

**A Feminist Act of Adaptation:
Identities and Discourses
in Michèle Roberts's *In the Red Kitchen***

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Abstract:

This article examines Michèle Roberts's 1990 novel, *In the Red Kitchen*, as a neo-Victorian text that deconstructs the Victorian discourses which continue to construct and exert control over female identities in modern society. Roberts engages heavily with the theoretical work of Julia Kristeva in order to write this deconstruction, and, in linking this psychoanalytic discourse with tropes of haunting and spiritualism, creates a neo-Victorian space in which the narrative voices converge. Thus the traumas to which the female characters are subjected at the hands of patriarchal discourses are exposed. Roberts undermines these discourses in order to suggest that only a feminist understanding of the past and reappraisal of the future can heal these traumas.

Keywords: desire, identity, *In the Red Kitchen*, Julia Kristeva, psychoanalysis, spiritualism, trauma.

Michèle Roberts's *In the Red Kitchen* (1990) is a neo-Victorian, multi-voiced tale of female identity and sexuality, which charts the personal, social and cultural traumas that accompany the characters' attempts to become fully functioning desiring subjects. By engaging with questions of female desire and longing, Roberts explores and exposes the ways in which those desires have been controlled by and contained within dominant hegemonic discourses. The novel synchronically explores four female experiences from ancient Egypt to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, although Flora Milk's Victorian spiritualism remains the site at which each of the voices within the novel are interlaced. Flora is the medium through which each woman's story is elucidated and where each of their narratives coalesce; whether that mediumship is authentic, or a symptom of hysteria perpetuated by the abuse she may have experienced at the hands of her father and her patron, is called into question throughout the novel. Hat, an Egyptian pharaoh, has had an incestuous relationship with her father and assumes his power after his death, only to find that, as a woman, her story is written out of history. Minny, the wife of Flora's patron, undergoes the rest

cure for her nervous illness and communicates with her dead child through Flora. However, the question remains as to Minny's involvement in her own child's death. Finally, Hattie is the twentieth-century character who, sexually abused by her uncle, uses her communication with Flora to make sense of her past trauma.

All the characters of *In the Red Kitchen* are haunted by their own memories *and* by the historical and cultural figure of 'Woman', along with the paradigms of femininity she represents. This figure of 'Woman' in the novel is given a very particular history in the Victorian psychiatric connection between the female body and hysteria, between the transgression of feminine norms and madness. Roberts also highlights the reification of that medical construction through the late-nineteenth century emergence of psychoanalysis and the normative identities it continued to enforce throughout the twentieth century. All the women internalise these very real, restrictive feminine norms and attempt to construct their own desires, and thus identities, through them, never able to come fully to terms with the personal and cultural traumas they have experienced. Reflecting Cathy Caruth's statement that "history, like trauma, is never simply one's own [...] history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (Caruth 1996: 24), Roberts's ultimate question is, perhaps, whether we can ever escape the limits placed on female identity, especially given the fact that the act of (re)reading Roberts's text is to become entangled within that trauma, that is, within the trauma of the Victorian past on which our social norms are built.

Roberts's project of historical revision echoes the painful yet necessary work being done by contemporary feminisms experiencing a double haunting: not only are we still grappling with the cultural artefact of 'Woman', but we are also attempting to counter her insidiously constructed antithesis: the "shrill, overly aggressive, man-hating, ball-busting, selfish, hairy extremist [feminist]" (Douglas 1994: 7). Roberts engages with this struggle between polarised identities. Through her use of the concepts of (re)memory and trauma experienced by the female subject, Roberts acknowledges the ambivalence inherent in this struggle and explores the possibility that neither of these identities can ever exist without being haunted by the other, which is a trauma in itself. The constant and relentless haunting of each character by one or more of the others – Flora by Hat and Hattie, and Minny by Flora, for example – further reinforces this sense of

trauma. The fact that the nineteenth century itself remains the locus of experience not only destabilises hegemonic, Victorian gender ideals, but the reader is also led to question the very (Victorian) foundations of the dominant discourses and institutions of twentieth-century society. Therefore, while our Victorian past loses all sense of secure location from which it can be narrated as something complete and already known, each of the women's present is also undone by that past.

1. Theoretical Tensions

One of the most insidious of institutions – medical practice – that controlled female identity was legitimised and enshrined in discursive practice by the new science of psychoanalysis, which came to represent a new way of thinking about sexuality (female sexuality in particular). This control had, of course, already existed, as represented by Minny's subjection to the rest cure: Minny embodies the notions of Victorian medical discourse which posited that "theories of female insanity [including nerve illnesses and hysteria] were specifically and confidently linked to crises of the female life [...] puberty, pregnancy, childbirth" (Showalter 1987: 55). The new practice of psychoanalysis, however, signified a paradoxical culmination of women's oppression through medical discourse, and that the norms it (re)produced have endured throughout the twentieth century. Those norms have continued to inform our thinking about female identities through psychoanalytic and therapeutic practices, which have been sustained through the popularisation of these ideas.

