The Poetics of Otherness and Transition in Naomi Alderman's Fiction

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For my parents

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INTRODUCTION

In *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*,[1] Jeanette Winterson delves into religious autobiography to explore lesbian Otherness. The protagonist is a subaltern who, drawing on Gayatri Spivak, can and cannot speak. Indeed, her coming out, no matter how accidental or forceful (it is her mother who catches her with her girlfriend in bed), is an act of speechless speech. Her acts speak for her because there is no language to utter her actual identity in the religious context she inhabits. Thus, as literature often does, Winterson's text intrudes on so-called reality by addressing the undecidable. When Spivak argues that the subaltern cannot speak, it is because their "trueness" is too mediated – I would say ventriloquized – to come out. Since Spivak, however, the subaltern has been a common postcolonial concept and issue, often appropriated by Western voices. This appropriation of subalternity is dangerous, for it constitutes an act of emasculation and, eventually, violence. When Western countries, institutions, and individuals (even respectful ones) give voice to the subaltern, the latter is deprived of a voice of their own. Take, for example, processes of the democratization of non-Western countries. I am not saying that democracy is not a good regime for organizing people, bodies, and ideas. Yet, what is the point of imposing Western democracy on docile subaltern individuals to challenge the power of untamed ones? That unilateral conception of democracy, or rather of how to teach, learn, practice, and implement it, is bound to fail. Both history and current international politics bear witness to it. Strictly political conceptions of democracy are not the only ones that matter. Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a case in point.[2] In a rather autobiographic fashion, the author recalls the days of the Iranian revolution and how women were confined to their homes and hidden behind their veils yet again. In this context, she sets up a clandestine readers' club with seven female students to comment on their personal experiences and interests through Western books by Nabokov, Scott Fitzgerald, and Jane Austen, among others. The confluence between Western and non-Western cultures and traditions is desirable as long as Western Modernity is no longer the only referent that systematically

[1] Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (London: Vintage, 1991).
[2] Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (New York: Random House, 2003).

downgrades and/or invisibilizes the non-Western Other. That is what Ziauddin Sardar's and Enrique Dussel's transmodernisms are about. However, is Nafisi's book an example of the ethics of late postmodernism or transmodernism, or a new intrusion/ventriloquizing of the West onto the Other? The book vindicates female liberation and the role of literature as emancipator; the question is whether liberation comes from Western (particularly Anglo-Saxon) texts, hence Hamad Dabashi's rough criticism of the novel as "American propaganda."[3] As Christopher Shea[4] and Amy DePaul[5] recall, Dabashi blames Nafisi for what he considers cultural emasculation, if not straight violence: "One can now clearly see … that this book is partially responsible for cultivating the U.S. (and by extension the global) public opinion against Iran." Much in line with Edward Said's *Orientalism*,[6] Dabashi considers that the imagery of the East from a Western perspective is tendentious and simplistic as long as, instead of fighting the unquestionable iniquity of radical theocracies, it only serves to confirm hackneyed stereotypes and justify institutional violence.

His argument is clearly related to Spivak's notorious quote: "White men are saving brown women from brown men."[7] That there is male chauvinism in non-Western countries (as in Western countries) is well known. However, what Spivak addresses is the biased intentionality of this message. In view of the ineffectuality of Western invasions of third-world countries to liberate women (while other countries also violating female rights are sponsored by Western countries), it seems evident that the main target is not equal rights, but rather a question of cultural domination and control over the Other (male). To better understand this logic I will address Eve Sedgwick's concept of the homosocial as the framework (virtually invisible, albeit implacable) that upholds the relations of power between males to institutionalize and normalize male supremacy and female subservience. Western politics of domination and foreign invasion are not envisaged to emancipate non-Western women. This is the excuse used to expunge the Others' culture, arguing that half of that other culture

[3] Christopher Shea, "A Prominent Scholar Accuses Azar Nafisi's Bestselling Memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, of Being Neoconservative Propaganda Aimed at Islam," *Boston Globe* (October 29, 2006), http://archive.boston.com /news/globe/ideas/articles/2006/10/29/book_clubbed.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Amy DePaul, "Re-reading *Lolita in Tehran*," *Iranian American Literature* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 74.

[6] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003).

[7] Gayatri C. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: a Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1993), 93.

– namely males – uses it against females. However, Nafasi's book can also be read as one that bridges the hiatus between cultures, and especially as a reification of literature as a powerful weapon that upholds singularity and gives voice to the speechless. When the girls read and account for their lives through these texts, they are given the option to speak beyond the radical regime or the hegemony they suffer.

From the above, one wonders who has the right to be regarded as subaltern? For Spivak, it is the removal from "all lines of social mobility"[8] that makes up subalternity. This lack of access to mobility, she argues, "may be a version of singularity."[9] Critics like Peter Hallward have questioned Spivak's very notion of subalternity as singularity and lack of mobility, because this prevents the subaltern from collective political action.[10] In a very shrewd reading, Hallward makes reference to Spivak's use of Emmanuel Lévinas's ethics of alterity to address her notion of impossibility as "non-situational," and suggests that "her understanding of singularity is ahistorical."[11] In other words, as happens with Lévinas's radical alterity, Spivak's subalternity may, in my view, be rendered ineffectual from a sociopolitical and ethical standpoint. However, I agree with Morton that Spivak (and I would add Lévinas) is not disregarding action against hegemonic power and discourses – she is rather pointing to the process of exclusion of the subaltern from narratives, which thwarts any claims to singularity.

Back to *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, Jeanette, the protagonist, is removed from all lines of social mobility as a lesbian in a Pentecostal community. Moreover, as the novel is split into chapters named after parts of the Bible, like "Genesis," "Exodus," and "Leviticus," her maturation process as a sexual dissident is marked and uttered through the hegemonic discourse that invisibilizes lesbianism itself. When Jeanette and her girlfriend are subjected to an exorcism, the traditional family and radical Christianity are ventriloquizing their identities and voices, somehow removing social mobility. I have started by addressing Winterson's novel because it is a precursor of Naomi Alderman's production, especially

[8] Gayatri C. Spivak, "Scattered Speculations on the Subaltern and the Popular," *Postcolonial Studies* 8, no. 4 (2005): 475.
[9] Ibid., 475.
[10] Stephen Morton, *Gayatri Spivak: Ethics, Subalternity and the Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), 66.
[11] Peter Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing between the Singular and the Specific* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 66.

