

COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND PERFORMANCE

COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND PERFORMANCE:
AN ANALYSIS OF TWO ADAPTATIONS OF THE LEGEND OF BEATRICE CENCI

By
AMANDA MONTAGUE, B.A.

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AUTHOR: Amanda Montague, B.A. (University of Waterloo)

SUPERVISOR: Professor Grace Kehler

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on two incarnations of the Cenci legend: Percy Bysshe Shelley's 1819 verse drama *The Cenci* and George Elliott Clarke and James Rolfe's 1998 chamber opera *Beatrice Chancy*. Shelley composed *The Cenci* after he discovered an Italian manuscript recounting the life of Beatrice Cenci who, after being raped by her father, plotted the murder of the debauched patriarch and was subsequently executed for parricide. Nearly two centuries later, Clarke and Rolfe created *Beatrice Chancy*, an Africadianized adaptation of the Cenci legend inspired by Shelley's play. This study investigates the way in which multiple performance genres re-embody history in order to contest collective memory and reconfigure concepts of nationhood and citizenship. It examines the principles of nineteenth-century closet drama and the way in which Shelley's play questions systems of despotic, patriarchal power by raising issues of speech and silence, public and private. This is followed by a consideration of how Clarke and Rolfe's transcultural adaptation uncovers similar issues in Canadian history, where discourses of domestic abuse come to reflect public constructs of citizenship. Particularly this study examines how, through the immediacy of operatic performance and the powerful voice of the diva, *Beatrice Chancy* contests Canada's systematic silencing of a violent history of slavery and oppression.

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Narrative Migration: Transcultural Adaptations of the Legend of Beatrice Cenci

The history of the Cenci family dates to sixteenth century Rome where, in 1577, Beatrice Cenci was born to the violent and sadistic Roman nobleman, Francesco Cenci. Throughout Beatrice's life, Cenci subjected her, her siblings, and her stepmother Lucretia, whom Cenci married in 1595, to ongoing persecution. This oppression took the form of various degrees of physical and mental abuse, including the alleged incestuous rape of Beatrice. In a radical act of rebellion in response to this subjugation Beatrice, with the assistance of her family, orchestrated the murder of the corrupt patriarch. But the family's conspiracy is subsequently discovered and leads to their execution by papal decree in 1599. The history of Beatrice Cenci became an integral part of Italian national consciousness, while the tragic and sensational elements of her story served to catapult it to mythic status.¹ It has been claimed that "the 'legend of Beatrice' was born on the day she died" (Ricci 271), by the spectacle of her funeral that "resemble[d] a popular demonstration" and "an equivocal report of the case and execution" (v). As a legend, the

¹ It's status as legend has created a preoccupation with historical veracity in several adaptations and translations of the Cenci history. Appeals to the story's historicity are repeatedly used as a way to circumvent the extreme nature of the subject matter. See Corrado Ricci's introduction to his history of the Cenci family: "Let none of these readers blame me if I have been forced to relate a story that is gloomy, sinister, and at times unedifying by reason of the depravity of the figures it summons forth from the past and the times in which they lived. My desire has been to change nothing, to attenuate nothing, never to recede from my duty of setting down facts in all their harsh sincerity" (viii). A similar sentiment appears in a letter Shelley wrote to Peacock in September 1819: "If my Play should be accepted don't you think it would excite some interest, and take off the unexpected horror of the story by shewing that the events are real, if [the manuscript] could appear in some Paper in some form" (*L.* ii. 102).

tragic themes of patriarchal tyranny, incest, personal and social corruption, and systemic exploitation of disenfranchised bodies have garnered global appeal for Beatrice's story. It has traversed through centuries and across nations and has undergone dozens of translations, adaptations, and remediations.

While visiting Italy in 1818, Percy Bysshe Shelley encountered a manuscript account of the history of the Cenci family. Upon reading her story, Shelley was moved by the pathos of Beatrice, whom he saw as “violently thwarted from her [gentle] nature by the necessity of circumstance” (727). A year later, inspired by the story's themes of domestic and social injustice under patriarchal authority, Shelley composed a verse drama entitled *The Cenci*, with the object of bringing Beatrice's tragedy “home to [the] hearts” of the British people (729). More than a century and a half later, in 1992, the Canadian poet George Elliott Clarke encountered Shelley's verse drama while studying at Queen's University. His interest in the play instigated a collaboration with composer James Rolfe that led to the creation of the chamber opera, *Beatrice Chancy*. Their adaptation relocates Beatrice's story to the Annapolis Valley, Nova Scotia, and introduces the themes of Canadian slavery and racial violence. In doing so, Clarke and Rolfe bring the violent history of Beatrice Chancy “home,” to Canada by using it to reveal a history of racial oppression that has been carefully suppressed in national discourse.²

² Cf: “In *Beatrice Chancy* this diasporan history is brought home, as it were, and made to confront hegemonic national narratives that would seek to stop it at the Canada-U.S. border” (Moynagh 116).