The theories of Jean-Martin Charcôt informed Freud's early work on women and hysteria and, to a degree, challenged the orthodox Victorian psychiatric view that hysteria was simply a physical problem; Charcôt believed that hysteria also had "psychological origins" (Showalter 1987: 147). Freud recognised that these psychological problems arose from the confining and repressive, often abusive, situations in which women found themselves locked, therefore problematising the naturalised links between femininity-female-hysteria versus masculinity-male-reason, offering a cultural and social reason for the female malady. He did, of course, repudiate this idea after 1897 in favour of the theory that hysteria could be attributed to unresolved infantile sexual drives and desires, formulating the Oedipal triangle in which women are always the objects (a move on which he comments in his 1924 addendum to 'The Aetiology of Hysteria' [1896]).

Thus psychoanalysis reinforced the paradigms of constant potential hysteria and childish passivity in which women were to function, suggesting that their minds as well as their bodies were to blame.

That is not to suggest, of course, that these notions have not been highly criticised. For example, Michel Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality: Volume One* (1976) that psychoanalysis facilitated the privatisation and domestication of sexuality in order “to keep the deployment of sexuality coupled to the system of alliance [the family]” (Foucault 1990: 113), a notion that is very definitely reinforced by the Freudian infantilisation of women and which has been used to justify discursive control over women’s bodies and their desires since the nineteenth century. Foucault’s arguments have certainly been useful to those feminisms which have repeatedly and continually attempted to reject that control by deconstructing the hetero-patriarchal norms that reify it. This rejection has also included vehement disavowals of work by female theorists who are seen as colluding with the ‘essentialist’ notion of women as constructed by psychoanalysis.

Much of this criticism has focused on the ‘French feminists’, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva,¹ whose work explicitly engages with Freud and Lacan, though of the three Kristeva seems to attract perhaps the most vehement and unrelenting criticism (see Moi 1986, Grosz 1989, Butler 1992, and Fraser 1992). For example, Kristeva has often been accused of rooting female sexuality in maternity, reifying the notion that the only viable subjectivity for women is that of motherhood. Judith Butler asserts that Kristeva’s static, structuralist notion of language is based on and leads to “a univocal conception of the female sex” (Butler 1999: 116). Roberts herself has talked about the influence, particularly of Kristeva, that French theories have had on her writing (see Rodriguez 2003: 96). Indeed, *In the Red Kitchen* offers a reappraisal of Kristevan theory, using it to undermine the very foundations on which it is based, thus subverting the misogyny and androcentrism of psychoanalytic discourse. At the same time, Roberts recognises that Kristeva goes beyond those foundations herself and offers useful ways of examining female identities through a psychoanalytic lens. Her thematic engagement with Kristeva does nothing to dilute the strong feminist message of the novel, whilst arguably also highlighting feminist anxieties that developed with the backlash of the 1980s and 1990s, as well as with the rise of gender and queer studies. Some of those anxieties

focus on psychoanalysis and the belief that to place emphasis on this discipline is to continue to be haunted by the shackles of 'Woman' constructed in so near a past, which have been so difficult to dismantle. By abjecting theorists like Kristeva, feminism attempts to gloss over the ambiguities her work embodies and concentrates instead on its place within the wider discursive field of a patriarchally constructed psychoanalysis.

However, Roberts demonstrates that a reappraisal of Kristeva's work can provide a valuable method of analysing the way in which women's identities have been affected by the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century discursive reification of Victorian gender ideals and female subjectivity, particularly through psychoanalysis and the medicalisation of women. Kristeva herself undermines Lacan's 'Law of the Father' through her concept of maternity and mother-child relationships: in works such as 'Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini' (1975), 'Stabat Mater' (1977) and *Tales of Love* (1987), Kristeva argues that maternity is a model for the split subjectivities women experience and that the relationship between mother and child actually provides the basis for language acquisition, providing a real and frightening challenge to the Symbolic Order. The space in which the mother regulates the formulation of this speaking being, this subject, is termed the *chora* by Kristeva. This is a space identified with the female body and its semiotic construction but is *not* outside, nor is it before the process of signification. The threats posed by this subversive model must be dealt with through oppression and subjugation of the mother, a process Kristeva calls 'abjection' (Kristeva 1982): it is at this point in the formation of the speaking subject that the Imaginary Father takes over from the abject Mother in order to inaugurate the child into Symbolic Order (Kristeva 1987).

It is through these Kristevan processes that this article will consider *In the Red Kitchen*, which is perhaps the most widely discussed of all Roberts's works. Several critical pieces dealing with the novel do so through a Kristeva lens, but all concentrate solely on 'Women's Time', the essay that says most about how Kristeva herself perceives and relates to feminism (see White 2004, Gamble 2006, Falcus 2007, and Parker 2008). It is also, however, an essay that does not encompass some of Kristeva's more contentious and difficult ideas and which perhaps fails to take us to the heart of her psychoanalytic ideas. By widening the scope of a Kristevan reading of Roberts's novel, this article will delve further into the uncomfortable

territory of the relationship between psychoanalytic discourse and feminism. In this way, (re)reading Kristeva arguably provides a valuable method of examining the Victorians and acknowledging the far-reaching influence that their ideals, particularly with regards to psychoanalysis, continue to have. Most importantly this framework provides the tools with which to dismantle the patriarchal blocks on which her theories are built. Thus reading Roberts's feminist novel through Kristevan theory allows us to revalue, even reclaim, the uses of psychoanalytic readings for feminism itself, as well as to recognise that an acceptance and understanding of the theoretical ghosts of the past may be the best means of moving towards a future free of the paradigms of 'Woman'.