Disobedience,[12] [13] in more senses than one. Like Jeanette, Ronit is a lesbian belonging to an ultra-orthodox family, this time a Jewish one. Be that as it may, they are outsiders, the radical Other that must be ventriloquized to gain existence in the terms of the hegemonic discourse. This book explores the poetics of radical alterity, subalternity, intrusion, and influence that articulate identity in Alderman's four novels to date.

When the literary magazine *Granta* revealed its once-a-decade list of the twenty most promising British writers under forty in 2013, Naomi Alderman was one of them.[14] At the time she had just published her third novel, *The Liars' Gospel*.[15] *Disobedience*, her debut novel, was successful and gave an almost unprecedented approach to Orthodox Jewish communities in England. *The Lessons*,[16] her second, constituted a radical change. Here, Alderman's discourse glides from the frum community in Hendon, London, to a group of friends' nostalgic account of Oxford. The aforementioned *The Liars' Gospel* returns to religion, this time from the historical viewpoint of prominent figures who give alternative accounts to those of the Christian canon. Her most recent novel, *The Power*,[17] has gained her critical praise. A feminist dystopia which draws on, among other things, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*,[18] Alderman's text recalls the aesthetics of videogames. Indeed, the novelist is also a game writer. Being the co-creator and lead-writer of a game like *Zombies, Run!* (2011) points to the narrowing bridge between literature and new narratives such as videogames. Thus, in her short career, Alderman has covered a wide range of genres, styles, and concerns, from rewritings of sacred scriptures (she is the daughter of a London rabbi) to feminism from the standpoint of science fiction. All of them, however, also tackle the poetics of radical alterity and intrusion. What does it take to be the subaltern (i.e. below the other) when othering seems culturally redundant? Her characters are intruders, othered in different ways, which explains her multifarious discourses on current alterities. They are vulnerable and often dispossessed of social mobility, much in line with Spivak's subalterns. Yet, in

[12] Naomi Alderman, "Coming Out: Naomi Alderman on Leaving Orthodox Judaism Behind," *The Guardian* (November 24, 2018), https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/nov/24/naomi-alderman-disobedience-faith-sexuality-leaving-community.
[13] Naomi Alderman, *Disobedience* (London: Penguin, 2006).
[14] "Britain's Best Young Novelists at a Glance," BBC (April 15, 2013), https://www.bbc.com/news/ entertainment-arts-22123175.
[15] Naomi Alderman, *The Liars' Gospel* (London: Penguin, 2012).
[16] Naomi Alderman, *The Lessons* (London: Penguin, 2010).
[17] Naomi Alderman, *The Power* (London: Penguin, 2016).
[18] Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: Vintage, 1998).

addressing the undecidable, literature allows Alderman to convey forms of ventriloquizing their displacement or non-identity.

Alderman is also the author of a *Doctor Who* novel for the famous BBC series entitled *Borrowed Time* (2011). Although the novelist argued that in writing it she could be torpedoing her literary career,[19] she actually proved her versatility. In any case, in the present book I will focus on her more traditional texts, so to speak, because they follow a common thread – namely an ethics of alterity much in line with current re-ideologized discourses. Her scripts for *Zombies, Run!* and *Borrowed Time* are valuable contributions and add to a multimodal writer like Alderman. It is increasingly difficult to only ascribe oneself to a non-audio-visual discourse when audio-visual texts and platforms are ubiquitous. However, for the sake of the thematic coherence and interest of this volume, especially the poetics of alterity in fiction, I will delve into her four novels to date.

In the first chapter, "Radical Othering in Frum London," I will explore the clash between Orthodoxy and the radical Otherness it occasionally begets and emasculates after the logic of Levinasian ethics. Rather than a neohumanist ethics, the analysis will rely on the turn to ethics that informs much post-postmodernist literature, *Disobedience* being a case in point. The chapter will also analyse how the cultural specificity of British Jewishness is particularly apt for exploring the hybrid poetics of the novel and its protagonist, silence, emasculation, intrusion, and trauma being key issues. The second chapter, "Oxbridge Otherness and Bisexual Arcadia in *The Lessons*," is not related to Spivak's subaltern, but instead the intruder as a recurring motif in British literature. The poetics of nostalgia and the sense of (non-)belonging rescue common issues like gender and, especially, class in Oxford. The sense of (non-) belonging is not only related to this poetics of a lost England from the perspective of both protagonists, but also affects the sense of disaffection that transcends and recasts the nostalgic logic of Oxbridge texts. As for the third chapter, "The Margins of Power: (Un)Authorized Voices from the Fathomless," the sense of Otherness and estrangement is multiple. Drawing on the four gospels, the novel features four relevant figures of Christ's times who witness his last days from different perspectives. All of them "are" as long as they relate to Christ, and hence their Otherness is a key feature of their personalities and discourse. However, their alterity is multifarious, giving a polyhedric account of Jesus: from Miryam's subalternity, Judas's paradoxical subservience, and Caiaphas's alleged (yet dispossessed)

[19] Rich Johnston, "Swapping Reputation for Time with the Doctor," *Cool* (May 5, 2011), https://www.bleedingcool.com/2011/05/05/swapping-reputation-for-time-with-the-doctor.

hegemony to Barabbas's encroaching (albeit dispossessed) transgression, they all ventriloquize Jesus's spectral presence. In the last chapter, "Democratic Transhumanism in a Feminist Dystopia," the estrangement of the protagonist comes from a radical reversal of the status quo. *The Power* fantasizes about breaking the principle of subalternity. Yet, in keeping its very structures intact, the result is distressing. The hegemony that disregards female power as an option is replaced by an analogous hegemony that only others powerful women. In the end, the fantasy features a dystopic scenario with women ventriloquizing prior hegemonic discourses.

