an artwork.

<sup>34</sup> Poetic language signifies in a manner antithetical to Symbolic signification. Kristeva illustrates this concept by referring to the manner in which for example rhythmic constraints in poetic language can structure the work to such an extent that grammatical rules and representational content is contravened or superseded. Syntactic elisions can also occur, rendering the meaning of utterances undecidable. Semiotic constraints include, for instance, "rhythm, phonic, vocalic timbres in Symbolist work, but also graphic disposition on the page" (Kristeva 1980:134).

signification (Oliver 1993:99,100). Kristeva suggests that the focus on the rhythm and tones of words, in poetic texts, is able to evoke the semiotic (Oliver 1993:98). It is because it exceeds the signifier/signified structure of the Symbolic, that poetic language is able to refer to drive processes such as “appropriation/rejection, orality/anality, love/hate, life/death” (Kristeva 1980:136). Because the Symbolic unity hinges on the absence of the maternal, the reactivation of that which needs to be repressed, causes the Symbolic Order and its fixed meanings to be disrupted (Kristeva 1980:138-40).

If poetic language comprises the articulation of bodily drive and desire, against Symbolic prescription, then the hysterical condition, the ultimate articulation of corporeal drive in contravention of Symbolic prohibition, should itself be conceived of as an instance of poetic language. This is in fact confirmed by Hélène Cixous (1976:886), who explicitly identifies hysteria with a feminine and corporeal form of poetic language. Hysterical symptoms do not refer to a stable signified content in the sanctioned manner, rather, as they are simulations, they suggest that the signifier may be loosened from the signified. The Symbolic command for transparent representation, which requires equivalence between signifier and signified, is disobeyed. The hysterical condition also comprises an evocation of the pre-oedipal (pre-Symbolic) period, associated with poetic language. The hysteric recalls a period before Symbolic representation, a period characterised by a mother-child symbiosis (where self and other has not yet been differentiated), and a closeness to the body (Jones 1984:59). The period is associated with instinct, the prelinguistic, and the unrepresentable (Kristeva 1980:239). The incoherent and nonsensical speech which a hysteric may occasionally revert to, can be seen as a remnant of the infantile speech associated with this period. Furthermore, the resuscitation of this imaginary period, also enables the hysteric to breach the distinction between self and other. For example, the hysteric often mimics male or other subjects, so that self and other may no longer be so clearly distinguished. In such a poetic language, where the signifiers of identity are confused, the Symbolic command for the maintenance of discrete identities, is disobeyed.

The artwork, *Trojan* (figures 5 & 6, 2004), by Victor, can be examined according to the concept of poetic language. *Trojan* depicts a woman curled into a semi-fetal position, ensconced in the body of a horse. It conflates the story of Troy with the Greek myth of the birth of the Minotaur. In the myth, King Minos, having a sacred cow bestowed upon him by Poseidon, refuses to comply with the god’s demand that the animal be sacrificed. His wife, Pasiphaë, is punished for his disobedience. Poseidon’s curse causes her to desire to mate with the sacred bull (Victor 2007).

In the original tale, Pasiphaë hides in the constructed body of an artificial cow in order to consummate this unnatural desire, which ultimately leads to the birth of the Minotaur.



Figure 5: D Victor, *Trojan*, 2004  
Etching and embossing, 79 x 50 cm  
(Photograph by author).

The work refers to excessive regulation and the reaction that it elicits (Victor 2007). The image suggests that unnatural desires have been instilled in the woman, who ultimately serves as scapegoat in the masculine economy, recalling the role contemporary women may also be consigned to. The interaction between Minos and Poseidon can be interpreted as a Symbolic relation. The image can therefore be read as an apparent submission to social law, with Poseidon performing the function of the name-of-the-father, dictating desire.



Figure 6: D Victor, *Trojan* (detail), 2004  
Etching and embossing, 79 x 50 cm  
(Photograph by author).

Victor's use of this historical image is in itself inherently mimetic: just as Irigaray would borrow the image from the philosophy of reflection in order to re-inscribe it, Victor is inserting new meaning into the myth. The image is highly ambiguous. While the myth of Pasiphaë implies that the woman has been controlled, the evocation of the Trojan horse rather suggests subterfuge. From this latter perspective, the figure can also be interpreted in terms of the simulation of compliance, which is ultimately empowering.

The woman is hidden inside the body of another creature – she is camouflaged, so that visual appearance and inner content are no longer equivalent. This aspect recalls poetic language, where the equivalence between inner and outer (signifier and signified) is similarly fractured. The horse seems to almost comprise an extension of the woman's own body, to be emblematic of potential freedom as well as bodily pleasure. This woman, by having ascended the umbilical cord, the little ladder, dangling under the belly of her Trojan horse, seems to have re-gained access to a pre-oedipal phase: the image can be read as representing a regressive return to a womb-like symbiosis with the maternal and the bodily. Such a re-activation of the Real typifies hysteria, where a compromised relation to embodiment is privileged over full entry into the Symbolic. Irigaray (1985:68) advocates a refusal of the Symbolic injunction and commends a return to the pre-oedipal, which she sees as the stage in which the subject is able to experience a close relationship to the maternal and to the materiality of the body itself. Poetic language comprises precisely such a return, where self and other may not be entirely separable. In this sense, the work may be interpreted as an attempt to surreptitiously engage with the Symbolic Order on one's own terms.

Another work by Victor, which may also be related to the concept of poetic language, is *Joan* (figure 7, 2004). As with a great deal of Victor's work, the focus, in this drawing, is on the conflict between corporeal desire and external forces of regulation. The legend of Joan of Arc is juxtaposed with a print by Jacques Calotte, which has been reinterpreted in a South African context. The original print, titled *The Hanging* (1632), referred to the 30 years war, and these original associations of violence, are still present in the new context – so that the scene comes to imply the presence of an African power-figure. The woman is clutching a Nkisi nail-encrusted fetish-figure to her chest. The depicted fetish figure itself originated in the Democratic Republic of Congo, appearing soon after the arrival of Christian missionaries – it is therefore assumed to be an Africanised and secularised version of St Sebastian (Victor 2007).

The image is suggestive of the manner in which the forced subordination to an unfamiliar or patriarchal social system may impact upon the subject on a bodily level. The figure of Joan, emblematic of a European history and value system, combined with the dual meaning of the landscape, and the inclusion of the fetish-figure, evokes a tension between Western and African cultures. The image suggests the extent to which materiality and discourse interact. The impact of external forces upon her, of this enforced assimilation, is made visible on her body itself. Joan's body is, in itself, a manifestation of psychological and physical scars, serving as primary signifier of pain and establishing a sensually empathetic communication with the viewer. This

corporeal communication of the traumatic impact of discourse on the subject, is typical of hysteria. The work can be interpreted as an instance of poetic language, as distinctions such as European/African, body/mind and inner/outer are breached, evoking bodily drive. Public and private intersect to the extent that the process of Symbolically sanctioned signification is inverted, and communication is turned inside out: *Joan* signifies the effects of external prescriptions externally, rather than communicating an inner psyche. Signifiers are loosened from reference to an internal signified content, but merely refer to an external force. Moreover, the work as a whole may be interpreted in terms of poetic language. The drawing reinterprets the story of Joan of Arc to retrieve other meanings, to suggest an absence: Victor evokes a materiality and agency which had previously been absent. Joan of Arc has always been

emblematic of the sacrifice of feminine desire, in her subordination of her body to conform to masculine ideals. Here the fetish figure is enthusiastically and, it is to be imagined, painfully, embraced to the woman's white body. It is unclear whether the figure is being born from her body or whether she is actually attempting to assimilate it into herself (Victor 2007). Nevertheless, the suggestion of birth is significant: the martyr herself never consummated her own bodily desires, or experienced the pleasures of maternity (Victor 2007). The figure of Joan is herself reinterpreted by Victor: she is hystericised. As hysteric, she no longer epitomises the successful sublimation of bodily desires, which is a Symbolic prerogative.



Figure 7: D Victor, *Joan*, 2004  
Charcoal on paper, 80 x 60cm  
(Diane Victor [sa]).

### 2.3.2.2 Abjection

The abject is that which “disrupts identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Taylor 1987:159). Kristeva (1982:18) relates abjection to the semiotic and Real, as well as the Symbolic – she indicates that the abject evokes the semiotic, pre-oedipal fusion with the mother from within the Symbolic. The abject is derived from this pre-oedipal period, where the child has not yet constituted boundaries around himself – a period prior to the encroachment of Symbolic regulation (Barzilai 1991:295; Kristeva 1982:5). As the abject recalls this primal relation to the maternal body, aspects related to this maternal body are examples of the abject, however, the abject may also refer to aspects not specifically relevant to the maternal as well; it may refer to a corpse, blood, sweat, decay, bodily fluids, filth and refuse (Kristeva 1982:5). Furthermore, as it refers to the pre-oedipal synthesis of self and other, abjection also refers to a negotiation of the boundaries of the self, in the formation of identity - it refers to the formation of the distinction between inner and outer, self and other (Kristeva 1982:10-2). In general, because the abject refers to the “in-between, the ambiguous, the composite”, it is able to evoke that which cannot normally be signified, which cannot normally be categorised and systemised (Taylor 1987:159). It threatens borders and distinctions, and is therefore an inherently disruptive force, with the potential for disorder and chaos. Kristeva indicates that the appearance of the abject is triggered by excessive regulation. Indeed, she indicates that the abject appears in order to challenge the repressive paternal law (Kristeva 1986:29).

