In December 1991 three elderly South Korean women filed a lawsuit against the Japanese government, claiming systematic enslavement and abuse as a result of their treatment at the hands of the Imperial Army during World War Two. As their case unfolded, and women’s groups took up their cause, the full scale of their story emerged. It was revealed that as many as 200,000 young women from South-East Asia, especially Korea, were forcibly conscripted by the Japanese forces and drafted to work as prostitutes throughout South-East Asia and the Pacific during the 1930s to 1945. Corralled in small cubicles, the women were required to have sex with as many as thirty men a day. The plight of these so-called ‘comfort women’ was subsequently suppressed for nearly fifty years, preventing the women from making public their experience. Many readers may judge such a conspiracy of silence as amounting to an extension of the original abuse, serving only to prolong the deleterious effects of the original trauma, and from which release has taken the best part of a lifetime.

Such a story confronts its hearers with suffering and injustice on a scale that is unimaginable. The fate of the comfort women is one amongst many expressions of the militarism, genocide and

---


3 Often referred to as jungshindae, which literally means conscripted worker.
totalitarianism that have habitually scarred the twentieth century and undermined the 'grand narrative' of civilization and progress, revealing it to be more a product of the naive confidence of Western modernity than a moral universal. Yet even if one model for enlightenment and emancipation is shaken, the question still remains: where are the resources for cultivating a moral sensibility appropriate to the horrifying scale of the evil and inhumanity of Auschwitz, Bosnia and Ruanda?

It is significant to note that one version of a reconstructed moral discourse — one cautious of universals and grand narratives, but determined nevertheless not to abandon the moral and political vision of human emancipation — draws upon the social theory of the body. To place the body at the centre of moral and social theorizing reflects a conviction on the part of many scholars that the human body serves as the surface upon which the most controversial and pressing dilemmas of the day are made flesh. Questions of war, peace, hunger and torture involve bodily containment, flourishing or coercion. It is bodies that bear most tangibly the marks and effects of cultural, political and economic trends, such as the use and abuse of medical advances or the growing encroachment of computer technologies on the human body to the extent of blurring the boundaries between organic and cybernetic life.4

One figure, the sociologist Arthur Frank, has been especially influential in the turn to the body in recent social theory, particularly as an advocate of an 'ethics of embodiment'.5 Frank’s position is well encapsulated in the following statement, found at the end of his 1991 essay surveying the future of the sociological study of the body. He argues that the body possesses a moral imperative of a compelling nature, capable of disclosing powerful truths about the human condition:

Ultimately there would be no ethics of the body, but rather all ethics would take the body as its fundamental point of departure ... The reason is simple: only bodies suffer. Only by a studied concentration on the body can we bear adequate


witness to this suffering. Only an ethics or a social science which witnesses suffering is worthy of our energies or attention.6

Frank's comments identify questions of bodily representation and theorization as ultimately questions of accountability and moral disclosure; and since the essay cited above, Frank has developed further the links between embodiment, suffering and ethics. He has advanced a compelling portrayal of the 'wounded storyteller' as moral exemplar, whose odyssey through pain represents what Frank terms a 'pedagogy of suffering'.7 He argues that (suffering) bodies constitute narratives of pain and redemption sufficient to regenerate our moral vocabulary.

In this essay, I propose to examine Frank's model of the representation of suffering bodies in narratives of 'the wounded storyteller' as a case study of the connections between representation, gender and experience. Whilst his account is courageous, inspirational and evocative, it contains a number of elements with which I wish to take issue. In particular, Frank's work ignores the extent to which the passage into speech of the wounded storyteller is always already circumscribed by concealed dynamics of gender and race. Some stories get told; but others, Frank's 'chaos' narratives, remain on the margins of acceptable speech because the prevailing system of gendered and racialized privilege renders their bearers mute and invisible. In particular, women — their bodies and voices — are so fundamentally absent from patriarchy that they cannot possibly occupy the same narrative spaces as men. This is graphically illustrated when we reconsider the emerging stories of the comfort women of Korea and Japan, whose bodies (and minds) bear the marks of suffering and coercion, but whose passage to speech exposes Frank's (and others') neglect of the gendered nature of bodies and their stories of wounding and healing.

Such ingrained gender representations need restructuring, and Luce Irigaray's remaking of the symbolic of patriarchy is similarly focused on suffering bodies. However, her task is to remake the metaphysics of embodiment and ethics via an ambitious project of reconfiguring our very concepts of divinity and transcendence. So, whilst Frank's wounded storyteller may serve as moral exemplar — and spark our efforts to relate similar narratives of hope and obligation — it seems that without Irigaray's concept of 'divine becoming', and new representations of identity, community and responsibility, we will simply be stuck with telling the same old

---


stories. 'Physical pain has no voice, but when it at last finds a voice, it begins to tell a story ...'\(^8\)

Frank develops his ethics of embodiment in two works: \textit{At the will of the body} (1991) is based on his own encounters with serious, life-threatening illness, firstly a heart attack at the age of thirty-nine, and then cancer treatment a year later. The theme of Frank's most recent book, \textit{The wounded storyteller} (1995) develops in more detail the association between bodies in pain and the search for a postmodern ethics.