2. Death and Language

Throughout *In the Red Kitchen* fathers are physically absent yet spiritually and psychologically present and become synonymous with the patriarchal violence suffered by the characters. Roberts undermines the Kristevan construction of the powerful maternal love that guides the pre-Mirror stage infant into normative subjectivity, in order to suggest that *all* women and their relationships suffer within the sanctioned violence of patriarchy, and that love between women is easily undermined by the oppressive and restrictive institutions through which we function as subjects. While Hattie, the twentieth century cookery writer, attempts to impose order on the chaos of her disenfranchised life of homelessness and prostitution, Hat, the Egyptian pharaoh, struggles to communicate with Flora in an attempt to understand herself as cipher in her male-dominated society. Flora herself experiences mediumship not only as communication with the spirit world but also as a haunting by her traumatic past. The implicit connection between all three is sexual abuse by the authoritative male figures in their lives: thus, their identity as women, and as desiring subjects, is inextricably bound up with trauma and annihilation of a coherent identity through which the women understand themselves.

The novel's almost pathological association between sexual desire and death is perhaps elucidated most clearly through the voice of Hat, the Egyptian princess, who marries the King, her father:

Just before my father dies he opens his eyes and looks at me
[...] Am I not the Queen? Must I not stand watch beside my

dying husband? [...] In the middle of the seventh night my father opens his eyes and looks at me [...] His message is whispered, but it reaches me. It flies into my heart. He breathes out, a long expiring sigh, and his breath comes into my mouth. I take it in, I hold it inside me. He pours all of himself into me, then relaxes in my embrace. Though I lay him down, calling out and weeping, I am secretly triumphant. I have him now. (Roberts 1991: 99-100)

In this sexualised description of her father's death, Hat believes that she has taken hold of phallic power, which she will use to build a more powerful Egypt, though it soon becomes apparent through her spiritual contact with Flora that what she had was merely an illusion of power, a phallic ghost. Her claiming of this pharaoh's power is undermined by the sexual initiation with her father – her narrative belies her declaration of enjoyment and anticipation: "Never have I known such a weight, such an extent, of darkness, of cold, of isolation" (Roberts 1991: 71). Furthermore, the loss of her virginity to her father, far from being her rebirth into greatness, is characterised as and explicitly linked to death: "Veiled in black linen, I lie on my bier in the funeral barge" (Roberts 1991: 71).

The pharaoh appears to Hat dressed as Thoth, the god of ancient Egyptian scribes and the scribe of the Underworld, symbolising the way in which Hat's initiation and sexuality is also strongly connected with language and writing. She focuses not on her pleasure but on the submission and courage she has been urged to show, and she shudders ambiguously when she feels not the "sharp bird claws" she expected but the "gentle fingers of a man" (Roberts 1991: 72). The figure wearing the mask of an ibis is representative of Hat's painful entry into the Symbolic Order and the repression of the semiotic:² she learns that to "write is to enter the mysterious, powerful world of words [...] To write is to deny the power of death, to triumph over it" (Roberts 1991: 24). The power of language, however, belongs to the domain of men as Hat knows – "were I *the son*", "scribes are learned *men*" (Roberts 1991: 23-24, emphasis added) – but she holds onto the belief that she too can capture the authority of words in order that her "existence continues throughout eternity" (Roberts 1991: 24).³

Hat's privileging of her father's position as a god (reflected in his appearance as Thoth) and her consuming love for him, indicates an

ambivalent desire: she recognises the power of patriarchy and desires that power for herself in order to assert some kind of subjectivity. However, the relationship with her father also echoes a desire for the Kristevan Imaginary Father, which masks or neutralises a taboo desire for the mother.⁴ Hat maligns her mother as the “woman some call my mother but I do not”: this woman was, Hat says, the “earthly queen being merely the vessel for [my father’s] power. It is my father through whom I shall live now” (Roberts 1991: 54). Hat negates the female body before she has begun to identify with it and does not recognise the transference of the mother’s desire onto the father: she has entered into combat with the mother figure (also symbolised by her assassination of one of her father’s lovers) with only her vulnerable and objectified position in the Symbolic to support her, which, Kristeva argues, can lead to “serious forms of psychosis” (Kristeva, cited in Baruch and Serrano 1988: 137).