There have been countless adaptations of the legend of Beatrice Cenci in the years between 1819 and 1998, but my project is confined to Shelley's verse drama and Clarke and Rolfe's opera, particularly because Shelley's play is cited as the primary source text for the opera. I am interested in Shelley's thematic treatment of speech and silence in the movement from abjection to agency that occurs in the Cenci legend and in Clarke and Rolfe's continuation of this theme. Specifically, in the latter text, I am interested in how the theme of speech and silence is addressed through the figure of the opera diva and constructs of the diva's voice as well as how it is applied to issues of African Canadian identity. *Beatrice Chancy* is not the first operatic adaptation of the Cenci legend.³ But I am interested in it both as a generic remediation of Shelley's play and for its value specifically as a Canadian opera, in terms of what it reveals about the state of opera in contemporary Canadian culture.

Both *The Cenci* and *Beatrice Chancy* are instances of transcultural adaptation (*The Cenci* from Italian manuscript history to British verse drama, and *Beatrice Chancy* from British verse drama to Canadian chamber opera) and, as such, are in constant dialogue with their respective adapted text(s) and contemporary context.⁴ Clarke

³ There are four other operas based on the Cenci history, all of which are based on Shelley's verse drama: Guido Pannain and Vittorio Viviani's *Beatrice Cenci* (1942), Berthold Goldschmidt and Martin Esslin's *Beatrice Cenci* (1949/1950), Havergal Brian's *The Cenci* (1962), and Alberto Ginastera and William Shand's *Beatrix Cenci* (1971).

⁴ "There is a kind of dialogue between the society in which the works, both the adapted text and the adaptation, are produced and that in which they are received, and both are in dialogue with the works themselves" (Hutcheon 149).

explicitly acknowledges this complex dialogue as a central part of the creative process behind *Beatrice Chancy*. He cites both Shelley's play and the legend upon which it is based as primary sources for the opera in his introduction to the libretto, and then appends the work with a list of more than fifty additional influences, twenty-six of which are textual adaptations of the Cenci legend, including six plays, three operatic adaptations, a screenplay, and a sculpture. Clarke also sources other Beatrices, including Dante's Beatrice in *La Vita Nuova* and Shakespeare's Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*, as well as Harriet Jacobs's slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and two Beatrice restaurants. By deliberately distinguishing each of these adaptation of the Cenci legend, Clarke emphasizes the interpretive diversity among them, implying that each work resonates with his adaptation in its own unique way, and confirms the doubled nature of adaptation: a work that is a distinct entity but also connected to a prior text. As Hutcheon contends, adaptation is "repetition but without replication...it involves both memory and change, persistence and variation" (173).

Transcultural adaptations often involve a change of place, time period, politics, and language (Hutcheon 145). In *Beatrice Chancy*, a recontextualization of place occurs from Clarke and Rolfe's mutual desire to "Canadianize" their project (Clarke, *Beatrice Chancy* 63). In addition, the opera exhibits a change in language, though not in the conventional dialectic sense laid out by Hutcheon. In contrast to *The Cenci*, the language of *Beatrice Chancy* is much more explicit as the opera emphatically exposes violence and violation through what Clarke terms a "demotic that hurts" (63). Moreover, with its

onstage depictions of rape and torture, Clarke and Rolfe's adaptation is not subject to the censorship restrictions in Shelley's text. *Beatrice Chancy* directly expresses hate and violence in a way that *The Cenci* refuses. In this sense, *Beatrice Chancy*, to a certain extent, "de-represses" the politics of *The Cenci* (Hutcheon 147). Their politics do, however, converge on a structural level. Even though a remediation from closet drama to chamber opera occurs in *Beatrice Chancy*, both adaptations exploit intimate spaces of performance to raise issues of despotic injustice and national abjection in order to generate an affective response in their audiences. As a closet drama *The Cenci* can, as Shelley suggests, "teach the human heart, through its sympathies and antipathies, the knowledge of itself" ("Preface" 730). It generates this kind of affective knowledge because "the closet is the specific location of the hearts of that class which the plays try to convene as a group" (Simpson 309). Similarly, as Linda Hutcheon suggests, opera is an "emotionally powerful" form that "owes much of its power to music," which has the capacity to generate an affective emotional response in the listener ("Opera in Canada" 186). In *Beatrice Chancy*, the limited size of the chamber opera necessitates a small number of characters and musicians, which serves to increase the intimacy between the performers and the audience. This study encompasses an analysis of both genres as they bring issues of identity, nationhood, and citizenship into the realm of affective encounter.