Frank speaks of illness as a 'dangerous opportunity': one's entire identity is undermined by the power of illness to confound habitual certainties and dislocate one from former preoccupations. It is a process of afflicted bodies 'dissolving' physical and social certainties, depriving the sufferer of his or her taken-for-granted abilities to function. The experience of pain is a central element of the debilitating potency of illness,\(^9\) a kind of surrendering of personal and professional competence and control.\(^10\)

But bodies dissolve and lose their self-possession in other ways: central to Frank's analysis is his distinction between 'illness' and 'disease',\(^11\) and the way in which both conditions are representative of contrasting sociological epochs. Disease is the condition of modernity, a medicalized version of one's condition, which is necessarily clinical and objectifying, and symbolized by the passive acquiescence of the patient in the high-tech medical facility. Illness, by contrast, is redolent of the opportunity postmodernity presents to take control of one's condition:

Illness is the experience of living through the disease. If disease talk measures the body, illness talk tells of the fear and frustration of being inside a body that is breaking down. Illness begins where medicine leaves off, where I recognize that what is happening to my body is not some set of measures. What happens to my body happens to my life.\(^12\)

The healing story can only thus emerge from the reclamation of the body that chooses to defy medical objectification. The body '... is not a territory to be controlled by either the physician's treatment or the patient's will ...':\(^13\) it has a mystery and a wisdom of its own. The integrity of the body, despite our attempts to maintain the control of assurance, progress and normality, is the

---


\(^9\) A.W. Frank, \textit{At the will of the body: reflections on illness} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), 34.

\(^10\) A theme later reiterated in Frank's discussion of Oliver Sacks, \textit{A leg to stand on} (London: Duckworth, 1984): see \textit{The wounded storyteller}, Chapters Five and Six.

\(^11\) \textit{At the will of the body}, 13–21.

\(^12\) Ibid., 13.

\(^13\) Ibid., 62.
best moral teacher.\textsuperscript{14} 'At the centre of narrative ethics is the wounded storyteller. What is ethical is found in the story, and the story depends on the wound'.\textsuperscript{15}

This contrast, between the diseased body held captive in the logic of modernity which prizes technological progress and scientific panaceas, and the narratives of illness which facilitate the advent of the wounded storyteller, may be simplistic but is crucial to Frank’s analysis. The paradigm of modernity is one of \textit{restitution}: a notion that suffering and illness have closure, and the narrative of pain can be rendered coherent via medical intervention. The primacy of technical expertise dominates the experiences of illness; the patient surrenders him/herself to the care and power of the professional.

Whilst the restitution narrative is firmly entrenched within modernity, Frank’s model of the ‘chaos’ narrative represents the stories which lack any coherence or resolution within the paradigm of restitution. Chaotic tales are untellable, representing merely a ‘hole’ in the narrative that cannot be filled. ‘The story traces the edges of a wound that can only be told around. Words suggest its rawness, but that wound is so much of the body, its insults, agonies, and losses, that words necessarily fail’.\textsuperscript{16} This is a strand of thinking about the body which may be traced back to the work of Elaine Scarry: the body is ‘unmade’ to a point of mute pain that removes self and body from language, culture and representation.\textsuperscript{17} It is actually the representation of pain into coherent narrative that transforms the body from flesh to words; and, for Frank, constitutes (in the sense of comprising and constructing) its ethical imperative. The drive to speak, to portray, to communicate — to become the master of one’s own narrative and the teller of one’s own tale — is thus at the heart of his account.

The process of recovering one’s voice is therefore a journey through suffering, but one redeemed by one’s capacity to connect with others, thereby forging a moral sensibility grounded in communicative inter-subjectivity. It is a movement from passivity to activity, isolation to community, and from objectification to self-actualization. This is the ethical heart of Frank’s system:

The idea of telling one’s story as a responsibility to the commonsense world reflects what I understand as the core morality of the postmodern. Storytelling is \textit{for} an other just as much as it is for oneself. In the reciprocity that is storytelling, the teller offers herself as guide to the other’s self-formation. The other’s receipt of that guidance not only recognizes but \textit{values} the teller. The moral genius of storytelling is that each, teller and listener, enters the space of

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{At the will of the body}, 115–27.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Wounded storyteller}, 169.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 98.
\textsuperscript{17} Scarry, \textit{The body in pain} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
the story for the other. Telling stories in postmodern times, and perhaps in all times, attempts to change one's own life by affecting the lives of others. Thus all stories have an element of testimony...\(^{18}\)