Abjection, which entails an engagement with the boundaries of the Symbolic, seems to be exemplified by hysteria: the hysteric is neither radically excluded from the Symbolic, nor wholly assimilated, but occupies a liminal position. The hysteric endeavours to subvert the Symbolic system from within, in order to expand its limits, and be allowed a measure of self-representation. Because of the marginal position that she occupies, the hysteric is able to evoke the Real, to experience jouissance, and also elicit experiences of the Real in those confronted with her (Kristeva 1982:16). The hysteric, rejecting the Symbolic, inevitably experiences a nostalgic longing for a return to a period before Symbolic representation, a period characterised by a mother-child symbiosis, a closeness to the body – the pre-oedipal stage (Rose 1985:136-7; Jones 1984:59). This return is essentially a return to a period characterised by abjection (Irigaray 1985:161):

And, but, what of the 'first matter'? What is this unknowable entity that has an existence in itself? Something that eludes the question 'what is?'... Might this not be the body of the mother, and the process of becoming flesh within the mother? Of becoming phýsis ... Might it not be this bodiliness shared with the mother, which as yet has no movement of its own, has yet to divide up time or space, has in point of fact no way of measuring the container or the surrounding world... Fusion, confusion, transfusion of matter, of body-matter... In which same and other would have yet to find their meaning.

Hysteria is not merely characterised by a resuscitation of the pre-oedipal closeness with the maternal and corporeal, indicated above. Jean Laplanche and J-B Pontalis (quoted in Foster 1991:23) indicate that hysteria is characterised by the conflation of physical with psychological, as well as by the perforation of the border separating inner and outer. This is supported by Hal Foster's (1991:24) description of hysteria in terms of an "uncertainty of inside and outside, psychic and perceptual."<sup>35</sup> This is because, with hysteria, psychical content or feelings of repression are expressed visibly, by the body itself. Such a hysterical confusion of inside and outside, and public and private, discourse and materiality is demonstrated, for example, by the surfacing of hysterical symptoms such as rashes or eczema on the outside of the body (Grosz 1994:78). The hysteric's body also demonstrates the fluidity and variability of the body image. The hysteric does not assign fixed meanings to the various parts of her body; rather, the meaning of one part of the body may be assigned to another. This is often the case particularly with erogenous zones, which would suggest that the specific part of the body has been associated with repression. The hysteric, Dora, would, for example, transpose the meaning of her erogenous zones onto her throat and vocal cords (Grosz 1994:77-8). The hysterical condition therefore demonstrates that the body is not a fixed and passive object, but suffused with representation.

Another phenomenon derived from the hysterical intersection of inner and outer, discussed above, is the hyper- impressionability and sensitivity of the hysteric (Bernheimer & Kahane 1985:4). With hysteria, the integrity of the skin as marker of the border between the self and the other, has been compromised, as a precise and impenetrable division between self and other, inner and outer, no longer exists – it has become virtual. This notion can be clarified by referring to Sarah Ahmed's concept of the fluidity of the bodily borders. Ahmed's concept of the manner in which bodily boundaries are negotiated, seems to comprise an elaboration of Grosz's description of the subject in terms of a möbius loop, where discourse and materiality intersect.

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<sup>35</sup> This hysterical confusion of boundaries between inner and outer, is, nevertheless, derived from the resuscitation of the pre-oedipal period in the first place.



Ahmed (2004:28) indicates that emotion and our experience of others (repulsion, pain, attraction, etcetera), can directly impact upon our mental perception of our bodily boundary, our skin. Ahmed (2004:28) correlates the formation of bodily boundaries with a person's affective negotiation of inner and outer, social and personal, so that, for example, a person would adjust his or her perception of the permeability or thickness or even the dimensions of his or her skin, according to encounters with an outside (Ahmed 2004:29). The physical receptivity of the hysteric may accordingly be interpreted as an "openness" on her part, a vulnerability towards others which compromises the distinction between inner and outer as well as between self and other. We may perhaps, therefore, conceive of the accommodating skin of the hysteric as radically porous - perhaps, of the hysteric, in Ahmed's terms, abrading her skin-surface. This is radically exemplified by the phenomenon of corporeography. Vicky Kirby, like Elizabeth Grosz, asserts that the body and discourse are inextricably linked, an occurrence which she illustrates in terms of the concept of corporeography (Kirby 1997:154). This refers to the nineteenth-century phenomenon where the skins of hysterics were "written": the physician would inscribe the patient's skin with a rubber stylet, and suggest to the patient a time where droplets of blood should appear and make visible the letters he had formed. With uncanny frequency, the subject's body would comply with her physician's suggestion, and the anticipated symptom would appear timeously. Rather than a mediating skin providing a definite border between doctor and patient, self and other, interior and exterior; in this case, the whole communicative process is articulated on the skin itself (Kirby 1997:58). This performance makes very evident the potential impact of representation on the body.

However, the impressionability of the hysteric should not be interpreted as passive submission. The subversive potential of this abject "vulnerability" can be clarified in terms of the radical functioning of the abject. As has been explained, the abject disrupts the boundaries of the self, referring to the formation of the distinction between inner and outer, self and other (Kristeva 1982:10-2). The subversive potential of the abject, resides precisely in this: it poses a threat to identity, as identity is only able to form to the extent that the abject is expelled (Grosz 1994:192). Far from indicating subjugation, such an abject body effectively serves to subvert hierarchical distinctions between "patient" and "analyst", self and other (Kirby 1997:60). Returning to Lacan's paternal metaphor, therefore, one might say that the inherently ambiguous hysteric, laying bare the wound of otherness, contravenes the Symbolic injunction to separate self and other, signifier and signified, inner and outer.

*White Women* (figures 3 & 8, 1999) may be interpreted in terms of abjection. Here the skins of the women have formed a surface of communication, a meeting place for internal and external forces. The writing on the women's bodies may comprise a hysterical symptom.<sup>36</sup> In this case, the writing may refer to inscription by the Symbolic, which has asserted itself in order to establish and maintain boundaries (distinguishing between self and other, to regulate and subjugate the women, as different, other). The insidious nature of this process of social inscription is made evident on the women's bodies – the images prescribed by the Symbolic are reproduced as symptoms, as is typical of a hysterical mimetic response. Their skins are being abraded, and those prescribed images appear on their skins in the form of writing - corporeographically, perhaps. The women's over-compliance should not be interpreted as submission. The viewer has been implicated in the brutal process. Their skins, the ultimate signifier of containment, of the distinction between self and other, have been abraded – so that they are rendered threateningly abject.



Figure 8: D Victor, *White Women* (detail), 1999  
Pastel on paper, 120cm x 80 cm  
(Photograph provided by artist).

<sup>36</sup> It is unclear whether their skins have been inscribed by an external protagonist, or not.

Another of Victor's artworks which may be related to the concept of the abject, is *Learning Posture* (figure 9, 2004), which is the companion piece to *Practicing Poise* (figure 13, 2004).



Figure 9: D Victor, *Learning Posture*, 2004  
Etching and embossing, 196cm x 99cm  
(Photograph by author).

Joan and her fetish-figure are seamlessly integrated in this artwork, where the white woman's body is perforated by repulsive lamprey fish (possessing double rows of teeth for attaching parasitically to other fish) and penetrated by nails (Victor 2007).

This artwork, like *Joan*, deals with the assumption of an enforced role. The woman seems to have assimilated African values and an African standard of beauty – sculptures from central Africa typically have an elongated torso and narrow hips, and this aesthetic ideal has been physically imposed on this figure (Victor 2007). The discomfort inherent in the adoption of an unfamiliar social system, in repression, is torturously exaggerated and evoked physically, rendered visible as symptoms on her body. This image can be related to Irigaray's (1985:113-14) description of hysteria, where bodily drives are not quite terminated, but rather diverted into a "script of body language." The woman has rendered herself vulnerable to the other. Her permeable skin does not serve as

enclosure, to contain, but recalls Ahmed's (2004:28) description of the negotiation of bodily boundaries in the formation of identity. Her skin, representing the border between internal and external, has been ruptured. The imprinting of her body seems to have compromised the integrity of her skin: the woman evokes external desires directly on the skin itself. She is rendered vulnerable to others to the point where the boundaries separating self from other fall away and she becomes object.

Her body reflects trauma derived from the Symbolic, externally: signifiers point to other signifiers and do not evoke a "depth". The woman has rendered herself transparent in the sense that everything is therefore visible on the outside: she is what Merleau-Ponty has described as invaginated, turned inside out. This inversion of sanctioned communication is possibly a mimetic response to the desire for transparency, which is fundamental to Symbolic representation: the woman turns herself inside out – so that that which was deemed negligible in terms of the concept of transparency, her body, conversely becomes the only surface of significance. While the surface of her body becomes significant, representing representation, the myth of a present and directly accessible "inside" is also invalidated, as explained by Taylor (1997:18):

If the principle of dialectical reversibility [outer = inner] is applied to the binary surface/depth, then surface is depth and depth is surface. Upon closer investigation, what appears at one level to be depth supporting surface turns out to be another surface...This does not mean that everything is simply superficial; to the contrary, in the absence of depth, everything becomes endlessly complex...nothing is ever what it seems.