This reading of Hat’s veiled longing suggests that a denigration of love between women is accepted as part of a patriarchal structure, an idea which is compounded in the novel by the abuse Hat suffers at the hands of her father. Hat does not recognise this incest as abuse but her disintegration, both in language and as a part of history, is testimony to the trauma she suffers – her fate is prefigured in a dream:

I have been unwritten. Written out. Written off. Therefore I am not even dead. I never was. I am non-existent. There is no I [...] I was mighty because I was male and bore the sacred sign of maleness and of kingship. Now that my name has been hacked off the walls and columns of my tomb the sign of my kingship has been broken off me. I am lacking. I am a lack [...] I am female [...] I shall seek for a scribe who will write down my name and let me live again. I shall dart forwards through hundreds of years, searching for a faithful scribe who will spell me write and let me rise. (Roberts 1991: 133)

Here, Roberts explicitly links the phallus and language – ‘I’ is the phallus, signifying the right to exist within language, within history and within the Symbolic. Hat’s desire is now to communicate with Flora in order to reinscribe herself into history and subjectivity. Flora herself has been

initiated into orderly communication by a patriarchal figure: her father is a printer who “packs letters into squares [...] in a frame called a forme. When he’s filled it, he locks it into place so that no words fall out and *spoil his neat sentences*” (Roberts 1991: 19, emphasis added). This rigid and linear process is imprinted on Flora: she and her sister make a Ouija board with a glass and pieces of cardboard on which she has “written the letters of the alphabet in the elegant capitals my father taught me so long ago to form. His hand guiding mine [...] his hand closing around mine, holding it within his, his index finger pushing mine” (Roberts 1991: 45). Hat first attempts to contact Flora through the Ouija board, yet both women are frustrated with their inability to understand each other: “The glass is irritated at my stupidity” (Roberts 1991: 45-46). Despite these thwarted attempts at communication, the very act of connecting represents a subversive challenge to the S/symbolic. This subversiveness, however, comes at no small cost to Hat. The inability to communicate means that she cannot testify to her suffering and, as Judith Lewis Herman suggests in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), we must be able and allowed to speak our traumas for any hope of recovery: “Sharing the traumatic experience with others is a precondition for the restitution of a sense of a meaningful world” (Lewis Herman 1992: 70).

3. The Personal is Political

The notion of recovery is hinted at through Roberts’s engagement with Kristeva’s ‘Women’s Time’. In her essay, Kristeva talks of three ‘generations’ of women: roughly paraphrasing, the first generation sought to identify with and become part of the Symbolic Order; the second recognised that women’s “intersubjective and corporeal experiences [were] left mute by culture in the past” (Kristeva 1986: 194) and rejected the first generation’s accommodation of and desire to function within a violent Symbolic, while the third generation is left frustratingly undefined by Kristeva. Her criticisms of the first two generations, however, suggest that a combination of both approaches may be the most effective way forward for autonomous, healthy identities for women functioning in the symbolic order. This is not to say that Kristeva recognises these generations of women as existing in on a linear time scale, for linearity is the domain of the patriarchal symbolic. Rather, she understands the term ‘women’s time’ as denotive “more of [...] space [...] than of *time*, becoming or history” (Kristeva 1986: 191, original

emphasis). It is this characterisation that is so significant for *In the Red Kitchen*, in which diachronic linearity is constantly undermined by the moments in which the characters meet across time and space. Flora and Hat's first connection is one such moment, with each woman participating in cyclical or monumental time, Kristeva's naming of the fluid functioning of the female subject, which stands opposed to the historical and political fixity of masculinity (see Gamble 2006). It could be argued that in this first communication, Roberts goes some way to achieving a vision of Kristeva's third generation: though violent and abusive, Flora and Hat's Symbolic inauguration provides them with a means of initial communication, which allows an 'intersubjective' experience that simultaneously undermines the power of that violence and subverts it through incoherence. As the story unfolds, however, the extent of the suffering undergone by the characters is elucidated, and incoherence emerges as a symbol of psychological (and physical) trauma.

Flora, and her Victorian positioning, materialise as the site in which the narrative of trauma unfolds. Thus although we could crudely map the novel's characters onto Kristeva's three generations (White 2004: 184-185), a more rewarding approach would be to see Flora Milk as the embodiment of the signifying space (that *is* 'time'), as suggested by Kristeva: the space in which all other female voices merge and from which they speak. Flora, in fact, becomes the key both to the personal memories within the novel and also to uncovering a *herstory* that stands in opposition to a history from which women's testimonies have been erased and eradicated. Thus the Victorian becomes the key with which to unlock the discursive structures that continue to haunt and constrain women's identities. This reading of Flora as the pivot on which the novel turns intensifies the vigorous feminism with which *In the Red Kitchen* is saturated. Flora occupies a liminal position within society and within patriarchal linearity:

Alone. In the pitch darkness. Which is my home. Which I know. Which lets me expand into something, someone, larger than a child or my ordinary daily self [...] The darkness touches me, velvet on my face and wrists, and I dissolve into it. I'm a dark ooze swirling and spreading, no boundaries. (Roberts 1991: 31-32)

This liminality highlights the friction between Flora's embodied subjugated experience and her paradoxical dissociated, yet free, state of being: it is within this discord that Roberts's feminism is most visible. Flora's personal duality easily translates into comment on the (continuing) cultural violence against women, which is compounded in the novel by Flora's relationship with her 'patron', William Preston.

Preston adopts Flora as his medium protégée, ostensibly to record and verify her powers as a spiritualist. Roberts adapts this from the factual accounts of the life of Florence Cook, the nineteenth-century medium, who had a professional and arguably personal relationship with William Crookes, a scientist who worked with her to establish that she could actually communicate with the spirit world (see Owen 1989). In the novel, however, Preston's interest in Flora proves to be more than just professional: William, whilst acknowledging to Flora that he is old enough to be her father and should "certainly not want either of my daughters to be in your predicament" (Roberts 1991: 62), "puts his fingers inside Hattie", who "is frightened", and who "whimpers and says no" (Roberts 1991: 122). Hattie is Flora's spirit guide, who is conjured up in her 'scientific' sessions with William and who dances for him. It is in this relationship that the suggestions, prevalent throughout the novel, of incestuous abuse by Flora's father reach their apotheosis. The dancing both recalls the actions of Flora's father and foreshadows Flora's visit to a Dr Charcot at a fictional La Sâlpêtrière, which embodies cultural violence against women: "Flora is the little girl in the white nightdress who sits on her father's knee [...] Flora twirls and dances for her daddy. Naughty little flirt, he calls her [...] Flora dances for Dr Charcot and for William just like she dances for her daddy" (Roberts 1991: 127). Here, then, Flora represents a cultural moment which began to recognise the systemic abuse of women. Yet she also symbolises the simultaneous repression of that moment, indicating the strength of patriarchal discourse's refusal to acknowledge the damage it inflicts on female identities. This moment also encompasses the close relationship between science and spiritualism, the way in which science attempted to control the transgressions embodied within spiritualism, and the subversive effects that spiritualism had on science (see Owen 1980). Flora's dance in front of Charcot is perhaps one of the most important scenes in the novel: it epitomises the nineteenth century's discursive explosion that, according to

Foucault, created and governs our sexual and thus our gendered norms (see Foucault 1990: 112-115).

This textual dialectic inextricably links the personal and the political and demonstrates the way in which the private lives of these characters are haunted by discursive structures. The use of Charcot invokes not only the (medicalised) cultural notions of hysteria used to subjugate and control female identities, but unavoidably summons up Freud's infamous repudiation of his theory that female 'hysteria' was linked to childhood sexual abuse, positing instead that it was caused by women's repressed sexual fantasies.⁵ Roberts, at the same time as exposing the Freudian 'phallusy', reinserts the story of abuse into history and undermines the structures that allow that phallusy to exert its control. Flora leaves behind her spirit guide – a symbol of her traumatised, dissociative state – for her dance in front of Charcot and William, and although she uses the third person to refer to herself (which does not signify integration of the trauma into her identity), she also uses the first person which represents her attempt to tell her own story, however fragmented: "I know what's happened. Also I don't know what's happened" (Roberts 1991: 129). In addition, Roberts uses intratextuality here to symbolise that the Kristevan notion of the *chora* can allow women a freedom to find expression denied to them within patriarchy.⁶ The description of Flora's liminality invokes the Kristevan construct of the semiotic, and suggests that she is operating outside the harmful Symbolic. Furthermore, in her own relationship and that of her spirit guide (Hattie King, the Egyptian princess) with William, Flora undermines taboo (classed and raced) sexual desires, which in turn subvert the patriarchal scientific discourses trying to contain her.⁷

4. Spectral Transgressions

The ultimate paradox of Flora as a character is that she violates borders and boundaries whilst being simultaneously confined by them. Alex Owen, in *The Darkened Room*, elucidates this paradox in stating that:

Within the séance, and in the name of spirit possession, women openly and flagrantly transgressed gender norms. Female mediums [...] often assumed a male role [...] [They] reached a peak in the 1870s when a handful of renowned

female mediums claimed to have finally produced 'materialised' spirit forms of both sexes. (Owen 1989: 11)

These transgressions occurred because the women were, as Flora describes herself, "open" and "empty" (Roberts 1991: 63), signifying the passive and receptive normative femininity required of spiritualists.

This disruption is analogous to the way in which Flora exposes the flaws in the perfect Victorian domesticity of William Preston and his wife, Minny. Minny Preston is confined to her bed after the death of her baby girl and the news that she is pregnant again. At the first public séance in the novel, held in the kitchen of a Hackney house, Flora materialises Minny Preston's dead infant daughter:

[T]he shape that now revealed itself inside the soft luminous glow was that of a little child in her nightgown: it was none other than Rosalie! Oh Mamma, how shall I describe to you the *terror and joy of that moment!* [...] On her head she wore a little wreath of white roses, exactly as when she lay in her tiny coffin at rest, and in her hand she carried a bunch of the selfsame flowers [...] she [blew] me a kiss with a playful wave of her little hand. (Roberts 1991: 51, emphasis added)

This haunting image is thrown into direct contrast with a later séance held by Flora in Minny's bedroom, the place with which, being a lady invalid, Minny is most identified: "*Mother. Smother. Mother, you smothered me. Mother, you smothered me*" (Roberts 1991: 94, original emphasis). The suggestion of infanticide, the absolute embodiment of the un-feminine and unmaternal woman, constructs the child spectre and Minny's motherhood in terms of the abject. The "terror" Minny feels at the séance, is not only fear of being found out as a child murderer, but also of the dread that she has to come face-to-face with the entity that, in the mother-child dyad, has defined her within, or inside, Victorian socio-cultural norms. Minny's murder of Rosalie, then, undermines the discursive situation of her within the maternal because, as Kristeva says of the breaking of the dyad, "I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself* [...] It is no longer I who expel [or gives birth], 'I' is expelled" (Kristeva 1980: 3-4, original emphasis).