The conditions under which Frank believes the wounded storyteller has been able to thrive is thus characterized by him as a shift from modern to postmodern times. Whilst Frank's characterization of the contours of modernity and postmodernity is sketchy — he admits: 'I make no attempt to define postmodernism'\(^{19}\) — it seems to me that Frank's distinction between the two epochs is concerned with questions of personal freedom and autonomy. The 'postmodern' is a corrective to the 'modern' in that the proliferation of people's own stories releases them from the imposed and ideological fabrications of modernity: 'Much of postmodernity — haunted by the question of how to write after Auschwitz — is a struggle to work out what aspects of modernity can be preserved while scrapping the modernist telos'.\(^{20}\)

Thus, the 'postmodern' narrative of illness begins when the patient can reclaim their capacity for telling their stories for themselves. There is a sense that illness is a reality which, in bringing us to our senses, provides some kind of ethical constant: 'Even in postmodern times, even among the various selves that each of us is, a bedrock of the really real remains. Its name is often pain.'\(^{21}\)

This means, I think, that Frank's work is ultimately as much about stories as it is about bodies. He takes the turn to narrative in much postmodern theory as his cue for pursuing the idea of narrativity as underpinning social life. 'Events are contingent, but a story can be told that binds contingent events together into a life that has a moral necessity'.\(^{22}\) In the absence of metaphysical truths, people must construct their worlds via story; but they inherit and receive the world narrationally too.\(^{23}\) People may no longer rely on 'grand narratives' to sustain them in the illusion that there really is a truth out there; but they subsist upon the local stories in which they participate.

Instead of the dominance of 'restitution', therefore, the paradigm here is the patient in 'remission'. Whilst the temporarily seriously ill may tolerate being taken over in the name of recovery — even cure — the long-term chronically sick and cancer patients in remission will not tolerate permanent colonization of this nature.

\(^{18}\) Wounded storyteller, 17-18.
\(^{19}\) Ibid., 4. Frank seems to use 'postmodernism' to delineate the historical and sociological condition, whereas I prefer to refer to this as 'postmodernity', and reserve 'postmodernism' as the term for the intellectual enquiry into the state of postmodernity.
\(^{20}\) Wounded storyteller, 112.
\(^{21}\) Ibid., 72.
\(^{22}\) Ibid., 176.
Relieved of the pressure to ‘get well soon’, the remissioner takes responsibility for her/his stories of illness as a way of defining themselves on their own behalf. No longer content to be the object of another’s colonizing gaze or construction (that of the medical expert, or the prescriptive logic of recovery, or the depersonalizing trajectory of invasive treatment), the postmodern wounded storyteller resists medical reductionism and his/her objectification and infantilization at the hands of the ‘master narrative’ of science or its practitioners.

Thus the ‘remission society’ exposes the flaws and presumptions in the restitution narrative. Modern medicine aims at an invulnerability and control which the frailty of the body belies. There can be no medical — or indeed ontological — distinction between ‘healthy’ and ‘sick’: one may not even be in the process of ‘becoming’ well. The remission patient forever remains transient, a citizen of two worlds. S/he recognizes that as the teller of his/her story s/he emerges changed, transfigured even, from the journey of illness and treatment.

This is the beginning of what Frank terms the ‘quest’ story which feature the ‘hero’24 who journeys through tribulation to eventual resolution. The destination is not victory but interestingly — ‘atonement’.25 The hero journeys to the heart of suffering but returns — changed, not necessarily, if ever, ‘cured’ to tell the ‘inspirational’ story to others. It appears not to be so much the content of the story — not a moral fable — as the embodiment of transfigured suffering and courage which reaches out as a source of grace to others. The storytellers bear the ‘marks of pain’26 on their flesh — flesh made words, in an inversion of traditional Christian typology of incarnation. The hero is not a victor but a ‘suffering servant’.27

Such figures cannot speak of ultimate closure or abstract ideals of progress and healing; they can only bear witness to their own wounded vulnerability and perseverance, an offering that invites empathy and calls forth community. Those who bear witness to the testimony are summoned to become a certain kind of person by virtue of the invitation to hear the story — and thus to realize and bring into flesh the words, and into words the flesh, of the wounded narrator: ‘... the listener must be present as a potentially suffering body to receive the testimony that is the suffering body of the teller’.28 The sharing of stories is one of the ways in which the communicative (other-related) body shares its pain and encounters the recognition of another. Stories heal by virtue of the

24 Frank cites Joseph Campbell’s work at this point.
25 Wounded storyteller, 119.
26 Ibid., 127.
27 Frank evokes the figures of Bodhisattva and Christ as paradigms of this process.
28 Wounded storyteller, 144.
shared bonds they create, and ill people's stories are therefore moral acts, eliciting care as the appropriate response of those hearing these narratives. 'The wounded storyteller is a moral witness, reenchanting a disenchanted world ... Postmodern times may be pandemonium, but they are not a void. Illness stories provide glimpses of the perfection'.