Alderman's varied discourse, if well-grounded in feminist and Jewish traditions, gives voice to an increasingly transcultural and, I would add, transmodern paradigm. This is particularly obvious in her last two novels and virtually missing in *The Lessons*. Although the term transmodernity was first coined by Rosa Rodríguez Magda in 1987, as she herself recalls,[20] it has been recast to meet new realities and respond to new challenges. Indeed, prestigious critics like Enrique Dussel and Ziauddin Sardar have recast the term in recent years to prove their "non-Western" standpoints. Rodríguez Magda maintains the Western origin and character of transmodernity. It constitutes "the description of a globalised, rhizomatic, technological society, developed from the first world, confronted with its others, while at the same time it penetrates and assumes them; and secondly, it constitutes the effort to transcend this hyperreal, relativistic enclosure."[21] However, outside the West, things are perceived otherwise. As Aliaga and Yebra point out, "Dussel's conception of transmodernity as a utopian project that outdoes modernity itself and claims a symmetric dialogue between Western culture and subaltern third-world cultures"[22] is the counterpoint to Magda's. Both argue for a paradigm shift in the move that connects (hence the prefix trans-) transculturally in a world more globalized than ever before. But Magda focuses on the relation between transmodernity and the previous modernity, which gives way to a globalized newness still controlled by Western logic and rationalism. That is why she considers other cultures being penetrated and assumed by the

[20] Rosa María Rodríguez Magda, "Transmodernidad: un nuevo paradigma," *Transmodernity, Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1, no. 1 (2011).
[21] Ibid., 3.
[22] Jessica Aliaga-Lavrijsen and José María Yebra-Pertusa, *Transmodern Perspectives on Contemporary Literatures in English* (New York and London: Routledge, 2019), 11.

West. Enrique Dussel[23] [24] and Ziauddin Zardar,[25] much in line with Spivak, vindicate the speech of the subaltern. For this to happen, it is mandatory that the discourses, institutions, and dispositifs change. In other words, this change that non-Western transmodern trends claim implies a paradigm shift[26] whose ultimate aim consists in undoing modernity. It is in this sense that transmodernism challenges the positive, albeit limited, changes conveyed by postmodernism. Critics like Jameson think postmodernism has not yet come to its end, and argue for a current late postmodernism. However, drawing on transmodern critics, I consider that there is a paradigm shift in the move which is more in line with Dussel and Sardar than the Westernized version of Rodríguez Magda.

Although Alderman is a British-born writer, her Jewish roots, her wide-ranging texts, her ethical commitment with different expressions of Otherness, and her interests in alternative cultural and textual media like videogames make up her, let us say, transmodern status. Alderman's texts belong in this shift because they are attentive and partake of the new paradigm. In levelling all cultural viewpoints, especially in her last novel, she is addressing a global world from a relational ethics which is transitional and liminal. Her novels are terrains for conflict and encounter where Western hegemony and hegemony in general are put to the test. Irena Ateljevic addresses the process as a "global relational consciousness … beyond the Western ideology [that] tries to connect the human race to a new shared story."[27] This is one of Alderman's motifs, namely the connection of the ethical and the political in responding to global problems, especially the sense of Otherness and non-belonging and the dramatic effects of violence. This ethical (and, I would add, political) turn[28] that rethinks the human in global(ity) terms is determined and connected with an epistemic turn. Onega makes reference to the dangers of the demise of transcendent knowledge after the Newtonian paradigm shift.

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[23] Enrique Dussel, *Postmodernidad y Transmodernidad* (Puebla, Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana, 1999).

[24] Enrique Dussel, "Transmodernidad e Interculturalidad (Interpretación Desde la Filosofía de la Liberación)," 2005, http://enriquedussel.com/txt/TRANSMODERNIDAD%20e%20interculturalidad.pdf.

[25] Ziauddin Sardar, "Critical Muslim," 2018, https://ziauddinsardar.com/articles/critical-muslim.

[26] Susana Onega, "The Notion of Paradigm Shift and the Roles of Science and Literature in the Interpretation of Reality," *European Review* 22 (2014).

[27] Irena Ateljevic, "Visions of Transmodernity: a New Renaissance of Our Human History?" *Integral Review* 9, no. 2 (June 2013), 203.

[28] Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau, *Ethics and Trauma in Contemporary British Fiction* (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2011).

The question is whether this paradigm, based on strict rationalism and "unadulterated" by the emotional, the affective, and the imaginative, as Onega suggests, is coming to an end, and if a new one, as Magda, Dussel, Sardar, Ateljevic, and others (from their different standpoints) put forward, is coming. In my view, the new paradigm does not reject rationalism. It recasts it to meet new understandings, as well as an ethical, political, and epistemological variety (albeit not relativism) that responds to globality. It is in this sense, I contend, that Alderman's novels convey the poetics of transition from a Western self-centred conception of reality to a much more open and empathic one that addresses and is informed by a multi-nodal standpoint.

Alderman is a hybrid in many senses, which is valuable since fusion is a sign of the times. That is why her production is representative of many contending discourses. Her interest, respect, and criticism of Jewish culture and religion are coupled with her concern for gender representation, expression and dispossession, and violence. This makes her discourse particularly rich and polyreferential. Her literary style is also diverse. With only four novels published to date, she has tried out different genres. From a lesbian *bildungsroman* set between New York and London, to an Oxbridge coming-of-age university novel, to a revision of the biblical gospels, to a feminist science-fiction dystopia, Alderman has explored multifarious territories to understand the present through the past and the future. This liminality is grounded by a feeling of uncertainty and insecurity which, according to Gilles Lipovetsky, explains the rise of new spiritualities,[29] a re-evaluation of the premodern,[30] and the recognition of the Other.[31]

As mentioned above, Alderman's literature belongs in the ethical turn that has terminated or challenged postmodernism to become new forms of understanding reality. If the effect of postmodernism since the 1960s is unquestionable, it is a fact that relativism has been redefined to meet new realities. Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau insightfully address this ethical turn, being especially concerned with:

> its branching out into two main, antagonistic trends: a neo-humanist ethics, of a rather normative, deontic type, implying an overall moral dimension, generally associated with the stable ego of the character as present in classic realist texts based on linguistic transparency; and a newer, Levinasian

[29] Gilles Lipovetsky, *Hypermodern Times*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 64.
[30] Ibid., 66–9.
[31] Ibid., 65.

> and post-Levinasian ethics, of a non-deontic, non-foundational, non-cognitive, and above all non-ontological type expounded by critics like Zygmunt Bauman, Andrew Gibson, Robert Eaglestone, or Drucilla Cornell, very much at home with experimentalism, that has come to be identified with the practice of postmodernism.[32]

This bifurcation, which started in the 1980s, has evolved unevenly. The second trend, more resolutely experimental and non-ontological, is, in my view, developing well beyond postmodernism into new isms, like the aforementioned transmodernism. Onega and Ganteau put forward this evolution into what they call "more specific and context-sensitive branches."[33] Among this they give some examples, namely "the ethics of truths … the ethics of alterity, or the ethics of affects, place, spectrality and pleasure."[34] Rather than a morally-charged discourse, which necessarily normalizes (Western) hegemony, these branches open the scope to new sensibilities and reject a univocal conception of ontology and, therefore, of reality. It is in this context that Dussel and Sardar's transmodernisms arise and develop. The logic of the "Same," as the ontologic imperative that represents Western Modernity, is being recast because it makes no sense in the era of globality. That which Lévinas argues is "otherwise than being" (1981)[35] constitutes the essence of literature as undecidability, that which is not here. In short, the Same has been opened and exposed to the Other, but not necessarily in the radical sense and fashion that Lévinas defended. Given this, only a post-ontological understanding of reality can guarantee an appreciation of globality as much more than globalization. Literature, which is particularly related to the latter trend above, is the perfect scenario for this ethically-committed paradigm shift.

When Jeremy Rifkin points out that "we are a fundamentally empathic species,"[36] he is also addressing the shift discussed in the previous paragraphs. Maybe too optimistic for those who think that humans are violent and materialistic,[37] the critic's point is that the planet's surviving entropy depends on humans' natural empathy. As empathy is "the mental process by which one person enters into another's being and comes to

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[32] Onega and Ganteau, *Ethics and Trauma*, 7–8.
[33] Ibid., 8.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization: the Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2009), 1.
[37] Ibid., 1.

know how they feel and think,"[38] it is attached to Lévinas's ethics of alterity. It is also related to Onega's concept of a paradigm shift that rescues the emotional and affective to combat the exclusivist rationalism of the prior Newtonian paradigm. Alderman's novels are informed by the demise (or at least recasting) of the Age of Reason to accommodate other(s') discourses. In *Disobedience*, the intimacy and affection of the protagonist challenge the logic of reason and faith of her community of origin. A rare conception of relationality, especially a revision of Oxbridge Arcadian bonds, relates and sets apart the group of friends of *The Lessons*. *The Liars' Gospel* also recasts the classic conception of Christian Otherness and "the neighbour." Empathy, rather than faith, determines the characters' actions and discourses. Finally, *The Power* puts forward the fight of evil forces when empathy and care break down. The dystopia of the novel is as dangerous as the entropic forces that Rifkin forewarns of. In a similarly optimistic fashion, transmodern theorist Mark Luyckx Ghisi considers interdependency and mutual recognition.[39] Only in recognizing each other do Alderman's characters solve the challenges they come across. And when they do not, as is apparently the case of *The Power*, the entropic prevails and the humanness of humans is under threat. I would like to close these introductory notes by referring again to Ghisi. As Aitor Ibarrola explains, Ghisi warns about the normalizing dangers of globalization and argues for cultures to vindicate their specificities.[40] This obviously goes back to Dussel and Sardar's transmodernities, which demand for transcultural mutual recognition if dialogue is likely to take place. Alderman's texts are a scenario of conflict and encounter, but also of undecidability.

Before closing this introduction, a brief note on the use of the term "influence" rather than the postmodernist "intertextuality." Drawing on Allan Johnson's premise in *Alan Hollinghurst and the Vitality of Influence*,[41] I contend that "influence" is much wider than Harold Bloom claims in his seminal *The Anxiety of Influence*.[42] Bloom's Freudian reading of influence

[38] Ibid., 12.

[39] Mark Luyckx Ghisi, *The Knowledge Society: a Breakthrough toward Genuine Sustainability* (Cochin: Stonehill Hill Foundation, 2008), 972–3.

[40] Aitor Ibarrola-Armendáriz, "Signs of Transmodern Relationships in Richard Rodríguez's *Darling: a Spiritual Autobiography*," in *Transmodern Perspectives on Contemporary Literatures in English*, eds. Jessica Aliaga-Lavrijsen and José María Yebra-Pertusa (New York and London: Routledge, 2019), 171.

[41] Allan Johnson, *Alan Hollinghurst and the Vitality of Influence* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[42] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: a Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

is insightful, but there are other approaches which are not so deterministic. Bloom's Oedipal struggle between fathers and sons for prominence and authority through originality is very narrow and lineal. First of all, females are excluded from the fight (no matter if Bloom includes some female writers in his canon). Only the son is privileged and jeopardized to overcome his father, which brings him an anxiety of influence. Moreover, influence is always unidirectional, from fathers to sons, from the past to the present and, presumably, to the future. To break with Bloom's straightjacketed conception of literature, Johnson focuses on visual images in Hollinghurst's novels: "The textual influences in Hollinghurst's work are the sequences of writing which most successfully portray and vitalise visual images from the aesthetic past."[43] In being a composite phenomenon that comprises many elements, these visual images in texts operate differently to classic influences. In short, whereas for Bloom the young poet is saturated and anxious because of the burden of his father's superiority, Johnson argues for the innate character of some visual images, well beyond personal authorship, to make up a collective imagery. Bloom's young poet can only overcome anxiety as long as the new generation is anxiously devoted to this young poet's. However, for Johnson, the influence on others is not emasculating but enriching, as an aesthetic collaborative effort prevails. In this book, the textual and visual are considered as two sides of the same coin, and thus contribute to the fabric of the text. It is the persistence of visual and textual images from a hybridity between British and Jewish cultures that is evoked throughout Alderman's novels; rites, traditions, and a sense of simultaneous cultural encounter and dispossession make up her rich imagery. The Jewish rites of frum London in *Disobedience* and the so-called British university traditions of *The Lessons* precede the hybrid imagery of *The Liars' Gospel* and the dystopian post-apocalypse in *The Power*.

Alderman's influences are varied, all of them enhancing her discourse, particularly her poetics of Otherness. In using the term "influence," I am focusing on fluency and the flowing between those that partake of the textual and cultural conversation. Thus, the conversation runs smoothly in different directions. For instance, Alderman catches up on frum culture in *Disobedience* to understand how Otherness is constructed in that context. Other than recipients of influence, this book understands texts as ventriloquizers. It is not so much that texts ventriloquize other texts, but that, drawing on radical alterity, most protagonists ventriloquize what their respective societies and communities do not dare to say out loud – be it frum-born lesbians, gay youths at a loss in Oxford, historical figures

[43] Johnson, *Alan Hollinghurst*, 3.

whose Otherness is exposed, or extraordinary women in a dystopic world they rule. All of them (though not altogether subaltern, responding to Spivak) can speak as long as they draw on different flows of influence that make up visual, cultural, and textual meeting points. Besides influence as a visual and textual phenomenon, one which makes texts overlap, dovetail, or contest each other, Alderman's fiction is informed by social and interpersonal influence. In most cases, influence is essentially positive or negative from an ethical viewpoint. It is a point of encounter with the Other, but also, as will be seen, of violence and dispossession.

CHAPTER ONE

RADICAL OTHERING IN FRUM LONDON

Naomi Alderman's debut novel *Disobedience* (2006) earned her the Orange Award for New Writers. *Disobedience* is controversial because it reveals the ins and outs of the British Jewish community. As mentioned in the introduction, Alderman's production, her first novel in particular, forms part of a transcultural trend. Although she argues it was not "in an attempt to 'catch a trend'"[44] that she wrote *Disobedience*, it followed the lead of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*,[45] Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*,[46] and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*.[47] In a more specifically Jewish context, *Disobedience* draws on Lesléa Newman and Judith Katz who, as Emma Parker points out, struggled "to integrate Jewish and lesbian identities … in the 1980s and … 1990s."[48] However, Alderman does not feel she was looking for a trend, but instead found one. Moreover, she has also conceded that her first novel is connected to some texts for which she feels "vaguely maternal,"[49] namely Francesca Segal Costa's *The Innocents*[50] and Eve Harris's *The Marrying of Chani Kaufman*.[51] All these novels make up a frum-withdrawing community of writers in Britain who have opened the doors of Jewish Orthodox communities to their reading public. This emerging trend, Alderman points out, forms part of a much wider one, ranging from America to Israel.[52] In her view, Smith's *White Teeth* "ignited an interest in books that

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[44] Alderman, "Coming Out."
[45] Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (London: Penguin, 2001).
[46] Monica Ali, *Brick Lane* (London: Black Swan, 2004).
[47] Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices* (London: Transworld Publishers, 1998).
[48] Emma Parker, "Contemporary Lesbian Fiction. Into the Twenty-First Century," in *The Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature*, ed. Jodie Medd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 208.
[49]Alderman, "Coming Out."
[50] Francesca Segal Costa, *The Innocents* (London: Vintage, 2012).
[51] Eve Harris, *The Marrying of Chani Kaufman* (Dingwall: Sandstone Press, 2013).
[52] Alderman, "Coming Out."

portrayed the different cultures that now live together in the UK,"[53] which also informs her own text. Thirteen years after it was first published and coinciding with its Hollywood adaptation, the novelist has come to understand the reason why she wrote it in the first place: "It is a movie and a novel about three people who have reached a cul-de-sac in their lives; who have to face the realisation that the things they've been muddling along with all these years won't work any more … A lot of people reach that point. Whole communities, whole countries get to that."[54] Alderman's words resonate with necessary change, individual and communal, recalling the paradigm shift addressed in the introduction.

The novel is set in Hendon, London, where Alderman herself was raised, and where the protagonist, Ronit, returns from New York to attend her father's funeral. Rav Krushka is not only the rabbi of the Orthodox Jewish community of Hendon, but a prestigious religious leader whose books reach America, where Ronit went to start anew, away from the strict lifestyle of her father and his followers. Thus, no matter how far she goes, Ronit is haunted by her past, her father's figure, and the culture he represents. Back in England, she finds out that her cousin Dovid is about to be elected her father's successor and, more importantly, is married to Esti, Ronit's former lover. Although the novel is not autobiographical, Alderman, like the protagonist, moved from England to New York. However, unlike Ronit, the novelist continued practicing the "Orthodox Judaism [she] was raised in"[55] for some time. In any case, and beyond particular implications and trauma, the writer makes reference to a collective trauma to partially explain the conception of the novel and its plot. In autumn 2001, while she was in New York, the massive terrorist attack on the Twin Towers took place and, with it, a new era started. In rather millenarian terms, she argues, "lots of people living in Manhattan … reassessed their lives. People got married, got divorced, decided to have a baby, adopt a baby, foster a baby … And people came out."[56] A new beginning, a new Jerusalem – a particularly Jewish and American concept – commenced for many. Samdi Simcha DuBowsk's *Trembling Before G-d*,[57] a famous documentary on gays and lesbians coming out, became, she says, important in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks.