Amidst the overwhelming ambiguity produced by such metonymic signification, the hysterical woman withdraws and becomes a figure of absence. Abjection is also an important component of Victor's *Strip* (figure 4, 1999), where scopophilic, scrutinising desire, is met with an excessive complaisance - in the form of the rupture of the woman's enclosing skin. The figure submits to the viewing subject's desire to the point where the act becomes horrific, revolting. The woman embodies Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "gaping wound", a concept which suggests radical openness on the part of the subject. By making herself diffuse and skinless, she is in fact clothing her body in the raiment of abjection, asserting her mortal, bleeding body that lies beneath it all. The art work calls to mind Kristeva's critical reading of images of the Virgin Mary as emblematic of the feminine sacrifice of the semiotic in favour of the Symbolic, which seems to be necessitated in a conservative Christian economy (Kristeva 1986:165). *Strip* inverts this process of sublimation: so that, as with her interpretation of Joan of Arc, Victor underscores the Saint's fundamental materiality. The woman's body is penetrated, only for the viewer to see

absolutely nothing. As with *Learning Posture*, full disclosure merely reveals another surface. The body as representation itself, is therefore dissected in this art work, in order to evoke a general withdrawal, absence.<sup>37</sup> The female body as carrier of Symbolically sanctioned meanings (beauty, love, virtue, sexuality, promiscuity) has become an ambiguous signifier – this woman has assumed all of these roles, so that her body now comprises a subversive poetic language. Her body is no longer the Symbolically sanctioned representation, where inner and outer may be equated, where meanings do not conflict. The representation of her female body has been broken down by tearing it apart, re-inscribing it with hysterical symptoms.

The woman is frozen in an act of sacrifice; her physical suffering serves as an abject mirror to others' selfish projections and expectations (Victor 2007). The disruptive manner in which this mirroring process functions, can be clarified by examining the companion piece of the work, namely *Teased* (figure 10, 1999), which, as the title implies, probably represents the viewer of *Strip*. Victor makes irreverent religious allusions with this image: the figure has assumed a beneficent, saintly posture, but the halo of his female counterpart is, in this image, transformed into a bloodstain.

In *Teased*, the male figure's repressed desires and needs are exposed by his nudity, but are rendered even more overt in that they are physically inscribed, literally written on the exposed raw muscles of his neck (Victor 2007). His scopophilic, scrutinising desire has, in *Strip*, been met with the similarly piercing abject.<sup>38</sup> The man's scopophilia is interrupted, his gaze returned, his eyes closed, and in any case, unable to see. The figure has been dissected, so that his head is almost severed from his body. His decapitation is suggestive of the dehumanising effect that is the result of his objectification of the erotically flayed figure of *Strip*. Inverting the metaphysical privileging of mind over body, Victor portrays his body as virile and animate, while his severed head, in contrast, seems unconscious or probably dead. A literal Cartesian mind/body split is enacted, but merely serves to announce the ultimate supremacy of a body which had provided animation in the first place. The feasibility of a Cartesian split is further undermined by the

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<sup>37</sup> According to Taylor (Taylor 1992:318), as has been mentioned, repressed otherness cannot in fact be represented as such, but can be evoked by this process of disfiguration. Taylor indicates that such a process, which engages with the limits of representation, functions to evoke a "nonabsent absence" (Taylor 1992:305).

<sup>38</sup> In the West, vision has traditionally been privileged over the other senses. The eye has been associated with the acquisition of unadulterated knowledge. On the other hand, the body has been seen as merely serving to obfuscate, to distract from objectivity (Baker 2002:56). Martin Jay (1994:70-4) traces the modern privileging of vision to Descartes, who said: "it is the mind which senses, not the body", privileging the importance of cognition over that of even the physical, embodied eye in the process of seeing. This disembodied vision has been associated with a metaphysical subject (Jay 1994:29).

appearance of writing on his body, which may constitute corporeal communication - a hysterical infection?

The figure depicted in *Teased* has been confronted by an over-complaisant and abject mirror image - it is a confrontation with hysteria. The brokenness of the figure may be related to Kristeva's notion that a confrontation with the Real ultimately serves to rupture the illusion of Symbolic wholeness. According to Kristeva (1980:163), the Real, the abject, presents nothing but corrosiveness and non-identity to those who wish to see themselves in it. She speaks of the close confrontation with this heterogeneity as a fatal experience of *jouissance*, which dissolves the notion of a separate self, of identity (Kristeva 1980:164). His scopophilic self-indulgence and subsequent confrontation with irreconcilable heterogeneity - the traumatic realisation that his Symbolic system provides inadequate protection from the Real; that he is mortally embodied - has proven fatal (Kristeva 1980:165).



Figure 10: D Victor, *Teased*, 1999  
Charcoal and pastel on paper, 120cm x 80cm  
(Photograph provided by artist).

The pairing of *Strip* and *Teased* echoes the gazer/gazed at dichotomy of the mirror phase. However, rather than culminating in the formation of identity, the subject is himself fragmented. The hysterical response, from beyond the mirror, has shattered it. The mirror of representation no longer serves as an intact mediating screen, but has, itself, been ruptured.

## 2.4 Conclusion

Hysteria essentially comprises an attempt to disrupt and extend the limits of the Symbolic Order. It has been demonstrated that the condition may manifest in terms of mimicry, poetic language, and the abject, and the subversive potential of the disease has been examined in each case. An important characteristic of the condition which imbues it with the potential to disrupt the Symbolic, is the fact that it exemplifies the radical interpenetration of discourse and materiality, as has been demonstrated in terms of hysterical symptoms. The Symbolic Order impacts upon the subject on a personal level. However, social inscription is offset by the inscription effected by hysteria – the hysterical body is responsive, functioning linguistically, so that symptoms may arise to evoke this repression.

The body conceived of by the dominant representational system as a *tabula rasa*, provides evidence of agency, so that the other perceived in the mirror is no longer passive, and the mirror of representation is fractured. Moreover, such a body, which does not passively reflect signified content; a hysterical body, undermines the idea of representation as transparent. If the maintenance of the distinction between signifier and signified, and the preservation of identity is essential for sustaining the illusion of the authority of representation, that is, the authority of the Symbolic; the presence of hysteria marks its dissolution. The following section posits that this capacity of hysteria to test the limits of the Symbolic, renders it a feasible postcolonial strategy.

## Chapter Three: POSTCOLONIAL APPLICATIONS

### 3.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter suggests that hysteria merely afflicts women. However, this essay addresses alterity in general, and differences in sex merely provide one obvious model thereof. While Irigaray focuses on the otherness of women specifically, her perspective on hysteria may be extended to apply to other marginalised bodies, such as the racial other. Hysteria, after all, does not manifest physiologically, and is therefore not a disease that insists upon a particular anatomy (Hunter 1983:485). The feminist concept of hysteria developed by Luce Irigaray, in terms of a form of subversion, can therefore potentially be extended to also link with the discourse of postcolonialism. This chapter examines the feasibility of hysteria as a postcolonial strategy. The intersection between postcolonialism and feminism is examined in terms of the common desire to question the validity of Symbolic representations of otherness. Both discourses deal with issues surrounding the body, and discrimination based on personal physical attributes. Consequently, it is posited, hysteria might be a viable strategy for addressing racial discrimination as well. The manifestations of hysteria, namely mimicry, poetic language and the abject, are examined in terms of postcolonialism, in order to determine in more detail how such a strategy might prove useful. The examination of the applicability of a hysterical strategy in a postcolonial context is limited to the consideration of specific artworks by Berni Searle and Diane Victor. The works, *Brace* (figures 11 & 12, 2003) and *Practicing Poise* (figures 13 & 14, 2004) by Diane Victor, are examined in terms of the concept of postcolonial mimicry along with Berni Searle's *Profile* (figures 15-20 & 25, 2002-3) and *Snow White* (figures 21-24, 2001). The latter work, *Snow White*, is interpreted in terms of both poetic language and abjection, as well. *Profile* is also discussed in relation to abjection.

### 3.2 Intersections: discrimination in terms of gender or race

In *White skin, Black Masks*, Franz Fanon examines the importance of racial difference in the construction of Western identity, in terms of the mirror stage of psychological development. He substitutes the image of the woman in the mirror with that of the black man. Fanon thereby translates the psychoanalytic notion of subject formation in relation to the female other during the mirror phase to refer to the colonial encounter as well (Bergner 1995:75-7). Fanon therefore



attempts to extend the notion of otherness in the psychoanalytical context, to refer not only to gendered difference, but also in particular, to racial difference (Bergner 1995:77-9). Indeed, Fanon suggests that racial difference is more important than sexual difference in the identity formation of the Western male subject. Fanon posits that the black skin as visual sign of lack and difference far exceeds that of signs of lack and difference discerned in women. In his system, in this manner, the white skin is afforded the social power previously ascribed the phallus (Bergner 1995:79).

The Western subject has historically disavowed his debt to the colonised other with regards the construction of his own identity. Postcolonialism critiques the manner in which the Western subject has constructed his identity in reference to the other, by differentiating himself from the other (Dirlik 1994:337). In the colonial encounter, identity formation on the part of the coloniser pivots on the lack of the other (Bergner 1995:79).<sup>39</sup> As is the case with Lacan's delineation of the mirror phase, in the colonial encounter, the distinction between self and other, and the codification of the other in terms of lack, has been fundamental in the production of the coloniser's identity (Dirlik 1994:329-36). Postcolonialism endeavours to critique such binary oppositions that sustain colonialism, as these binaries do not acknowledge the existence of otherness outside the self/other distinction (Dirlik 1994:329,333-6; Erickson 2004:167). Homi Bhabha (1992:49-50) points out that the dominant representational system is problematic, distorting, misrepresenting and providing justification for colonialism while masking and repressing absence. Bhabha (1992:50) asserts that the representational system which provides justification for colonialism, the "knowledge structure of modernity" is itself indeterminate, ambivalent, an aspect which is merely confirmed on a smaller level by the inadequacy of the sign, the "excess' of the signifier".

Both the racial and female other therefore struggle to figure their desires in the exclusionary Symbolic system, which nevertheless upholds an illusion of being intact; that nothing exceeds it. Fanon's *White skin, Black Masks*, provides another overt point of intersection in terms of racial and sexual discrimination (even though he asserts that racial difference is far more significant than gender difference): sight is integral to both processes of differentiation and othering. Vision, prompted by the Western "scopic impulse", is central in enabling the regulation and categorisation of all others (Boehmer 1993:269). As has been demonstrated, in the mirror phase

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<sup>39</sup> This dialectical structure, according to Fuss, is underpinned by Hegelian ideology (Fuss 1994:23). The colonial situation closely resembles both the Hegelian dialectic and the psychoanalytical concept of identity-formation.

of development, the subject's identity formation takes place by means of vision, by differentiating the self from the other (Dirlik 1994:337). As with the female other, racial othering in this phase depends upon visual observation, the positing of physical difference (Bergner 1995:79). In both instances, discrimination takes place on a personal level, relating to the body itself. Fanon, for example, describes the manner in which the gaze of the white man seems to fragment the black person's experience of his own body, and describes the subsequent struggle for the black man to cease conceiving of himself from the white man's perspective (Bergner 1995:78).<sup>40</sup>

Not only are both others conceived of as other, they are also conceived of as being somehow more corporeal than the Western male subject (Grosz 1994:14). Grosz (1994:203) examines this notion in terms of the situation of women (however, this would be similarly valid in terms of the racial other): she asserts that women, because they are so narrowly associated with the corporeal, are seen as abject – associated with disruption, the uncontrollable and amorphous, the inchoate; potentially disrupting order. While the body of the other serves as a sign of difference, the other's subjectivity does not really figure in the Symbolic. This image of the other in relation to corporeality also entails a correlative lack of agency, so that a conception of the other in terms of corporeality may therefore have served to rationalise both racial and sexual discrimination (Boehmer 1993:270). Boehmer (1993:270) suggests that the body of the other is conceived of as follows: "...it does not (itself) signify, or signify coherently, it may [therefore] be freely occupied, scrutinised, analysed, resignified". This is problematic in so far as corporeality, in the West, has been conceived of as distinct from mind and consequently denigrated. Furthermore, the West has traditionally been cast as masculine while Africa or the colonies are represented as feminine, with the racial other accordingly represented in terms of femininity (Vizzard 1993:[sp]).

The problems identified by postcolonialism seem to echo those which had given rise to the hysterical reaction in women. If the difficulties faced by the racial other and the female other are comparable (though not in terms of degree), could it not be possible that there would be a measure of similarity in terms of the reactions elicited? Fanon, for example, speaking of colonial discourse, urges the muted subject to shatter the frame of representation by speaking from his own point of view, by not returning an image of homogeneity (Bergner 1996:79). Here he echoes Irigaray who similarly urges the female other to not return an image of sameness. Is it

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<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, Bergner (1993:270) points out, Fanon does not refer to the black woman.

not possible that one plausible manner in which Fanon's request can be satisfied, is by means of a hysterical reaction?

If the body of the other has been over-inscribed, it is necessary to re-inscribe the body, and this is only possible by signifying the process of inscription in the first place, by engaging with these images in subversive manner. In terms of Irigaray's concept of mimicry, the racial other, who has been radically excluded from the Symbolic, is confined to engaging with these restrictive prescribed images. If the other cannot be represented, save in terms of otherness and the particularity of his or her body, this limitation should be addressed strategically. Hysteria, as has been demonstrated, is itself a form of inscription which would be able to address social inscription and test the limits of the Symbolic. The rest of the chapter examines the applicability of a hysterical strategy in a postcolonial context more closely, by referring to the three manifestations of hysteria identified in the previous chapter, namely mimicry, poetic language, and the abject.

### **3.2 Mimicry as a postcolonial strategy**

Bhabha develops his notion of mimicry as a corrective to the exclusivity of the Western representational system, where the Third World subject does not have access to the system, and is in fact radically excluded. He develops the concept as an answer to the conundrum posed by Fanon: the only choice left to the black subject is to "turn white or disappear" (Bhabha 1985:162). Rather than repudiating this exclusive system completely, "disappearing", Bhabha proposes that the colonial subject gain access to the system by means of camouflage - mimicry. His notion of mimicry is derived from Lacan's description of camouflage in nature – it refers to a process of both defensive deception as well as an aggressive strategy. It can refer to both a feigned complaisance (mimesis) and a subversively parodic strategy – it comprises both a camouflage suggestive of assimilation and an intentional oppositional strategy (Huggan 1997-8:94-5). In the postcolonial context, mimicry functions by means of duplicity and ambiguity, a method which is analogous to Irigaray's strategy of hysterical mimicry, which similarly enables women to engage with the exclusionary representational system in a strategic manner. As the body of the other has already been over-determined, a device such as mimicry, replicating images of the self, functions to highlight "the weightiness and oppressiveness of the body's status as sign" (Boehmer 1993:275). It re-writes the body, in order to create awareness of the body as a representation produced by colonial discourse (Boehmer 1993:275).

In the postcolonial context (as with gender discrimination), enforced silence can mimetically be converted into a withdrawal – even a repudiation of the Symbolic. The postcolonial body, which had previously been a sign of lack and difference, can be re-inscribed to bear evidence of imposed suffering and repression (Bergner 1995:79). Images of the body of the other in association with lack, may be mimetically re-translated in terms of the “‘excess’ of the signifier” which Bhabha (1992:50) refers to; in terms of the inadequacy of representation itself. Lack becomes excess in this manner, and otherness is newly conceived of in terms of the limitations of the representational system.

The manner in which of postcolonial mimicry can evoke absence and repression, can be illustrated by referring to Victor’s *Brace* (figures 11 & 12, 2003). The brace is an ambiguous element, which can be interpreted as: medical equipment, as a corrective, healing measure (suggestive of patronising aid?), as a choke to which a chain for slavery may be affixed, to the elaborate collars worn by Europeans during the seventeenth century, or perhaps even an erotic device (Victor 2007). This artwork is similar to *Learning Posture* and *Joan*, as it refers to the traumatic imposition of a foreign Symbolic system, physically. Interpreted in terms of colonialism, this image is redolent of the imposition of a Eurocentric social and cultural system. It suggests the imposition of an alien Symbolic Order which would subjugate and contain the body of the other and his desires.

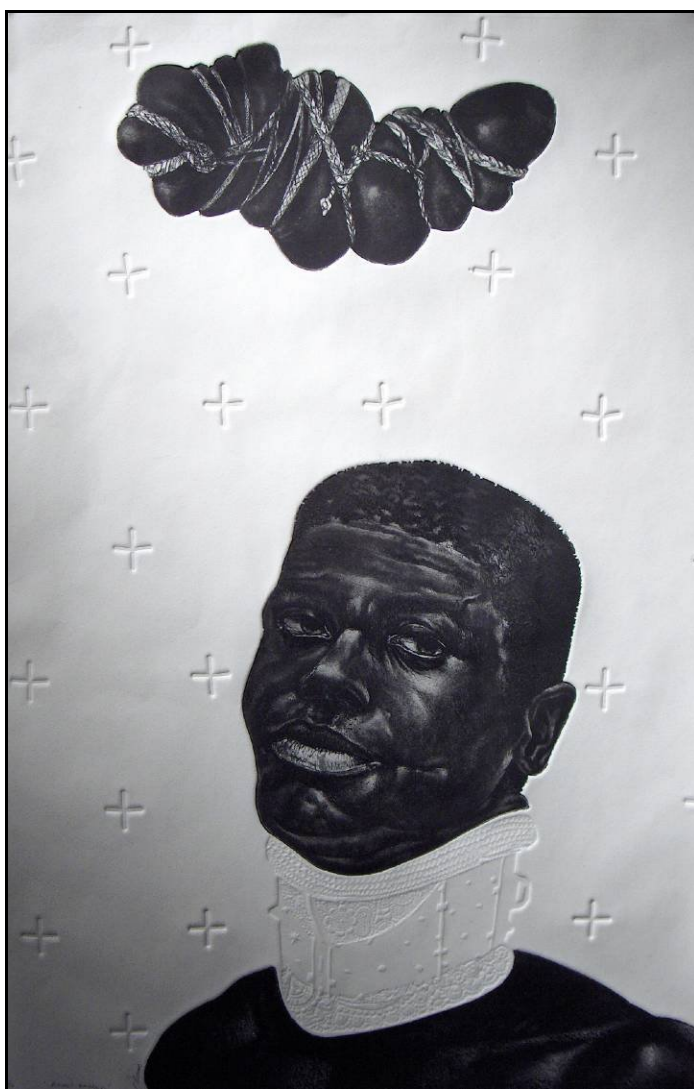


Figure 11: D Victor, *Brace*, 2003  
Etching and embossing, 100 x 71 cm  
(Photograph by author).



Figure 12: D Victor, *Brace* (detail), 2003  
Etching and embossing, 100 x 71 cm  
(Photograph by author).

The tension between the authoritarian Symbolic system and the desire for an unrepressed sense of embodiment, is rendered incarnate in the figuration drifting above the figure, which can be interpreted as a manifestation of the tension between physical desire and social prohibition. It is an ambiguous object evoking containment, and a resultant resisting bulge of flesh (Victor 2007). It suggests the existence of an(*other*) phallus.