Paradoxically, at the same time as this subversion occurs, Minny's position as not-mother is itself undermined.⁸ She has moved to the outside and has blurred the boundaries between an accepted female position and that which is socially and culturally deemed Other. It is a shift that needs to be contained. Thus she is brought under the control of the medical establishment: "My confinement being only a matter of weeks away, Dr Felton insists upon the cessation of all excitements [...] I was mainly confined to the sofa in my room (I write, now, from my bed, whither Dr Felton has banished me)" (Roberts 1991: 82). This is one of the first explicit acknowledgements that Minny is, in fact, pregnant again – a double-bind by the institutions of Medicine and Family. Minny has no choice but to function within these structures, which is perhaps what characterises the spirit child as truly abject. In her work on Kristeva's notion of the abject, Gail Weiss states:

There is a permanent danger that this boundary [between what 'is' and what 'is not'] will be dissolved [...] since the boundary is only reinforced on one side, the Symbolic side. The "other side" is the unnameable, abject domain that continually threatens to overrun its carefully established borders [...] The abject spectre, which continually haunts the ego and seeks to disrupt the continuity of the body image, is all the more terrifying because it is a ghost incarnated in flesh, blood, spit. (Weiss 1999: 89-90)

That the spectre, for Minny, is corporeal is what invokes her terror, and this is reinforced by her construction of Flora, Rosalie's medium (or even, if Flora *is* acting fraudulently, Rosalie's embodiment), as a child: "little Flora", "daughter" (Roberts 1991: 52-53).

Flora hints, at almost the same point in the novel, that Minny is having a sexual relationship with a friend of the family: "*Smothered* laughter, silence, the slither of her skirts [...] A pause. *Her bedroom door* closes softly. The smell of cigars and eau de cologne [...] It's Mr Frederick Andrews" (Roberts 1991: 79, emphasis added). Minny's unmaternal act is linked with sexual transgression and erotic desire (reinforced by Flora's language), which underlines the notion that, in desiring anything outside the restrictive spheres of marriage and family, Minny has performed a

contravention of normative femininity and will have to be brought back under control, grounded in her body by another pregnancy. This link also connects Hat and Minny through time and cultures: as for Minny, sexual desire for Hat is inextricably bound up with annihilation, not only physical death but also the erasure of identity. Minny's situation perhaps also highlights the restrictive notions of maternity and motherhood that Kristeva sees as endemic not only within patriarchal discourses, but also in the feminisms that seek to avow them.

5. Historical Truths

The destabilising effects of ghostly and cultural and social transgressions are compounded through Hattie's use of a journal, which she uses as testimony to her own abuse at the hands of another patriarchal figure – her uncle. Pregnant again after experiencing a miscarriage, she writes to her unborn baby: “[I] clasp my hands gently over you, baby, dancer in your warm house of stretched skin [...] Many weeks to wait before your birth. No way of knowing whether you'll stay inside me that long” (Roberts 1991: 139). This image of Hattie talking to her baby reinforces Kristeva's construction of the maternal body as primarily a speaking subject, never severed from culture and the Symbolic, solely trapped in the domain of nature and biology:

[I]f we suppose [the mother] to be *master* of a process that is prior to the social-symbolic-linguistic contract [...] then we acknowledge the risk of losing identity [...] biology jolts us by means of unsymbolized instinctual drives [...] but at the same time they are settled, quieted, and bestowed upon the mother in order to maintain the ultimate guarantee: symbolic coherence [...] the maternal body is the place of a splitting. (Kristeva 1980: 238, original emphasis)

Roberts, then, constructs Hattie as the subject-in-process, Kristeva's model for all speaking beings: like the pregnant woman who is neither subject nor agent of what will happen to her during pregnancy and birth, Kristeva argues, no human can be completely subject or agent. So whilst Hattie reconciles herself with the trauma of her memories (“It's my work. There's a lot of it to do” [Roberts 1991: 137]), this construction symbolises that her

future remains open and unresolved – a spectral hope. Hattie, then, moves out of the position of non-speaking subject attributed to her by patriarchal discourse, particularly that of psychoanalysis, thus subverting the understanding of women as cipher within the Symbolic Order. Furthermore, the truth, as Hattie writes it for herself, uncovers a story that has never been told and therefore does not form part of the ‘truth’ of her life that is known to others. She also writes her experiences with Flora into her ‘truth’, constructing another story that has never been told, because Flora’s history, rather than written by Flora herself, is that which has been recorded by the doctors and scientists who have decided her story for her. Emma Parker states that “[w]hile *In the Red Kitchen* thus suggests that, if women do not wish their lives to be mis-read, they must write their own (hi)stories, Roberts also indicates that reading those (hi)stories is a duty that must be shared by all” (Parker 2008: 126). This recalls Caruth’s earlier cited statement with regards to our implication “in each other’s traumas” (Caruth 1996: 24), suggesting that *In the Red Kitchen* deliberately sets out to implicate the modern day reader in the traumas experienced by the characters, something that forces us to recognise the neo-Victorian as a way of deconstructing the social systems, based in the Victorian construction of female identities, that have caused those traumas.

6. Embodiment and Hope

The intangibility of Hattie’s future is reinforced by the elision between past and present, symbolised by the association of her unborn baby with her previous miscarriage and by the letter from Rosina Milk that closes the novel. Temporally the reader is thrown into the pasts of both Hattie and Flora, and so the reading of Hattie as a Kristevan subject-in-process becomes symbolic of Roberts’s privileging of the dialectic of memory and trauma into which the characters are forced. By ending the novel with Hattie’s pregnancy, Roberts draws our attention to the notion of the body as embodied memory, as an archaeological site, much like the tomb of Hat’s pharaoh father, which preserves traumatic experiences.⁹ This allows us to read Hattie’s visions of Flora as, simultaneously, meetings with her younger traumatised self. Paradoxically, these ghostly meetings, which frighten Hattie because they raise the “old fear about myself, that I’m not real” (Roberts 1991: 88), also allow her to acknowledge the very real pain she feels: when she finds the sobbing child Flora in the basement, she says, “I

kept her in my arms and listened to her sobbing”, adding, “I poured out words of love to her [...] Her pain was the most real thing I’d ever felt and I held it as I held her” (Roberts 1991: 118). This image of “pouring words” contrasts directly with Hat’s internalisation of her father’s last moments, where the semiotic connection between adult and child further undermines the man-made language, through which it is impossible for the women to communicate pain. Flora spells out Hattie’s name in bits of broken type – “HATTIE. HATE. I” (Roberts 1991: 19) – recalling not only Hat’s disintegration but the miscarried baby that was “dragged out of [Hattie] in bits”, further linking the women (Roberts 1991: 73). Thus the body becomes a very definite space in which pain functions and from which the desire to move forward issues.

This is reinforced by the ambivalence Hattie shows towards her own body and sex. She “reluctantly accepted [she] had a body” but never knew how to become “real” (Roberts 1991: 87) like other people, remaining a ghostly presence on the margins. Again, Roberts constructs Hattie in terms of the subject-in-process, if only by demonstrating the two extremes of her experience that prevent her building an identity:

Sex with all those men didn’t help; I was always somewhere else when it happened, looking down at the two bodies on the bed. Sex with you feels real [...] but I don’t trust it. Some strict patriarch in the sky is warning me off. (Roberts 1991: 87)

Here, Roberts acknowledges that Hattie must disembody herself in order to escape the pain inflicted by social and cultural constructions of the female body as available for use. The stark reality of the use and abuse of that body is highlighted by the fact that this splitting is also symptomatic of the safeguarding strategies used by victims/survivors of childhood sexual abuse.¹⁰ Hattie later throws herself into her sexual relationship with her partner:

Our bodies talk, love, feed, play: sex. You never hold back; you pour yourself into me [...] Love and desire slosh in me, liquid; I walk carefully, holding, not wanting to spill. You’ve melted me, you’ve made me runny and hot [...] But I didn’t

hold the baby carefully enough. I let the baby slip out.
(Roberts 1991: 101)

The lyricism of the passage suggests abandon and that Hattie revels in her body, as well as in its desire (in the semiotic). That this desire is also closely linked with the loss of the baby follows Kristeva's argument that the mother must remain within s/Symbolic coherence or risk losing her identity. Furthermore, Hattie and Hat's disintegration is again linked through this image of the male 'pouring' himself into the female, becoming internalised like the loss of the baby.

Roberts's novel, then, does not offer any resolution to the questions it poses: is Flora's spiritualism the result of delusion precipitated by abuse from her father and William Preston (characterised as hysteria by the medical establishment)? Will Hattie recover from the trauma of sexual abuse? Did Minny Preston kill her child, and was the cause evilness or post-natal depression exacerbated by her forced rest cure? What is clear is the comparison Roberts draws with the questions that continue to occupy feminists: women who express symptoms of trauma continue to be viewed as hysterical and their minds and bodies continue to fall under the remit of the medical establishment. As Parker notes, the construction of the Victorian hysteric parallels the late twentieth-century view "that women who recover memories of childhood sexual abuse are subject to False Memory Syndrome" (Parker 2008: 128), and we only have to glance at the media to see that women who may or may not be mothers are vilified and castigated if they stray from the path set out for them by normative views of femininity and motherhood. It is no coincidence that Roberts's novel was republished in 2008 under the title *Delusion*.