David Mattin addresses what for most critics constitutes both the main drawback and asset of the novel. In the task of cultural documentation, he

[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Samdi Simcha DuBowsk (dir.), *Trembling Before G-d* (Cinephil, 2001).

argues, *Disobedience* succeeds.[58] However, it is at the expense of literature. Likewise, Dina Rabinovitch thinks the novel lacks character, since "none of the personalities here gets beyond the two-dimensional."[59] In her view, literature can go further, and explore plotlines in brand new ways, but in *Disobedience*, "storytelling is wielded like a blunt instrument, hammering home the message that small communities foster small-mindedness,"[60] which for Rabinovitch is too hackneyed a territory. In other words, the novel often reads as the political and religious manifesto of a connoisseur against frum conventions and a traumatic testimony of ultra-orthodox repression against females. Feminism (particularly Carol Gilligan's care ethics), ethics of alterity, and trauma theory thus constitute the theoretical framework for exploring the traumatic undertones of the love triangle of the novel. Indeed, according to Mattin and Rabinovitch, *Disobedience* is at its best when the narrator and implied author bear witness to British Jewishness in a detached fashion.

Hendon is an urban area in North London with a high Jewish population. In fact, as often happens with writing about London, the city and a particular area or neighbourhood become another character of the novel. Rabidovitch recalls that Hendon is seldom seen in literature, except for an episode of Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and a passing reference in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*.[61] When Ronit comes back home, Hendon is part of her *Trembling Behind G-d* experience. She comes out in more senses than one. That is, she comes out as a bisexual, first having an affair with her male boss in New York[62] and later resuming her teenage love affair with Esti, but also as the Other within the Same. Being the daughter of the rabbi of the community, her disobedience constitutes a radical othering; coming from the "Same," i.e. the frum community she was raised in, her transgression is a radical coming out to and from her roots, and the care and protection that community is supposed to provide its members. In *Disobedience*, coming back is akin to coming out because she cannot be part of the frum Orthodoxy anymore. Her return has much to do with trauma poetics. When she is back, she looks at Hendon as a place stuck in time, a Jewish Sleepy Hollow. Thus, the original wound, which coincides

[58] David Mattin, "*Disobedience* by Naomi Alderman," *Independent* (March 12, 2006), https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/disobedience-by-naomi-alderman-6106762.html.
[59] Dina Rabinovitch, "This is Hendon," *Our Daily Read* (March 4, 2006), http://www.ourdailyread.com/2006/03/this-is-hendon.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Alderman, *Disobedience*, 35–6.

with her split/withdrawal from the community, remains the same. Her father's funeral only triggers the latent wound enclosed in Hendon's rejection of the Other within itself.

Rabinovitch says of Hendon that it "epitomizes London facelessness"[63] because it allows each community to be itself without being disturbed. However, in my view, the neighbourhood is faceless in a Levinasian sense. For Lévinas, "the face of the Other"[64] [65] represents the radical Otherness of the Other, that which cannot be accessed by the Same. Furthermore, in his ethics of alterity, he contends that the Other (through the face as its metaphor) prevails, and the Same must surrender. In *Disobedience*, Ronit first adopts a Levinasian stance, more specifically when she leaves London for New York. She accepts and surrenders to the Otherness of the community she has been part of. This is the original trauma she leaves unhealed while in Manhattan. Only when her father dies, which releases her latent trauma, does she come to terms with the face of the Other, the Other within herself. Back in Hendon, she not only resumes her love affair with Esti, but also comes to terms with the community's intrusions, triggering a crisis that is presumably the source of her, her friend's, and the community's working through. In analysing the traumatic references and memorialization of the Holocaust, Dominick LaCapra makes a distinction between acting out, "the tendency to repeat something compulsively … to relive the past, to exist in the present as if they were still fully in the past, with no distance from it,"[66] and working through. In the latter case:

> the person tries to gain critical distance on a problem, to be able to distinguish between past, present and future. For the victim, this means his ability to say to himself, "Yes, that happened to me back then. It was distressing, overwhelming, perhaps I can't entirely disengage myself from it, but I'm existing here and now, and this is different from back then." There may be other possibilities, but it's via the working-through that one acquires the possibility of being an ethical agent.[67]

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[63] Rabinovitch, "This is Hendon."
[64] Frederick Young, "Lévinas and Criticism," in *Introducing Criticism in the 21st Century*, ed. Julian Wolfreys (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).
[65] Emmanuel Lévinas, *Ethique et Infini* (Paris: L'espace Interieur, 1982), 90.
[66] Dominick LaCapra, "Acting-out and Working-through Trauma. Interview with Professor Dominick LaCapra" (June 9, 1998), https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%203646.pdf.
[67] Ibid.

Drawing on trauma theory, Ronit gets to work through the wound she left behind and becomes an ethical agent who dismantles the status quo to come back to herself. Ronit's case transcends the text itself. As Ruth Gilbert points out: "Alderman has discussed, in frank terms, the way in which the novel is in some respects a working through of her own background."[68] In the novel, Ronit's recovering her mother's candlesticks is a metaphor for her reconciliation with her past and origins. However, it is transgression that allows the novel and its protagonist to work through the trauma of being expunged from one's roots. In being transgressive, Ronit brings about change, especially through her cousin Dovid, the next rabbi of the community.