The medium of etching itself mimetically evokes associations with racial oppression. Etching has several historical associations; in this case, because of the format of the portrait, as well as the exaggerated darkness of the man's skin, the image particularly calls colonialist or ethnographic etchings to mind. The harsh contrast between black and white, in the context of South Africa, suggests racial tension. Indeed, Olu Oguibe's notion of "whiting out" (see the discussion of *Snow White*, below), is probably appropriate in this case. The negating whiteness of the brace suggests that oppression will sever the man's body from his mind, fragmenting him (Victor 2007). The brace itself is figured by means of blind embossing - it is a negative shape that has integrated the represented figure into the paper itself, to the extent that it seems to have ceased existing at that place. The whiteness hollows out, disfigures the representation: while the brace refers to repression, it constitutes an erasure; it simultaneously serves to fragment the representational aspect of the image and evoke absence and negation.<sup>41</sup>

As has been mentioned, the brace simultaneously, ambivalently, evokes both restraint or incarceration and an assimilation of European ideals. The image describes an attempt to inscribe colonial power on the body of the other, an attempt to represent the reassuring colonisation of the body of the other. The brace, originally intended to be metonymic of the presence of European power, has, in this new context, become a mere fetish. The brace, as it refers to the imposition of a foreign social system, can also be examined in terms of Bhabha's concept of hybridity. Bhabha develops the concept of hybridity, closely associated with mimicry, in the colonial context. The term, describing ambiguity, is itself ambivalent: it can refer to the lack of identity and purity on the part of the coloniser, or the fusion of the foreign and local culture on the part of the colonised. Colonial hybridity can refer to the desire on the part of the coloniser to reproduce the other subject in his own image – as similar, yet still different, subordinate (Lazarus 1993:87). This desire for sameness, described as "the reformation of the

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<sup>41</sup> The notion of postmodern disfiguration is developed by Mark Taylor to describe a process whereby representation is "disfigured" in order to evoke absence. He indicates that postmodern disfiguration, by dissecting the limits of representation, functions to evoke a "nonabsent absence" (Taylor 1992:305). Taylor exemplifies his notion of postmodern disfiguration by referring to the work of Anselm Kiefer, who describes his process as follows: "[I] show what's behind the story. I make a hole and go through" (Kiefer in Taylor 1992:302).

'native' in the image of the European", can also refer to the effect of colonial power which attempts to inscribe the other with signs of European presence and power (Baucom 1991:7,8). Hybridity refers to the repetition of colonial images and values, but also to the manner in which these images are exceeded (Gikandi 1996:140). This attempt by the coloniser to produce hybridity can stimulate the desired hybridity, which is, ironically, an inherently destabilising force. Hybridity evokes an in-between space (neither self nor other) which resists classification and proper representation; subverting the idea of authoritative representation (Werbner 2001:141). The colonial hybrid comprises a liminal space or liminal subjectivity – it refers to a state of having both assimilated colonial culture and, on the other hand, the retention of the colonised subject's original culture. Hybridity implies that such a subject can be located precisely as being wholly part of neither one system nor the other (Geesey 1997:130). The hybrid subject is apparently the same (repeating the image of the coloniser, or colonial representations of his or her otherness), yet is radically different simultaneously. The perception of the constant oscillation between the two conflicting states, disconcerts the coloniser (Bhabha 1984:132). Mimicry and hybridity, inducing confusion between self and other, therefore call the relationship between "original" and "copy", into question, refusing identity (Bhabha 1984:131; Huggan 1994:652). The myth of presence is repudiated in this process - the illusion of authenticity, presence, control, is disrupted by the disconcerting oscillation between sameness and difference (Baker 2002:77).

Victor's *Practicing Poise* (figures 13 & 14, 2004) can also be discussed in terms of hybridity. This is the companion piece to *Learning Posture* (figure 9), and should be interpreted accordingly, in terms of representing a difference and tension between African and European cultures. *Practicing Poise* is therefore reminiscent of the racial tension experienced during the apartheid period. The work refers to processes of control and containment. The formal similarity between the security grating in front of the window and the lacings of the corset seem to suggest that the process of control is related to fear (perhaps prompted by dormant feelings of guilt on the part of the repressor?). As with *Brace*, the white sections of the work abbreviate and fragment the man's bodily wholeness.

The corset and stockings worn by the man are traditionally part of a European and female code of visual seduction. The extreme severity of the corset may perhaps be associated with sado-masochistic practices. The man has assimilated European customs and attire while his body continues to signify an African identity. The man is a hybrid figure: the corset and stockings have caused self and other to become entangled. The evident masculinity and physical strength

of the figure undermine the efforts to contain him, and the ridiculousness of this performance seems to parody the very process of submission, as well as the artifice of Western sexual codes themselves. The colonialist mythologising of the racial other as effeminate is similarly satirised. It parodies scopophilic desire and mimetically challenges the desire to establish difference by means of vision.

Another subversive aspect of mimicry in the postcolonial framework and related to the figure's hybridity, is that it creates an awareness of a return of the gaze. This is because the process of mimicry entails a close observation of the coloniser. In terms of Fanon's appropriation of the mirror phase, mimicry comprises a confrontation with a destabilising "gaze of otherness...where the observer becomes the observed and 'partial' representation rearticulates the whole notion of identity and alienates it from

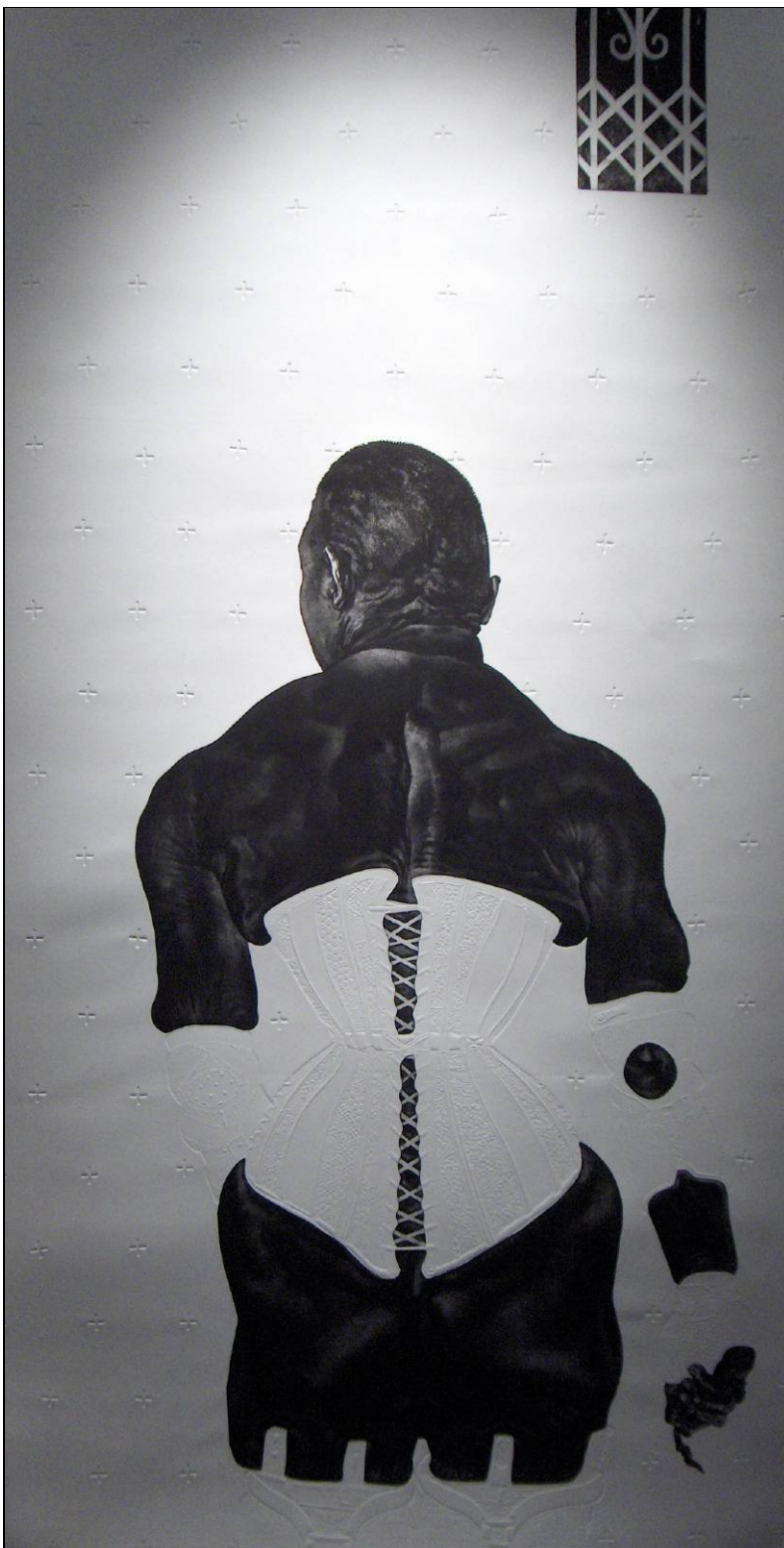


Figure 13: D Victor, *Practicing Poise*, 2004  
Etching and embossing, 196cm x 99cm  
(Photograph by author).



essence” (Bhabha 1984:129). Mimicry, rather than presenting the coloniser with a blank mirror, a space for his own projections, therefore presents him with the gaze of an other subject. In *Practicing Poise*, the mimicry of European customs implies that the customs of the observer had been observed; in spite of the fact that the man has averted his eyes, the work still implies a disconcerting return of the gaze.