In Chapter One I examine *The Cenci*, as a verse drama, in relation to formal structures of nineteenth-century closet drama. I contend that these constructs enhance the thematic discourse of suppression in the text. I also consider Beatrice's movement from

abjection to agency in the context of trauma theory, namely the way in which trauma can generate resistance. The chapter concludes with an examination of voice. Drawing on Lauren Berlant's concept of Diva Citizenship, I explore how private acts of abuse and abjection are representative of public discourses of hegemonic control.

Chapter Two contains an analysis of *Beatrice Chancy*. My reading of the opera is not limited to Clarke's libretto. It also necessarily undertakes a musical analysis (to the best of my ability) of Clarke's score. In addition to these concomitant parts, I also consulted several reviews of the opera after its staging by The Queen of Puddings Music Theatre Company in 1998. This aspect was particularly important to my reading of *Beatrice Chancy*, as through it I was able to gain an understanding of the opera's cultural reception. The chapter begins with an exploration of how the opera re-embodies history, where voices from the past are recalled through the singing voices in the present performance. I consider how this performative invocation of the past contests collective memory in order to re-narrate a dominant history that has marginalized the experiences of African Canadians. I examine the relationship between public and private in the rape of Beatrice and her subsequent acts of vocal and physical insurrection following Berlant's contention that discourses of sexual violence and national citizenship intersect at "complexly related sites of subjectivity, sensation, affect, law, and agency" (243). Finally, I extend Maureen Moynagh's application of Diva Citizenship to *Beatrice Chancy* by integrating it into an analysis of Beatrice as an opera diva in order to assess the extent of Beatrice's vocal power and its limits in liberationist discourse.

Chapter One: *The Cenci*

Shelley was first introduced to the story of Beatrice Chancy while in Italy in 1818. But it was not until seeing a portrait of Beatrice by Guido Reni at Palazzo Colonna in 1819 that he became enraptured by the prospect of turning her story into a play.

According to Mary Shelley, after seeing the portrait:

Shelley's imagination became strongly excited, and he urged the subject to me as one fitted for a tragedy. More than ever I felt my incompetence; but I entreated him to write it instead; and he began and proceeded swiftly, urged on by intense sympathy with the sufferings of the human beings whose passions, so long cold in the tomb, he revived and gifted with poetic language. (Shelley, "Poetical" 274)

As Mary suggests, Shelley's interest in composing *The Cenci* stemmed from the desire to reinstate Beatrice with a voice. Moreover, Beatrice's history entails the contestation of gendered injustice. By writing the tragedy, Shelley recalls this history and insists upon a reconsideration of its politics by bringing it into conversation with his contemporary context. However, Mary's conviction that the Cenci story is "long cold in the tomb" is not entirely accurate, particularly in Italy. Shelley indicates this in his preface when he discusses his fascination with the national interest that Beatrice's story occasions. He writes: "On my arrival at Rome, I found that the story of the Cenci was a subject not to be mentioned in Italian society without awakening a deep and breathless interest...All ranks of people knew the outlines of this history, and participated in the overwhelming interest which it seems to have the magic of exciting in the human heart" (729). Shelley seems to desire the creation of a similar kind of national experience by bringing the tragedy to the British stage, which in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a popular site for the

promotion of national discourse. But before Shelley returned home, the play was declared too “objectionable” to be performed on the British stage and immediately relegated to the closet.⁵ *The Cenci* therefore is characterized by a discourse of suppression as a result of censorship laws. This discourse not only operates structurally, but also historically and thematically.

Shelley addresses the historic suppression that characterizes the Cenci legend in a footnote to the preface of the play in which he reveals that “the Papal Government formerly took the most extraordinary precautions against the publicity of facts which offer so tragical a demonstration of its own wickedness and weakness; so that the communication of the [manuscript] had become, until very lately, a matter of some difficulty” (728). In emphasizing the past oppression of the Cenci’s story, Shelley calls attention to the silences that have been imposed on Beatrice’s history and then employs these silences thematically throughout the play. In *The Cenci*, Shelley explores a system of patriarchal power where the male voice is sanctioned by a firmly entrenched network of tyrannical power relations, rooted in religious authority. Consolidated on three levels (the divine, the papal, and the domestic), this network of socio-political patriarchal control systematically silences the female voice. This tripartite structure of patriarchal

⁵ According to M. Shelley, the manager of Covent Garden, Thomas Harris, “pronounced the subject to be so objectionable, that he could not even submit the part to Miss O’Neil for perusal” (279). *The Cenci* did, however, achieve success as a verse drama. Its first printed edition was so popular that it was printed again in 1821, “the only one of Shelley’s works to be published in an authorized second edition in his lifetime” (Rossington 718).

power is particularly toxic as it allows tyrannical contagions to permeate all aspects of life, making it difficult for the marginalized to breathe, let alone speak. Furthermore, at the centre of *The Cenci* there is an incestuous rape enacted on Beatrice by her father that is never actually named. By pursuing the incest motif which, as Groseclose notes, Shelley is the first to do, