“If We Could Learn to Learn from Pain”:
A Contemporary Literary Ethics of Women’s Suffering and Self-Sacrifice

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This dissertation explores suffering and self-sacrifice in literature and theory from 1950 to
the present, highlighting the concern with suffering in numerous women writers' texts as well as the
way several contemporary discussions of ethics—including feminisms, theologies, and
poststructuralist theory—crystallize around redemptive sacrifice. Noting that the late-twentieth-
century turn to ethics in literary studies participates in a problematic erasure of the gendered and
religious histories of redemptive sacrifice, I argue that my project's literary texts correct this erasure
through a dynamic interplay of what I call the “ethics of literary representation” and the “ethics of
readerly attention,” an ongoing interaction of form and content, critique and embrace.

Chapter One traces a narrative of women's writing in English, beginning with Julian of
Norwich's *Revelation of Love* (c. 1400) and running through the present, in order to highlight the
long history of women's literary engagement with the Judeo-Christian cultural mandate that women
suffer and sacrifice themselves for men and children. This first chapter also explicates the rhetorical
role of suffering and sacrifice in contemporary understandings of literature and theories of ethics. In
Chapter Two I argue that Adrienne Rich, famous for her critique of the institution of self-sacrificing
motherhood and linked in the 1970s to radical feminist philosopher-theologian Mary Daly,
paradoxically exemplifies an ethical practice of endless, self-giving reinterpretation. I locate this
practice in her poetic exploration of language's risks and possibilities; her suggestion of an ethical
paradigm rooted in mothering that accompanies the critique in *Of Woman Born*; and her self-
revision, including her later texts' more hopeful outlook on religion and their shift away from
separatist feminism to a stand against global injustices. Chapter Three reads Toni Morrison's novels
*Beloved, Love,* and *A Mercy* together with the Black Liberation theology of redemptive suffering
and womanist theologians' challenges to Black theology in light of gender. Here I assert that
Morrison's texts perform a paradox in suggesting an ethical model of self-giving responsibility that
is not unlike Christian redemption and, at the same time, subverting such generalizations through
their specific representations of raced, gendered, and classed suffering and service. Chapter Four
situates Ana Castillo's novels *So Far From God* and *The Guardians* within a narrative of Chicana
activism and the Mexican-Catholic heritage of self-sacrificing mothers. I locate within her novels a
hermeneutic of liberation that re-interprets religious stories through the lived experiences of the
oppressed and suggests an ambivalence that does not quite abandon religion as a source of
empowerment for women. Chapter Five examines Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus,*
*Half of a Yellow Sun,* and *That Thing Around Your Neck,* all published since 2003. I argue that
Adichie's exploration of injustice as arising from the post-colonial heritages of political turmoil as
well as familial and religious patriarchy—and her suggestion of critical fidelity to those broken
systems through a proliferation of particular stories— offers a brave critique of unjust suffering
paradoxically accompanied by a creative and risky refusal to reject these specific histories
altogether.

The dissertation concludes with a poetic meditation on the endless interplay of the ethics of
literary representation and the ethics of readerly attention at work in these literary texts. By
mediating my synthesis of a literary ethics of women's suffering and self-sacrifice through the
inescapably particular details of the texts I study and through creative accounts of my own reading
experience and critical desire, I perform in this last chapter one of the project's fundamental
insights, namely, the paradoxical dance of critique and re-vision, textuality and materiality, the
personal and the political.