However, despite Frank's insistence that the assumption of illness is necessarily a vocation of vulnerability, vestiges of the modern narrative of self-actualization and control linger on. The ethical significance of the narrative process of illness seems, for Frank still, to be about personal responsibility: 'In postmodern times, becoming a narrator of one's own life implies an assumption of responsibility for more than the events of that life. Events are contingent, but a story can be told that binds contingent events together into a life that has a moral necessity'.

Frank's 'postmodernism' thus emerges supremely as an era of liberal individualism: see the emphasis here — mirrored throughout his book — upon choice and responsibility: 'People, especially ill people, may not choose their bodies, but as bodies they remain responsible for their bodies, and they choose how to exercise this responsibility'.

This connects with a perennial theme in Frank's work, already identified: that of illness as disruption and interruption of personal success, competence and progress. It mirrors his earlier distinction between 'disease' — the medicalized, objectifying discourse about one's condition — and 'illness' which is the lived, phenomenological experience through which one achieves a greater degree of autonomy and self-definition.

However, I take issue with Frank's basic premises in this respect. He takes what he calls 'postmodernism' to be a state in which everyone is equally free to tell their story (free of authoritarian, totalizing regimes) and that no-one is complicit in silencing anyone else. This is a 'free market' of storytelling, postmodern clearly in Frank's terms insofar as a multiplicity of voices proliferate; but essentially a state in which narrative has been deregulated: a democracy of wounded healers! We are all now authors of our own lives:

In stories, the teller not only recovers her voice; she becomes a witness to the conditions that rob others of their voices ... Those who have been objects of others' reports are now telling their own stories. As they do so, they define the ethic of our times: an ethic of voice, affording each a right to speak her own truth, in her own words.

29 Wounded storyteller, 185.
30 Ibid., 176.
31 Ibid., 41.
32 Ibid., xii–xiii.
Here, we see again Frank’s characterization of postmodernity as the culmination of personal responsibility to tell one’s stories; but note also the language of ‘robbery’ and ‘recovery’. Is there a primal state of innocence in which everyone is the author and agent of their story, only to have it subsequently distorted or misappropriated? If so, what robs us of that capacity to relate our lives? Whatever that may be, it is clear that the finding of one’s own voice occurs not if, but ‘... when the capacity for telling one’s own story is reclaimed’. ³³

By stressing the narrative as the epitome of self-actualized agency, Frank glosses over issues of power and difference in the construction of bodies, stories, suffering and recovery. What of those who have a story, manifest in bodily distress, and yet who cannot speak for lack of an audience, or who are constrained not merely for want of listeners but by virtue of altogether more intractable factors? Some bodies may be legitimate groundings of the kind of personal agency suggested by Frank’s process; but others are denied any realization of personal autonomy, subjectivity or moral authority. It seems inadequate therefore simply to follow Frank’s logic without also asking how some bodies become constituted as bearing the credibility to be classed as fully human, liable to be heard into speech; and which bodies still have to struggle to gain any kind of hearing.

Despite Frank’s careful gender-inclusive language, and his use of Audre Lorde’s Cancer Journals as one of his source texts, Frank’s narratives are implicitly gendered and racialized. Gender and race are both systems of social relations, founded on power and difference, in which representations of the body are fundamental. Gender oppression and racism both become embodied in quasi-scientific discourses which reduce complex biological factors to deterministic processes and which feed representations of women, indigenous and Black peoples as inherently more ‘animalistic’ or ‘closer to nature’ than white males. ³⁴ Such ‘scientific’ evidence must be subject to the hermeneutics of suspicion and exposed as perennial pieces of rhetoric by which the powerful exclude subordinates from full humanity and participation. Physical coercion, dispossession of rights, enforced segregation and other forms of bodily control are crucial tools of gendered and racialized regimes. ³⁵ The power to resist such representations (in their widest forms: as discourse, as portrayals and as control of physical and political space) and to

³³ Wounded storyteller, 7, my emphasis.
³⁴ For a critique of the deterministic and reductionist tendencies in sociology, see R.C. Lewontin, S. Rose and L.J. Kamin (eds), Not in our genes: biology, ideology and human nature (New York: Pantheon, 1984).
construct alternative models of identity and self-representation is a critical element of Black and feminist political and theoretical empowerment. However, as such movements testify, it is not achieved without significant struggle, often against considerable resistance.

Systems of hierarchy and exclusion also manifest themselves in the differential occupation of bodily space, in physical violation, unwanted touch or gaze. Iris Young argues that gender relations in particular are enacted within bodily space; women's experience of themselves as embodied is often one of confinement and restriction, not of personal agency. It is not simply illness that 'robs' women of ourselves; we may never fully come into self-possession in the first place:

Insofar as we learn to live out our existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal culture assigns to us, we are physically inhibited, confined, positioned, and objectified. As lived bodies we are not open and unambiguous transcendences that move out to master a world that belongs to us, a world constituted by our own intentions and projections.