The Outsideness of British Jewry

While Hendon remains immobile and true to itself as Orthodoxy claims, Jewish literature is quite a different matter. For Jyl Lynn Felman, "Jewish literature is the history of transgression. From the story of Abraham smashing the idols to Sigmund Freud's *Power of the Unconscious*; from Herzl's Zionist dream to Jabotinsky's transformation of that dream."[69] It is a paradox that Orthodoxy has often been questioned and coupled with transgression. The transgressor Other is thus as common a Jewish figure as the Wandering Jew, as Jack Nusan Porter's *The Jew as Outsider* contends.[70] Drawing on the example of Tony Kuhner's assimilationist *Angels in America*,[71] Felman argues: "In every generation there are questions that need to be asked and doors that need to be opened. Each generation of Jews asks the questions for those who follow; our survival depends on this truth telling."[72] Alderman is a voice of the new generation, and as such her novels ask questions and open doors to confront current and future challenges. Drawing on Donald Weber,[73] Ruth Gilbert makes reference to the "Anglo-Jewish literary revival"[74] in the early twenty-first

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[68] Gilbert, *Writing Jewish*, 134.
[69] Jyl Lynn Felman, "Transgression in Jewish Literature," *Judaica Librarianship* 8, no 1–2 (1994): 119.
[70] Jack Nusan Porter, *The Jew as Outsider* (Newtonville, MA: Spencer Press, 1981).
[71] Tony Kushner, *Angels in America* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1992).
[72] Felman, "Transgression," 119.
[73] Donald Weber, "Anglo-Jewish Literature Raises its Voice," *JBooks* (July 12, 2007), http://www.jbooks.com /interviews/index/IP_Weber_English.htm.
[74] Ruth Gilbert, *Writing Jewish: Contemporary British-Jewish Literature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 9.

century. Since Howard Jacobson's Booker Prize win and thanks to the "high profile given to other contemporary British-Jewish writers,"[75] among whom Gilbert includes Alderman, British Jewishness has been "arguably opened to a wider readership than ever before."[76] Maybe it is far too ambitious to say that Alderman's production is truth telling. However, it is a way to move towards truth, of diversity within the frum, the (LGTB) Otherness that comes out of (Jewish) Otherness. Indeed, the Jewish LGTB community has been a major influence in the progress of Jewishness, as Nusan Porter argues, since the 1960s counterculture at least.[77] If Jews have "inherited the status of outsiders"[78] this is doubly so in the case of LGTB Jews. Thus, their voice must be preserved as Jewish civilization has done with its history, culture, and religion. Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini examine the trans-fluency (drawing on the transmodern and influence) of queerness and Jewishness. Rather than outing people who happen to be Jews,[79] they analyse "the complex of social arrangements and processes through which modern Jewish and homosexual identities emerged as traces of each other."[80] How the Jewish and homosexual bodies are lived and especially how they die have become commonplace since the nineteenth century, when Jewish masculinity was "downgraded" as effeminate, and hence homosexual. In this way, Boyarin, Itzkovitz, and Pellegrini argue, "modern Jewishness became as much a category of gender as of race."[81] This conception of Jewish masculinity as essentially inverted, effeminate, and complex is an archetype Dovid recasts in the novel.

Jewish female queerness is even more complex. In often being regarded "at once too much and not enough woman,"[82] the Jewess is a hybrid, more so when, like Ronit and Esti, she breaks with the expected. Zohar Weiman-Kelman recalls the genealogy of poetry by Jewish lesbians in queer terms, recasting the conception and perception of time. Thus, the historical impulse of her study "is based in the possibility of moving

[75] Ibid., 11.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Jack Nusan Porter, "Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Literature with Jewish Content: a Bibliographic Review," *Judaica Librarianship* 8, no 1–2 (1994): 124.
[78] Ibid., 120.
[79] Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini, *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 1.
[80] Ibid., 1.
[81] Ibid., 1.
[82] Ibid., 6.

across time, allowing past and present … to pleasurably touch."[83] This view of transhistorical and transcultural Jewish poetry (Weiman-Kelman's project addresses Jewish queer writing by women in different countries and languages) does not inform *Disobedience*. Although transgression has been a defining characteristic of Jewish literature and the Jew – both male and female – has been identified with sexual inversion, Alderman's novel focuses on the here and now, and on the clash between tradition and transgression. The religious words recalled at the beginning of each chapter do not foster change and acceptance of Otherness. On the contrary, these prayers bear witness to, justify, and reinforce the cultural narrow-mindedness of the frum community Ronit feels that she had been forced to leave. However, the lines and the matrices that, drawing on Adrienne Rich, Weiman-Kelman searches for in Jewish lesbian poetry work as interpersonal meeting points in *Disobedience*. "Webs, rafters, nets, connections of the body (hair, blood) and of the mind (telepathy) … are woven, flung … contrived"[84] in these poems, as they are in the relationship between Ronit and Esti. Yet, Alderman's novel confines these connections to the realm of the private and, more specifically, the intimate. Both women are *contra mundum* in a context of Jewish radicalism. This is precisely the main rebuke of some critics to *Disobedience*. It sometimes reads more like a pamphlet against intolerance than the piece of literature it actually is.

As mentioned above, in *Disobedience*, every chapter starts by quoting lines from Jewish prayers, most of them offensive and/or discriminatory to women. For instance, chapter four starts with men praying and thanking God for not having been born a woman.[85] In its turn, each chapter is split into two parts, easily recognizable because the font is different. The first part is narrated in the third person whereas the second, in the first person, accounts for Ronit's viewpoint. The two sections are not complementary, and one is not the nemesis of the other. They are in fact incompatible, the Same and the Other, that must be split apart. From the very beginning, the novel denounces the male chauvinism of Hendon's frum community; especially the way it segregates men and women and assigns them roles and physical spaces. In fact, while men sit on the front row, women are confined to the back of the synagogue.[86] The prominence of males, which seems taken for granted within the community, is rendered discriminatory

[83] Zohar Weiman-Kelman, *Queer Expectations: a Genealogy of Jewish Women's Poetry* (New York: SUNY, 2018), xix.
[84] Ibid., 1.
[85] Alderman, *Disobedience*, 58.
[86] Ibid., 5.