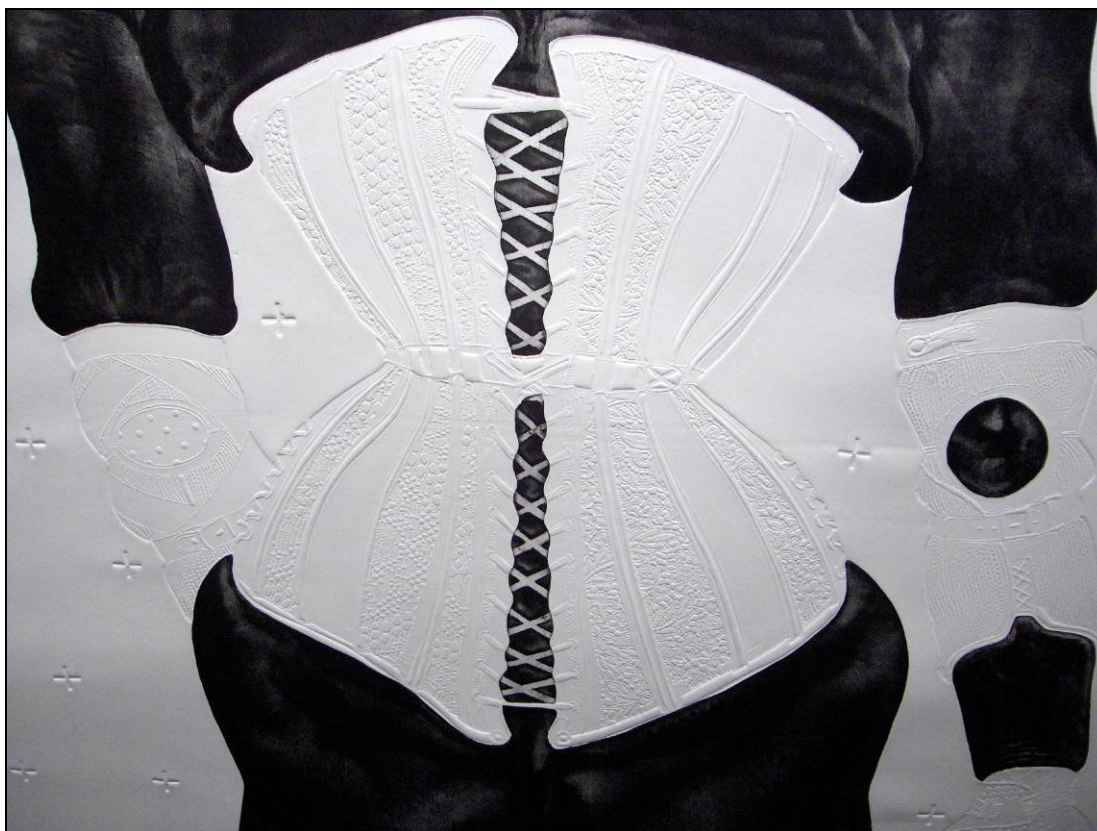


Figure 14: D Victor, *Practicing Poise* (detail), 2004  
Etching and embossing, 196cm x 99cm  
(Photograph by author).

The ambiguity inherent in the man’s assumption of the role of submissive, along with his silence, elicits a sense of de-stabilising uncertainty. The man in this image is inscrutable. His face is hidden, his body is turned away. Another aspect of the work which is significant in terms of evoking absence, is the blind embossing that Victor employs here (as well as in *Brace*). Victor’s recent adoption of the technique of blind embossing mimetically changes the associations evoked by the medium itself. By using a medium traditionally associated with confidence and precision, employed in order to represent exactly, to dissect, analyse, and stigmatise (colonial

etchings); to now represent that which is analogue, in an indistinct manner, she is able to subvert the brutality of this traditionally objectifying medium. Inkless, the delineative properties of the medium are undermined. She mimetically appropriates the masterful medium, only to subvert its authoritative associations. The mimetic aspects of the work, as well as the process of representation which entails blankness and withdrawal (engaging with the limits of the Symbolic), suggest that the work may be interpreted in terms of hysteria. The work translates imposed silence into refusal. The image seems to ultimately represent the refusal of representation; the repudiation of scrutiny and objectification.<sup>42</sup>

In this hybrid figure, the marks of power, social inscription, have become less substantial. As has been suggested, with hybridity, the stamp of power becomes delible: the hybrid is produced by duplicating the original, it is a copy of the original, but merely a duplicate, so that the effects of power are not equivalent (Werbner 2001:136). In this regard, Bhabha (1985:154) describes the hybrid colonial subject as a “negative transparency”. This description recalls how hybridity is initially produced in order represent the presence of European power. However, the concept of transparency is used to imply that these supposed metonyms for colonial power are mere reproductions, even negatives of the original, and that the copy is no longer inscribed with the power associated with the original (Baucom 1991:8-10). The traditional philosophical concept of transparency is therefore inverted in Bhabha’s definition of hybridity. In this sense transparency refers to counterfeiting, merely retaining the semblance of the marks of power. Instead of the original transparency being achieved between signifier and signified, the signifier is loosened from the signified in this case, so that hybridity ultimately only comprises a simulation, or a dissimulation. The hybrid, far from being a “copy” of the “original” makes evident that it is in reality inherently inverted, other, so that the hybrid, according to Geesey (1997:130) “unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power”. This process is described by Bhabha (1985:156) as follows: “colonial specularity, doubly inscribed, does not produce a mirror where the self apprehends itself; it is always the split screen of the self and its doubling, the hybrid.” The perfectly transparent mirror is shattered – the hybrid does not represent the presence of the colonial power but rather, like an actual transparency, the diminution thereof. The illusion of equivalence between signifier and signified, which sustains the authority of representation, is shattered.

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<sup>42</sup> This process is also significant in terms of Taylor’s concept of postmodern disfiguration. As suggested in terms of *Brace*, the whiteness of blind-embossing suggests that representation has failed at these points. The blankness forms a void that hints at the inadequacy of representation. Victor’s method may here be described in terms of postmodern disfiguration: representation is erased in order to evoke a sense of the inadequacy and obfuscatory effects of representation, to evoke a sense of absence.



Figure 15: B Searle, *Profile* (detail – anti riot shield), 2002. Duraclear Lambda print, 49 x 59.8 cm. (Berni Searle [sa]).



Figure 16: B Searle, *Profile* (detail – British spoon), 2002. Duraclear Lambda print, 49 x 59.8 cm (Berni Searle [sa]).



Figure 17: B Searle, *Profile* (detail – cloves), 2002 Duraclear Lambda print, 49 x 59.8 cm (Berni Searle [sa]).

Berni Searle's artwork, *Profile* (figures 15-20 & 25, 2002-3), engages critically with the demand for representational transparency, from the perspective of the extreme other. In this artwork, the artist's face has been impressed with miscellaneous objects, including a British spoon, a windmill-paperweight, a Muslim prayer, a cross, an anti-riot shield, etcetera. These objects refer to limits imposed by colonialism, religion, and racism, so that the work comprises an investigation into the impact of externally imposed boundaries on the body itself (Pollack 2001:[sp]). The work comments on the objectifying nature of the quest for perfect knowledge and perfect representation, used to aid in processes of hierarchising and regulation.

Searle is particularly aware of the problematic historic relationship that exists between representation and ethnography, so that her work often engages with problematic issues surrounding representation – here the concept of the profile refers to the practice of anthropometry, for example (Williamson 2000:[sp]). Practices like anthropometry were objectifying and ultimately served to stigmatise otherness: *other* bodies were exposed and classified only to be described as pathological. *Profile* examines and subtly disrupts the identity



Figure 18: B Searle, *Profile* (detail – cross), 2002  
Duraclear Lambda print, 49 x 59.8 cm  
(Berni Searle [sa]).



Figure 19: B Searle, *Profile* (detail – love letter), 2002  
Duraclear Lambda print, 49 x 59.8 cm  
(Berni Searle [sa]).



Figure 20: B Searle, *Profile* (detail – Rakam), 2002  
Duraclear Lambda print, 49 x 59.8 cm  
(Berni Searle [sa]).

that South Africa's apartheid policy of racial classification had imposed on her, by means of a strategy of mimicry. The image of the artist's face is enlarged - facilitating, even encouraging scrutiny. Yet, in spite of her heightened visibility, she remains ultimately inscrutable and the ambiguity of this gesture of exposure compounds this mystification. The distinguishing features of her profile have in any case been cast in shadow, minimised, so that processes of classification are impeded in this respect as well.

*Profile* may be interpreted as a conscious adoption of the hysterical strategy, which has been posited as precisely a reaction to such limiting representational practices as those mentioned above. She is miming the process of objectification, feigning submission to classification, yet this deliberate repetition of the process evokes the constructed nature of representation, implying absence. Searle re-examines the process of representation, in order to evoke the repressed underside of the image; to emphasise the presence of an other, muted, subject. If, as Taylor suggests, otherness appears by means of withdrawal, Searle does precisely this: she enables otherness to appear by means of a hysterical withdrawal, by figuring precisely the movement of repression. Far

from presenting her profile as signifier from which a stable signified may be established, she has, actually, assumed a mask. This strategy is described by Irigaray (quoted in Whitford 1991:71-2) as follows: "The assumption of masks, signs of deceit or absence, at least suggest that something that is lost."

Searle's *Snow White* (figures 21-24) employs a similar strategy of mimicry, and may also be examined in terms of the concept of hybridity. The artwork seems to comprise a negotiation of identity which would illustrate the dilemma identified by Fanon: to "turn white or disappear."

*Snow White* consists of a video, showing the artist kneeling to allow her body to be covered with flour; which she subsequently wipes off her body. Water is dripped from above, and Searle proceeds to knead the flour into bread.

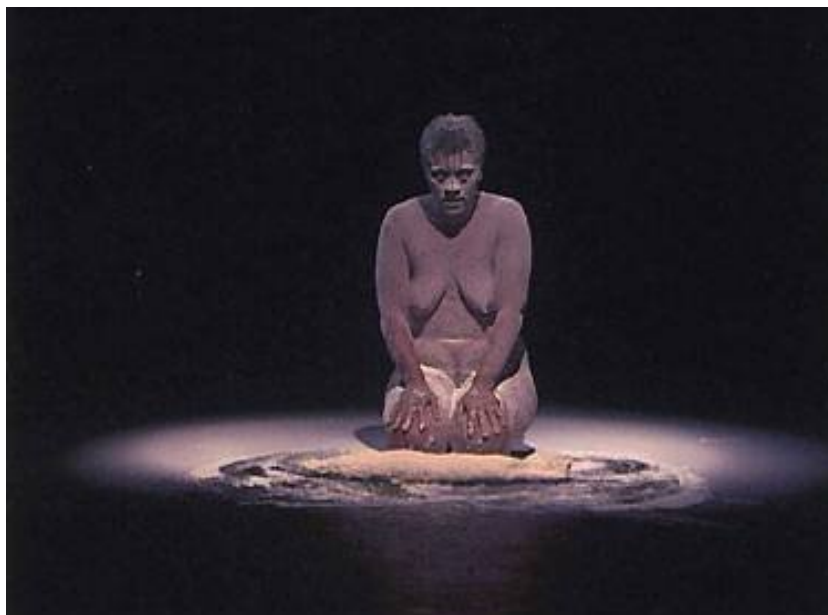
There are layers of visibility and disappearance in this work. Initially, Searle's body is invisible against the background, momentarily rendered partially visible by means of the light and flour highlighting her body, only for her body to again disappear beneath the flour. The menial task of kneading the flour into bread, which she performs, recalls the casting of the racial other into a subservient role. The disappearance of Searle's body mimetically evokes a



process of negation. For example, according to Olu Oguibe (quoted in Pollack 2001:[sp]), the flour which wholly envelops the artist's body, rendering her momentarily white, may refer to the racist process of "erasing" blackness, a process of "whiting out". In *Snow White*, Searle evokes imposed silence: as with the hysteric described in the previous chapter, this postcolonial subject is able to evoke her own repression precisely by means of the representation of silence; negation. Searle appropriates the image of whiteness and sameness, myths of servitude that would be forced onto her, and subverts it by literally manipulating and reconstructing it into bread.

This adds one more layer of subversive ambivalence to the work: the bread, in this case, may either be

consumed in the sense of passive assimilation of such roles, or in the sense of destruction. Just like Irigaray employs a strategy of mimesis to resuscitate those very terms associated with a patriarchal tradition and covertly giving them a new meaning, Searle appropriates images of subjugation and labour and converts these into motifs of resistance, in order to negotiate a different identity.



Figures 21 - 24: B Searle, *Snow White*, 2001  
Double projection video installation  
Scale of projection: 300 x 400cm  
(Berni Searle [sa]).

She is a hybrid – she in turn appears to have both white and coloured skin, assimilating and repudiating the limiting image of Snow White beauty. This new Snow White forms a negative transparency – she has been marked by the dominant representational system, however, the signs of presence are evidently only ephemeral and superficial. Her mirroring skin reflects the manner in which traditional Western ideals of complete transparency, which aspire to absolute knowledge, endeavouring to pin down, subjugate, and regulate, have been projected onto her. In the process she presents an image of absence. She has become totally transparent: her body disappears, so that her “depth” may not be surmised, so that she may not be reduced to merely being other or conceived of in terms of lack, based on the morphology of her body. In the dominant social system, naming and labeling serves to obfuscate and dissolve otherness. In contrast with such a negating disappearance, the disappearance of Searle’s body in this case, conversely allows her own subjectivity and agency to re-appear. Her body is no longer transparent in the Symbolically sanctioned sense; rather, her disappearing body will no longer serve to illustrate an enforced and mythical resemblance between signifier and signified. Hiding, indefinite, inscrutable, she resists objectification.

### **3.3 The semiotic**

The body of the colonised has historically served as marker for alterity. At the same time the colonised has not been allowed self-representation. Rather, just as the continent of Africa has been represented as a space of absence inviting European presence, the body of the other has been over-inscribed in terms of lack. The body of the racial other has been so extensively marked by the Symbolic that Fanon asserts that the gaze of the white man fragments the black person’s experience of his own body - so that he is unable to conceive of his own body, save through the perspective of the white man (Bergner 1995:78). The over-signified body of the other should be re-written – an action which is only possible by stimulating an awareness of the body as a sign produced by colonial discourse in the first place (Boehmer 1993:275). As has already been demonstrated, the strategy of mimicry or hybridity is useful in signifying Symbolic inscription and evoking absence. However, aspects pertaining more closely to the body of the postcolonial subject in terms of the semiotic, should also be examined in this regard. The rest of this chapter accordingly examines those aspects of the hysterical disposition related to the semiotic; namely poetic language and the abject.

### 3.3.1 Poetic language as a postcolonial strategy

If the colonised subject's relation to his or her body has been fragmented, as Fanon states, and this subject has effectively been alienated from his or her own body; a closer relation to the body may be re-established by re-activating bodily drive in terms of poetic language. The use of poetic language would constitute a rejection of Symbolic censorship, as it comprises a return to a period before prohibition – before the Symbolic has forced the repression of difference. Poetic language therefore allows the expression of the body and of difference within the confines of the Symbolic system: it may be used to retrieve and refer to the particularity of the body. As has been demonstrated, the hysteric, figuring resistance to the Symbolic, refuses coherent communication. The hysteric does not communicate in the Symbolically sanctioned manner, but communicates corporeally. As has been mentioned, poetic language allows the hysteric to highlight the non-signifying elements of communication, those aspects that do not designate or signify coherently, in order to expose the ambiguity of signification (Kristeva 1980:167; Kristeva 1986:96). The postcolonial subject may, in terms of such a poetic language, refuse to represent correctly (in a manner sanctioned by the Symbolic Order); to designate an internal content directly. Rather, the process of communication may be inverted and symptoms of repression displayed externally. That is, the skin and body of the racial other, as a signifier of repression, may be communicated to an outside, in terms of a poetic language.

In *Snow White*, the corporeal language that Searle speaks may be interpreted as a form of poetic language. Here Searle examines her body as a representation – her body poetically becomes an ambivalent signifier, fluctuating between one meaning and another. Liese Van der Watt (2003:26) has remarked that the constant disappearance of Searle's body in this work, can be related to the desire to remain un-marked. The movement between visibility and disappearance seems to comprise a play between presence and absence; to evoke an indeterminate identity. It describes a tension between a prescribed identity, hinging upon visibility and vision, and the subject's personal construction of a more indefinite identity. The assumption of a mutable, indeterminate identity is empowering because it resists objectifying classification (Van der Watt 2003:26). The tension between visibility and invisibility can therefore be related to the process of social inscription, which hinges on visibility (othering and hierarchising, based on the body's morphology) and transparent representation. Taylor confirms this, asserting that processes of representation related to regulation and containment, rely upon the determination of a fixed internal signified via the signifier of the body. Searle's strategy of disappearance can accordingly be interpreted as subversive, in terms of Taylor's (1997:54)



statement: “The search for the body (and the effort to establish its identity) is the search for a signified– transcendental or otherwise – that lends signifiers their thickness, weight, depth, and substance. If the body cannot be found, the mystery cannot be solved”. In spite of her nudity, Searle is certainly not rendered more apparent, but becomes, increasingly, inscrutable. The flour both covers or hides Searle’s body, and literally renders it more visible. When she is whitened by the flour, she is also more visible in terms of being represented in the Symbolic: the title, *Snow White*, denotes the beauty associated with fair skin in the Eurocentric paradigm. In the light of the artist’s dark skin, the title evokes associations with racial prejudice. The ostensible supremacy of *Snow White* is subsequently literally shrugged off.

Taylor (1997:12) notes: “Hide hides hide, which hides nothing...nothing but other hides”. In opposition to the philosophical quest of knowing the inner by means of the outer, Taylor (1997:12) proposes that one conceive of “depth” as mere illusion, and that one may in reality ever only come into contact with surfaces and representations of representations. In *Snow White*, Searle, by continuously adjusting her appearance, the primary signifier of her “signified inner content”, makes particularly evident that the outer may not reflect a stable inner identity. With the indeterminate identity that Searle evokes, the signifier is loosened from reference to a stable signified content, in a process of poetic language. As has been mentioned, whiteness may refer to negation, or assimilation, the kneading of the bread to compliance or resistance. Searle’s disappearance can refer to a resistance to social inscription, or to the loss of a sense of self and identity (the disappearance of her body reminds that one cannot figure outside the Symbolic), or both. While the indefinite metonymy of signification suggested by Taylor above, is valid in general, *Snow White* epitomises Taylor’s contention: her skin, over-inscribed, subversively becomes merely a signifier of signification itself, rather than ever designating a fixed signified content. In *Snow White*, if the signifier of her body is subordinated to the desire to know her “signified content”, one will only be baffled. The subject who privileges vision as a mode of unadulterated knowledge, believing in the immediacy and presence, is confounded in this process (Baker 2002:77). Her identity is indeterminate, and her body as a sign is marked by ambiguity and ambivalence. The poetic signification in the work serves to undermine the illusion of fixed, transparent representation which is fundamental to maintaining the authority of the Symbolic system.