The experiences of the comfort women of Korea serves as a graphic example of the silencing of gendered and racialized bodies. The bodies (and minds) of the comfort women continue to bear the scars of what Davis characterizes as '... one of the most extreme expressions of territorial, ethnic, and gender domination resulting from the masculine abuse of power, domination [sic], and aggression documented in the twentieth century'. Their experience gives graphic detail to the way in which the structural forces of poverty, colonialism, racism and sexism find material and specific expression in the bodily abuse of women and children.

But why has it taken so long for the stories of the comfort women to be told; and why is it only now that their sufferings have been given voice? The answers to these questions suggest that Frank's analysis fails to take sufficient account of the circumstances under which bodily narratives are acknowledged and legitimated, and the resistances which often circumscribe the wounded storyteller: of denial, collusion and self-interest. Frank does not see that the dichotomy between 'disease' and 'illness' is not the only locus of dispossession, and the silencing

---

36 See, for example, A. Lorde, *Sister outsider* (Freedom, California: Crossing Press, 1984).
wrought by the patient’s powerlessness at the hands of medical attention is paralleled by other forms of objectification and exclusion.

Why could these women not transform their story from one of ‘chaos’ to ‘quest’? Until the campaign for reparations was launched, most former comfort women suffered unnoticed, often disowned by families, living in poverty and suffering chronic illness as a result of their ordeal. Strong structural factors were at work which created a culture of silence. Stories are always given voice within a political context; we might say that cultural factors predisposed the comfort women to a life of ‘abjection’ because their experiences, inscribed upon their suffering bodies, transgressed too many cultural taboos for their society to tolerate. Confucianism and Calvinist Christianity in Korea contribute towards patterns of social order and social interactions built upon elaborate observations of honour, shame and social status. Women are still regarded as the property of their fathers prior to marriage and of their husbands afterwards: so for a woman to be ‘defiled’ sexually casts her as damaged goods, with dire consequences for the honour of her family.

Religious beliefs, institutions and practices sacralize and perpetuate gender hierarchy by sanctioning dualistic metaphysics in which women are associated with nature, the body and matter, whilst men are depicted as closer to the world of the spirit and the intellect. In their examination of the religious and theological roots of the sex industry in South-East Asia, Brock and Thistlethwaite suggest that Confucianism, Christianity and Buddhism perpetuate powerful cultural and ideological motifs which foster the subordinate and exploited status of women in this region. These religious systems emphasize the symbolic association of women with the body, which is regarded negatively as an obstacle to spiritual enlightenment, thereby enclosing women in the realm of the profane, and sanctioning the objectification of women as lesser forms of humanity. This suggests that religious images play a powerful role in shaping gender and racial representations which, judging from the experiences of the comfort women, served as a powerful inhibiting factor to women’s achieving equal status as wounded storytellers.

The true nature of the abuse of the comfort women was also obscured by a refusal to sanction the seriousness of the systematic rapes which they had to endure. Recent work on violence against

41 Chung, ‘Haunted lives’.
42 Brock and Thistlethwaite, Casting stones, 90–1.
women has emphasized that it is a phenomenon not committed only by exceptionally pathological individuals, but is something likely to be perpetrated by 'normal', often respectable and responsible, men. Similarly, the campaign for an official recognition of the existence of the comfort women insisted that the rapes were not spontaneous acts of cruelty by sadistic men, or even the excesses of ill disciplined troops; quite the contrary. It was a systematically sanctioned programme to ensure soldiers did not contract venereal disease and to prevent the occupying forces from consorting with the local population.

Thus, the feminist-inspired campaigns had to overcome the reticence of the comfort women — many of whom sought to repress the trauma of their experiences — and the culture of shame which surrounded the women’s 'going public'. The comfort women faced resistance to their efforts to name their experiences as violence to body and mind, and to acknowledge the physiological and psychological effects felt in the present as manifestations of a systematic and calculated programme in the past. The culture of denial prevented the comfort women from being able to claim their status as active participants in the hostilities. But the telling forth of their stories as casualties of war could not take place until they were properly named as legitimate combatants; only then could they begin to relate their narratives. For years, therefore, the comfort women were politically and institutionally invisible; but the healing narrative could not be told whilst their very existence was denied. The first step was therefore visibility.

Here are stories of bodily confinement, abuse and suffering which have been silenced for a lifetime, only now to be told, and heard. The effects of totalitarian political rule and militarism may be seen, inscribed on the bodies of such women; but, in a sense, these bodies also still bear the scars of subsequent years of denial. Bringing to light such testimony required more than the presence of a sympathetic fellow-sufferer: major cultural shifts had to occur. Political movements had to argue for the legitimacy of these women's bodies as appropriate speakers and actors of their pain. Much of that was to do with reconfiguring women's status and giving them the right to speak for themselves, and challenging a patriarchal and racist culture which denied them justice.