and weird for the outsider. And here comes one of the key issues in *Disobedience* and Alderman's production as a whole – the Other takes the centre stage and becomes the point of reference, or at least one of the points of reference in a nodal understanding of so-called reality. When I say outsider, I mean the reader, the implied author, and Alderman herself, as all of these are allegedly detached and critical of what is going on around Ronit. The Other's point of view prevails from a political, ethical, ontological, and literary viewpoint. The novel does this by addressing facts in a rather documentary fashion when narrated in the third person, and from Ronit's brand-new eyes when in the first person. When a young man tries to win Ronit round to her own father's teachings in Manhattan, she rebukes him. In an ideologized discourse where Alderman's voice is quite clear, the heroine argues how he and other orthodox Jews cannot understand that she no longer feels at home with religion and within the community, which has become constraining – "more like a prison than a safe harbour."[87] That is, Mattin would argue, Alderman is preaching behind the protagonist. Her New York lifestyle, being single and the lover of her boss, makes Hendon an uncanny space which eventually turns particularly hostile for her. As pointed out above, the power of words, which Orthodox Jews revere, is used against itself. This is indeed one of the novel's main assets, albeit more a political than literary one. Hashem, the narrator says, "created the world through speech."[88] Hence, the one who controls speech also controls people's lives and wills. That is why the rav's words matter so much, and he pays peculiar attention to all units of the utterance.[89] The power of words to name and thus construct realities has a dark underside in the novel, though. To utter is often to dispossess the non-normative Other. The worst act of dispossession is, however, not to deny a name, but to deny its utterance. This is the case with Esti Kuperman at the beginning of the novel. Although her problem is not obvious, it seems evident to the narrator that there is something wrong with her.[90] This *something*, presumably her repressed lesbianism and nonconformity, falls "under the name of lashon hara,"[91] which stands for the unspeakability of same-sex desire in Western culture. Thus, when the rav reifies speech as a spark of the divine granted on people because, of all living beings, "only *we* speak,"[92] it is uncertain, to say the least, whether

[87] Ibid., 14.
[88] Ibid., 7.
[89] Ibid., 8.
[90] Ibid., 3.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid., 7.

the subaltern is included in this *we*. As for Ronit, being a rebel, the Other within, she self-excludes from the emasculating discourse her community practices. She answers back to the recriminatory discourse of the books she has been obliged to read. The prosopopeia comes to an end when the heroine silences the books instead of being silenced by them, against frum prescriptions. In any case, the fact that books address her in a nightmare, recriminating her lack of commitment with the community as long as she rejects being a mother, is culturally significant.[93] She is the marked one because she withdraws.

Female Transgression and Trauma

When the rav dies, Ronit comes back to the funeral and to Esti. She feels estranged from the burial, but deeply attached to her friend.[94] Moreover, a new patriarch is needed, which problematizes Esti and Dovid's lives. Thus, the novel's intrigue starts. Ronit's return, which coincides with the second chapter, focuses on fluidity. It is dirty in females' case, as it is related to menstruation. In fact, the narrator recalls Jewish traditional teachings whereby, during the wife's menstruation, she must keep apart from her husband.[95] Like the Other in the couple, the man being the Same, she is forbidden, not the one who forbids. Moreover, she must be immersed in natural water before returning to her husband. In other words, purification is exogenous because there is no intrinsic purifying in Esti or any other woman.[96] However, fluidity in males is quite different as they pour the water "to fill the enamel jugs."[97] Men are active ritualizers who transmute water from a purifying substance into a divine force. The triangle between Ronit, her cousin Dovid, and Esti serves for exploring the role of frum women when they go astray and frum men when they are chosen to perform in the name of power. Ronit's return only unsettles Esti's silent existence and brings up their teenage love story again. Memories are erotic, making it clear that female bodies matter. When Ronit recalls the corporeality of her rapport with Esti[98] it is never done so in dirty terms but as moments of encounter, of radical relationality and mutuality with the other. Yet female eroticism, let alone lesbianism, clashes against the rules of the British Jewish community which, the

[93] Ibid., 74.
[94] Ibid., 38.
[95] Ibid., 21.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid., 26.
[98] Ibid., 47.

narrator laments, is much stricter than the American one.[99] Ronit and Esti confront their trauma in dissimilar ways: the former escaping, the latter remaining silent and losing weight. In both cases, though, they have built their lives "on resisting the process"[100] – the process of submission and self-denial, be it marriage or "shielding … from unpleasant truths,"[101] as Ronit's psychoanalyst says. When Ronit is supposed to be mourning her father for a month according to tradition, she is indeed resisting the silence and invisibility she is compelled to.[102] The heroine's *joie de vivre* gained far from the community fascinates Esti, who finds out "unexpected desires."[103] Thus, the latent desire that has been haunting and tormenting them for years comes back, as trauma always does, belatedly, according to Cathy Caruth and other trauma theorists. For Caruth, trauma "is not located in an isolated event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its not-known/unassimilated nature returns to haunt the survivor later on."[104] In other words, "the full force of trauma [is perceived] as operating belatedly."[105] I am addressing trauma theory, not because I consider that both women's love affair is intrinsically traumatic, but because it is constructed like that from the standpoint of the community that presses them in/out of existence. Trauma experience relies on silence because it cannot be named, at least not straightforwardly. It is an ontology that escapes the logic of the Lacanian Symbolic well into the Real. That is why the investment in silence and the absolute invisibility that Ronit detests in her Jewish community[106] match the (im)possible discourse of trauma. The protagonist fights against the frums' silence and darkness by speaking her "truth" to her psychoanalyst. Thus, like the Freudian talking therapy she practices, Ronit is the trigger that wakes a love that Hendon's radicalism has turned into repressed trauma. Paradoxically, it is love that belatedly revives events that have long been silenced, as they are impossible to utter in a frum community. And not only are they impossible to utter, but also to experience. Drawing on Weiman-Kelman, after Ronit comes back, Esti experiences queer expectations, which break with everything from before.

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[99] Ibid., 54.
[100] Ibid., 51.
[101] Ibid., 93.
[102] Ibid., 54.
[103] Ibid., 63.
[104] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 3.
[105] Andrew Barnaby, *Coming Too Late: Reflections on Freud and Belatedness* (New York: SUNY, 2017), 39.
[106] Alderman, *Disobedience*, 55.