7. (In)conclusion

Roberts does, however, respond critically to the socio-political structures at the basis of the women's traumas and firmly asserts that these structures must be examined and deconstructed, if women are to claim subjectivity and identities. In exploring the Foucauldian assertion that psychoanalysis is responsible for repressive and oppressive attitudes towards sexuality, through incorporating the theories of Kristeva, Roberts draws attention to the androcentrism of Foucault's thesis. Furthermore, she simultaneously highlights the masculinist, punitive construction of women

in a psychoanalysis largely authored by men. In highlighting that the damage done to women is done by the male figures in their lives, Roberts does not revile heterosexual relationships within the text as irrevocably damaging and abusive. Rather, she throws them into direct contrast with female, semiotic, healing relationships, in order to highlight that patriarchy damages women when it denies their connections to one another. This is perhaps most clearly symbolised in the happier future envisaged by Hattie, a happiness that is brought about by her connections with Flora and her younger, repressed self. This, in turn, exposes the dialectical tensions within feminism itself: Kristeva is rebuked by feminist writers for ‘essentialising’ women through her use of the model of maternity as embodying the importance of female relationships,¹¹ an abjection which perhaps emphasises the fear and reluctance to engage with this sort of theorising in an age of gender and queer politics. That Roberts uses, but also challenges and rewrites, Kristevan thought, indicates an acceptance of such a dialectic and a willingness to highlight the fact that connections between women are already precarious within patriarchal hegemony, but that those connections are of the utmost importance. As Emma Parker succinctly puts it, “*In the Red Kitchen* stresses that, in terms of both women’s history and women’s health, the end of patriarchy is essential to female survival” (Parker 2008: 130).

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Notes

1. This is a problematic term, especially in its use by Anglo-American feminists. It posits an uneasy, unqualified relationship between these writers and the notions of nationhood and nationality, which all have disavowed. In addition,

it presumes that the three are the embodiment of feminism in France, eliding the mobile political action taken by many other women. I would also argue that the term constructs an unhealthy dichotomy between feminist work being undertaken in France, the UK and in the United States.

2. I want to distinguish here between the Kristevan notions of the Symbolic and the symbolic. As Kelly Oliver notes in *Reading Kristeva* (1993), critics of Kristeva tend to elide the differences between the two. Kristeva uses the notion of the symbolic to denote a mode of signification that works with and against the semiotic to produce meaningful language. She talks of the Symbolic as the discursive structures, which encompass the subject and are governed by language.
3. Hat's obsession with writing reflects, of course, Roberts's own preoccupation with writing women back into history, and this preoccupation is widely reflected not only in Roberts's later novels, but also in many other neo-Victorian texts. In Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* (2002), for example, Maud Lilly recognises writing as a form of cultural production. Her writing of pornographic texts symbolises Waters's own writing of marginalised female desire into mainstream culture. Maud's writing, like Hat's, is explicitly linked to bodily, sexual desires and can thus be read as a confrontation between semiotic and symbolic within a Symbolic Order that attempts to subsume desiring female identities. This theme continues to be important in neo-Victorian writing – see, for example, Belinda Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2008).
4. This masking of desire for the mother is a prevailing theme throughout Roberts's work. In her memoir, *Paper Houses* (2006), as well as in various interviews and other writings, Roberts has reflected on her own difficult relationship with her mother and the pain she felt in her desiring relationship with her father. This desire was to some extent, she states, a masking of the taboo need and desire for her mother.
5. Hermann gives an interesting reading of Freud's withdrawal of his theory: she argues that political pressures, including the spread of the movement for female suffrage to the continent, forced him to reconsider his ideas in order to safeguard his career in medicine (Herman 1992: 14). Ironically though, Freud's work had already spawned the proscriptive psychoanalytic movement that would continue to construct women as hysterical well into the twentieth century.
6. See, for example, *The Looking Glass* (2001) and *The Mistressclass* (2004), in which Roberts constructs spaces analogous to Kristeva's *chora*, which allow

her female characters to more freely explore their identities and desires, as well as to take refuge from patriarchal violence.

7. Flora is subjected to medical discourse here in a similar way as Grace Marks, the protagonist of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), is subjected to legal discourse and state definition of her subjectivity. Atwood's novel, like Roberts's, is a fictional exploration of the nineteenth-century woman, and is concerned with how any transgression of normative boundaries is implicitly linked with female sexuality. I would also suggest that the reframing of the real women in these novels can be read as a semiotic challenge to the way women have been positioned within the Symbolic Order.
8. In her work on the 'Suffering Mother', Natalie McKnight says: "statistics [...] show an increase in infanticide in the early to mid-Victorian age [...] Medical doctors tried to explain infanticide by blaming it on insanity caused by puerperal fever, the assumption being that no sane woman could act in such an unmaternal fashion" (McKnight 1997: 16).
9. For various examples of the body as a container or repository of trauma, see Alice Miller's *The Body Never Lies* (2005).
10. Again, Alice Miller's work on this subject is internationally renowned. In addition, Hermann discusses the well-documented link between this notion of 'splitting' and sexual trauma (Hermann, 1992: 111).
11. This term is often applied unjustly to Kristeva's work. It should be noted that this term cannot be used unproblematically, just as the phrase 'French feminism' is highly troublesome and should be deconstructed in order to examine the weight of meaning behind it.

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