45 The Korean-American journalist Yunghi Kim has been instrumental in bringing the story of the comfort women to public attention via a series of photographs. The visual nature of her intervention underlines the importance of making the bodies of the comfort women tangible and real amidst the political and familial denial. Kim says: 'The most important thing the pictures did was give these women a face, show them as real people'. H. Lacey and Y. Kim, 'The Emperor's forgotten army', *Independent on Sunday*, London, 25 May 1997, 40–1.
Power and difference do not therefore disappear in post-modernity, although their effects and traces may become more diffuse. But we cannot simply rest the emergence of the wounded storyteller on personal responsibility, without looking at the ways in which some narratives are geared actually to the re(in/en)forcement of such relationships of inequality. We can be complicit in some power relations whilst victimized ourselves by others; and whilst Frank dissolves the boundary of health/sickness, he is less perceptive on the dichotomies of power/powerlessness. Nor is he alert to the possibility that the 'fellowship' of wounded storytellers may still be divided along the fault-lines of power and difference.

I suspect that Frank’s inability to accommodate such dynamics, and his gender-blindness in particular, may be traced back to his characterization of the ‘chaos’ narrative. He unconsciously attributes entrapment in such chaos in a way that contains within it unexamined gender representations. If Frank’s depiction of ‘chaos’ is examined through psychoanalytic, especially Lacanian, eyes, it is possible to identify the echoes of a longstanding tradition that depicts women as inherently chaotic, silenced and voiceless:

Hearing is difficult not only because listeners have trouble facing what is being said as a possibility or reality in their own lives. Hearing is also difficult because the chaos narrative is probably the most embodied form of story. If chaos stories are told on the edges of a wound, they are also told on the edges of speech. Ultimately, chaos is told in the silences that speech cannot penetrate or illuminate. The chaos narrative is always beyond speech, and thus it is what is always lacking in speech. Chaos is what can never be told; it is the hole in the telling.\[46\]

The chaos story seems to adopt a Lacanian feminized subject position in Frank’s analysis: associated with embodiment; unrealized in, and marginal to, speech (and therefore culture); the lack, or hole; it is enigma, mystery and ‘Other’ to its hearers (who occupy the normal world of privileged speakers); these chaotic bodies/stories cannot be ‘penetrated’ or rendered coherent by the Phallic order which only acknowledges those who can conform to its particular bodily/linguistic economy. We can only conclude that the chaos story resembles the Imaginary world beyond patriarchal speech, space and time: as Frank remarks, chaos narratives have no flow, no future, present or past to structure them.\[47\] To the mainstream world, chaos narratives comprise ‘vulnerability, futility, and impotence’:\[48\] much as the patriarchal symbolic characterizes women’s incoherence and invisibility due to their incidental relationship to the Phallus as universal signifier.

\[47\] Ibid., 108.
\[48\] Ibid., 101.
Within Lacanian psychoanalysis, sexed identity is contingent upon entry into culture designated as the structures of language ordered around the privileged signifier of the Phallus. Woman's sexed identity is predicated upon lack of such anatomical/linguistic privilege. She is relegated to non-being — by virtue of being non-male — a characterization that can be traced back to Freud's theories of the castration complex, in which the female child discovers the absent penis as a fateful affliction, a 'punishment personal to herself', a 'scar', a 'wound to her narcissism'.

Lacan's analysis of woman's absolute silence and invisibility under the Law of the Father should serve as a warning, as it does to his one-time disciple and critic Luce Irigaray. For Irigaray, feminist politics founded on appeals to the common humanity of women and men rest on presuppositions about human nature which frequently, on closer scrutiny, are implicitly those of male human nature. Woman can only glimpse the void of her absence, enclosed in phallogocentric constructions. Irigaray is therefore critical of those varieties of feminist politics which locate women's emancipation in terms of their equality with men; this simply condemns them to conformity to androcentric standards. Instead, if women's representation as 'Other' within the deep symbolic of patriarchy is fundamental, then it must be radically remade into a truly woman-centred subjectivity — and ethics — founded on the sexual specificity of women.

Irigaray's representation of embodiment is not a literal or essentialist reading. Rather, she is practising a 'poesis' of the body: a creative rendition which is actually trying to recreate the very terms of representation themselves. One of her objectives is to subvert the terminology of 'wound', 'lack' and 'hole' as appropriate characterizations of women's subjectivity. However, this process of remaking goes beyond metaphor or literary device: her insistence on the real, sexuate body is an affirmation of the material bedrock of women's identity. Her poesis of the body is a subversion of phallogocentric representations of women's embodiment; whereas patriarchy portrays women as deficiency and blankness, Irigaray's celebration of the body is an assertion of women's Being — but on terms of her own making.