Another relevant aspect of poetic language, is its ability to breach the distinction between self and other. The early process of closeness with the maternal and the corporeal, and the

separation there from, which ultimately forms the basis of any distinction between self and other, is evoked in *Snow White*. Here it is not merely the loss of connection to the body which is evoked, but also the retrieval thereof. Searle is reconstructing a fluid identity for herself. However, as there is no identity available for her within the Symbolic, engagement with the Symbolic still entails having to assume one of those guises already existing within this system. The work creates a sense of liminality, calling to mind the negotiation of identity during the mirror phase of the subject's development. Searle plays with the idea of being inscribed into the Symbolic, being given a sanctioned name, and shrugging it off - regressing (insisting upon a state that is aligned with a less fragmented bodily relation?). She enters the Symbolic Order only under the guise of whiteness. *Snow White* forms a repetitive process of inscription into the Symbolic, followed by egress there-from, and a re-entry – an oscillation on the threshold of the mirror – a liminality that avoids both identity and the negation of her own body.

### **3.3.2 Abjection as a postcolonial strategy**

In the colonial encounter, while the skin of the other was made excessively visible and over-inscribed as a signifier of difference, pathologised, it was paradoxically only rendered visible in order to negate it. The body of the other was constructed as a signifier of lack, and the aspects of difference were fetishised, so that the body of the other served as fundamental signifier of abjection. MacCormack ([sa]) describes the abjection of the female subject as follows, and here it is possible to substitute references to the female gender with a reference to the colonial subject: "...she is defined by her flesh rather than in spite of it...[she] is horror because of her failure to signify anything but her flesh".

The body of the other should be re-inscribed in order to erase previous inscriptions of colonial power. Grosz (1994:209) emphasises the subversive potential of an assertion of the body as a sign of otherness: "embodiment, corporeality, insist on alterity, both that alterity they carry within themselves...and the alterity that gives them their own concreteness and specificity (the alterities constituting race, sex, sexualities, ethnic and cultural specificities)." Boehmer (1993:272) also suggests that the conscious exhibition of the scarred and objectified body, as signifier of exclusion, is able to express a traumatic history. Abjection should accordingly be strategically converted into an empowering tactic. Cixous re-valorises abjection from a feminist perspective. She indicates that men have constructed women as being unrepresentable, have conceived of them as a threat that should be excluded from the Symbolic Order. She uses the

metaphor of the Medusa, in order to illustrate this fear, and indicates that the Medusa is in reality beautiful to contemplate. This is because the Medusa, as she contravenes paternal prohibition, enables new meanings to emerge (Cixous 1976:885). As has been demonstrated, the hysteric who is abject is ultimately able, as a figure of heterogeneity, to rupture the boundaries that sustain both patriarchal and colonial representation, including those distinctions between self and other, inner and outer, body and mind, in order to evoke that which has been excluded, in a Medusa-like manner (Barzilai 1991:295).

In *Profile* (figures 15-20 & 25, 2002-3), the various objects which impress Searle's skin, refer to social inscription, the marking of her body by the various regulatory discourses. The imprints, which had once been a sign of the presence of the relevant discourse, have, significantly, become a *negative* imprint on her skin - ultimately a sign of absence. Searle has become a hybrid figure – not only in terms of being impressed upon by an external discourse, but in terms of being utterly hybrid, having partially assimilated what had once been distinctly part of Holland, the Middle East, England... Attention is drawn to the permeable quality of her hybrid skin, to the point where the boundaries of her self are exposed as rather tenuous. A hysterical tension between the internal and external, a tension echoed by the evident interpenetration of discourse and materiality, Symbolic and semiotic, has been evoked. The evidently permeable and impressionable skin of the artist in this work, which seems to have been inscribed by external forces, remind of corporeography. The work evokes the abject, as the Symbolic prescription to separate self and other, inner and outer, signifier and signified, has been disobeyed. *Profile* precludes classification.

Vision no longer serves to establish a sense of mastery, knowledge and control; rather, the extreme visibility of the signifier of difference, the artist's skin, because of its magnification actually renders her unfathomable. In this work, the representation of anything other than the process of social inscription itself is kept to a minimum. Where the body of the other has traditionally been conceived of in terms of a *tabula rasa*, in this work, this notion is re-worked into a subversive strategy, to become a withdrawal, a deliberate blankness, emphasising absence.



Figure 25: B Searle, *Profile*, 2003  
Duraclear Lambda prints, 98 x 120 cm each  
(Berni Searle [sa]).

Snow White functions in a similar fashion. As stated previously, the disappearance and reappearance of Searle evokes regression to a period where a less fragmented relation to the body is possible, the pre-oedipal period. It therefore recalls the abject, which entails the formation of a distinction between self and other in the search for identity. Her skin is visible, then invisible, covered, then revealed. The coordinates of her skin, therefore the external boundaries of her body, are being negotiated. The chameleon-like penetrability of her skin recalls Ahmed's (2004:28) description of the affective formation of the bodily boundaries. This mutable skin is subversively abject, as the Symbolic prescription of separating self and other, is disobeyed – she mimics whiteness, mimics Eurocentric myths of the racial other. Her body can be seen as hysterical; it has been over-inscribed by the Symbolic, and now is re-inscribed in order to signify merely this process of representation, social inscription, rather than referring to a fixed signified content. Her body, mutable (white, black, present, absent), resists classification and containment. It merely signifies the indeterminacy of identity. A rupture of the boundaries between self and other that may sustain Symbolic representation, has taken place. Possibly, in the future, a space may open up for her inclusion.

## Chapter Four: CONCLUSION

In *Dora and the Other woman*, Siopis has linked the two women, Saartjie Baartman and Ida Bauer, in terms of their shared status as “dark continent”, and situated this relation within the context of hysteria. With this artwork as point of departure, this essay has argued that a hysterical strategy is one manner in which the racial other may be able to engage with the exclusionary Symbolic system, a notion which has been examined in terms of selected artworks by Diane Victor and Berni Searle.

This essay is based on Irigaray’s (1985:70) assertion that exclusion from the Symbolic Order has forced women to function as hysterics. Irigaray (1985:113,124) points out that, while hysteria may comprise a position of compromise, it may also present a position of resistance to a repressive Symbolic system. The pernicious nature of social inscription has been pointed out. Both psychoanalysis and colonial discourse is sustained not only by the differentiation of the self from the other but also by the objectification of the other’s body. The body of the other is subsumed by signification, forced to resemble a signified and sustain race or gender-related fictions. The body of the other should be wrested from the stronghold of the Western, male subject, and representations of the body should be revised and re-articulated in terms of the limits of the Symbolic system – a process which Irigaray has suggested is only possible by means of a hysterical strategy. It has been demonstrated that models of the body as an infinitely malleable, passive *tabula rasa*, should be replaced with the conception of the body as being inherently linguistic and generative. This phenomenon is exemplified by the hysterical condition, where repressed desire is communicated physically. Such a body is a palimpsest, evoking the imposed burden of representation.

It has been demonstrated that the re-inscription of the body of the other may take place by means of hysterical mimicry, poetic language, or subversive abjection. It has been demonstrated that the “script of body language” by means of which the hysteric can articulate desire, may be interpreted as a poetic language (Irigaray 1985:113). Here the relation to the corporeal may be resuscitated when the hysteric signifies psychic tension physically, improperly: in opposition to the Symbolic prescription for coherent, transparent representation. The hysterical symptom may also involve abjection, where the boundary of the skin separating self and other, signifier and signified, is compromised. The body may, in this manner, become a signifier of corporeal inscription itself, a signifier of painful repression. Both abjection and poetic language are narrowly related to mimicry: representations of the other’s body as abject, can be

mimetically exaggerated to the point where absence is evoked, whereas a hysterical poetic language comprises the mimicry or simulation of symptoms. Hysterical mimicry is particularly useful in terms of disrupting the distinction between self and other – a distinction which is seminal to the process of subjugation. While the body of the other has been represented as a sign of lack, absence – hysterical mimicry is able to re-translate this in terms of the “‘excess’ of the signifier”, which Bhabha (1992:50) refers to; in terms of the inadequacy of representation itself. The audible silence evoked by a hysterical reaction, forms a void, which hints at the inadequacy of representation.

Irigaray and Fanon have pointed out that the dominant subject conceives of others in terms of his own reflection (as being a poor copy of himself); and that the other is expected to return an undistorted image of sameness back to him (Jay 1994:532). Such a mirror of representation is abstracted in Lacan’s paternal metaphor, which institutes an apparently irrevocable separation between subject and object, and the subject and the corporeal or maternal:

Father’s name (precedence)

Mother’s desire (cancelled)

The apparently unbreachable distinction between signifier and signified, which is based upon this fundamental separation of self and m(other) - that is, the repression of otherness - supports the illusion of representational transparency. However, this aspect, which forms the basis of the Symbolic, is, nevertheless, itself repressed.

However, it has been suggested that a hysterical strategy may evoke this absence. The infraction of the paternal prohibition in terms of poetic language, abjection and mimicry, can retrieve otherness. Irigaray has pointed out that the hysteric can re-direct the mirror of representation back towards the dominant subject himself, by mirroring the processes and constructed nature of representation and highlighting the limits thereof. The mirror of the hysteric’s body, representing only the outside; representing improperly, reflecting his or her own other, effects a dissolution of the mirror of representation, and the bar separating signifier and signified. By comprising this extra, excessive mirror (a gaze which should have been repressed), the hysteric is able to fracture the unity of the Symbolic hall of mirrors.

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