Rosi Braidotti has championed an interpretation of Irigaray as articulating a uniquely feminine symbolic. In referring to Irigaray's

51 See L. Irigaray, This sex which is not one, trans. C. Porter (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977); K.B. Stockton, God between their lips: desire between women in Irigaray, Brontë and Eliot (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994).
notion of the body as 'threshold of transcendence'. I take Braidotti to be hinting at the body as a liminal thing, an inhabitant of indeterminacy and margins, transitory and fluid; and it underlines Irigaray’s insistence that a renewed feminist symbolic is both morphological and theological/metaphysical. It can neither be reduced to discourse nor to biology. For without addressing the entrenched symbolic of sexual difference, it will be impossible to reconfigure questions of identity and sexuality. The subject must be linked to the sexed body, because this is the foundation of women’s real, lived experience, representing the lack of reciprocity in the symbolic order of patriarchy; but it also serves as the site of an alternative symbolic founded on bodily pleasures unspeakable and irreducible to the monolithic order of the Phallus. But because this representation of (embodied) feminine subjectivity is not available within the prevailing discourse, such an alternative is necessarily utopian and teleological:

Women are alienated not from some past body they have known but from a future body owed to them. These are bodies women have not yet been allowed to see, to fashion, or to listen for, even though these bodies already resist their dominant constructions, particularly where these bodies appear as holes in the dominant Symbolic.

Such a vision exists in the repressed and unvoiced arena of the female body; but not as hole or void, but more appropriately, as sacred space. Women do not become divine by abandoning their bodies; rather, the sexual body is caught up into the divine: ‘spiritual becoming and corporeal becoming are inseparable’. The material and the transcendent are undivided.

This turn to theology and metaphysics is not a predictable association of women with idealized spirituality but a means to convey the manner in which the divine represents a horizon of incompleteness and becoming — a telos — in which all human essences remain unfinished and unfixed. Is Irigaray’s evocation of ‘the divine’ thus an ultimate deferral of essentialism; not a projection of human finitude onto the divine (cf. Feuerbach) but an acknowledgement that no representation of the mystery that is human identity is ever complete?

Love of God has nothing moral in and of itself. It merely shows the way. It is the incentive for a more perfect becoming. It marks the horizon between the

---


53 Just as Irigaray insists on the liminality of bodiliness, so too I detect similar strains in Donna Haraway’s work. Her emphasis on the future of feminist strategy via the artful manipulation of new technologies tells us that it is less to the essence of bodies and rather to their boundaries that we must attend. (D. Haraway, ‘A manifesto for cyborgs’ in Simians, cyborgs and women: the reinvention of nature (London: Free Association Books, 1991), — Bodily practice is dynamic and contextual, but of course always already material).

54 Stockton, God between their lips, 28.

55 ‘Equal to whom?’, 203.
more past and the more future, the more passive and the more active — permanent and always in tension. God forces us to do nothing except become. The only task, the only obligation laid upon us is: to become divine men and women, to become perfectly, to refuse to allow parts of ourselves to shrivel and die that have the potential for growth and fulfilment.56

Thus Irigaray argues that women must necessarily reclaim their relationship to the divine, and to regard the horizon of divinity as an essential element to their own becoming. Irigaray elaborates on the Lacanian notion that ‘the feminine’ is inconceivable in positive terms, but only as ‘deficiency or atrophy’.57 But not only does patriarchy construct femininity as the ‘Other’ in order to define and bolster normative masculinity, it also conceptualizes God as the ‘guarantor’ of masculine subjectivity. ‘Man can exist because God helps him to define his gender (genre), helps him orientate his finiteness by reference to infinity ...’58 God as self-sufficient, immutable, omniscient and non-material serves as the perfect idealized Other to masculine identity. This God as a projection of patriarchal desires must be distant and distinct from man in order to function as a perfect ideal. The existing sexual symbolic depends on a radical dualism between man/God and man/woman in order that the latter element of each pair can function as the ‘Other’ to masculine identity. When Irigaray reconceives the notion of divine, she does not simply duplicate the schism between man and God. Her notion of transcendence is very different: the divine is continuous, even intimate with, the human, rather than abstracted and distant. But Irigaray’s notion of divinity proceeds from the encounter between man and woman: as sexually distinctive beings, certainly, but as co-equal subjects whose discovery of one another provokes wonder. This is necessarily a bodily, sexuate — but debateably still a (hetero)sexual — encounter, because Irigaray insists that it is in and through bodily practice, sexually differentiated, that the beginnings of such perfect community are founded. But this is grounded in the realization of both the integrity (wholeness) and potential of the other: they are precisely not alike. Thus, Braidotti’s idea of the body as ‘threshold’ is so apposite: ‘Where the borders of the body are wed in an embrace that transcends all limits ... each one discovers the self in that experience which is inexpressible yet forms the supple grounding of life and language. For this, “God” is necessary, or a love so attentive that it is divine’.59

---

57 This sex which is not one, trans. C. Porter (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 69.
So transcendence is not to be interpreted as other-worldly, or disembodied, but rather the recognition of the mystery at the heart of human encounter. Hence Irigaray’s term, ‘sensible transcendental’: ‘A birth into a transcendence, that of the other, still in the world of the senses (“sensible”) still physical and carnal, and already spiritual’.  

Susan Parsons, significantly, nominates Irigaray’s work as in part a project to reconfigure the *imago dei* in terms which value and accommodate women. Yet Irigaray’s characterization is also profoundly Christocentric, and one which consciously uses the crucified Christ on the cross as the representation of divine solidarity with the silenced and suffering women. The ‘wounds’ of women’s lack (and perhaps their material oppression?) now become symbolic of divine becoming in their equation with the lacerated, bleeding body of Christ on the cross. Irigaray thus reappropriates the derogatory metaphor of hole, gash or wound into a motif of divine disclosure.

It is intriguing to see that religious and theological language peppers the work of both Frank and Irigaray, and how the figure of God informs their respective ethical sensibilities. For example, Frank relates the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel to illustrate the value of the heroic ‘quest’ narrative. The wound to Jacob’s hip is evidence of the fact that the story cannot be told independent of the (brokenness of the) body. Jacob pits his body against the angel and is wounded — lastingly. Without those marks of engagement and suffering he cannot enter into a new phase marked by the assumption of a new name — Israel. However, Jacob’s travail also entails wrestling with God:

Jacob’s story is about the complexity of resistance to what readers of the story can only call God. God is the mystery of what Jacob wrestles with, this mystery is not named until the end of the story ...

Jacob’s impulse toward what is retrospectively known as God is curiously expressed as resistance: Jacob contests the divine.

By wrestling, resisting and being vulnerable to a wound, Jacob encounters God and finds himself to have been on holy ground; but it is the embodied immanence of the human wrestling that sanctifies the ground: ‘... resistance is never worked out once and for all; the self must continue to wrestle and continue to be

---

60 Irigaray, *An ethics of sexual difference*, 129.
63 Genesis 32:22–32.
64 *Wounded storyteller*, 181, my emphasis.
wounded in order to rediscover the ground it now stands on as sacred. *To be is to wrestle with God*. 65

Irigaray's account takes the religious and metaphysical references which exist in the margins of Frank's text and gives them voice. However, the 'wound' which for Frank signifies excess of embodiment unrationalyzed by speech, and therefore unrepresentable, is precisely the genesis of Irigaray's characterization of bodily experience which also becomes an avenue of divine disclosure. The wounds of Frank's narrative of chaos attain new value in Irigaray's telling: they are analogous to women's 'holes', but are consecrated as sacred epiphanies. They now function more as stigmata which may designate unspeakable suffering within conventional logic, but within Irigaray's alternative symbolic, wounds are compared to the 'lips' (a reference to women's labia which displaces imagery of women's vulva as gash or hole) which become the source of an alternative *poesis* of desire and empowerment.

For Irigaray, the wound is the hole in patriarchal discourse, which both silences women (designated 'lacking') and becomes the sacrament of divine becoming (the Passion of Christ identifies with the wounds of women). Whereas Frank uses the figure of the 'hero' as his mythic ideal (an image which, once more, privileges the male character in myth and legend), Irigaray's model for the wounded healer may best be that of 'abject Other': one who assumes the realm of liminality, silence and effacement in order to bear the stigmata of suffering on her body with pride and not shame.

We appear, therefore, to have two avenues for an ethics of the body, which we might call respectively Frank's 'narrative' and Irigaray's 'poesis'. Whilst Frank concentrates on 'narratives' of the body, some of which record the discovery of wonder and mystery — 'to what readers of the story can only call God ...' 66 — Irigaray prefers 'poesis': a radical reshaping of the metaphysical and theological presuppositions upon which women ground their concepts of self, Other, relationality, community — and ethics. Irigaray reshapes the symbolic of bodily representation to counter women's invisibility. She also argues that women must radically rework religious symbolic — starting with bodies — in order to articulate new forms of moral community. At the heart of this theological project is the identification of women's 'wounded' status — their lack of phallic privilege barring them from full participation in the narrative order of ethical storytelling, relegating them to the chaotic imaginary. But by reappropriating the 'chaotic' wound as the Passion of Christ, Irigaray conjures up the repressed sacred of modernity and places it not at the margins but at the

65 Wounded storyteller, 182.
66 Ibid., 181.
centre of her revised ethics of sexual difference. Thus, suffering bodies — but bodies as the ‘threshold of the divine’ — are the agents by which women retrieve their stories and transform the ‘wounds’ and ‘holes’ of patriarchal discourse into an empowering, and moral, narrative. ‘Is not God the name and the place that holds the promise of a new chapter in history and that also denies this can happen? Still invisible? Still to be discovered? To be incarnated? Arch-ancient and forever future’. 67

67 Luce Irigaray, ‘Divine women’, *Sexes and genealogies*, 55–72, esp 72.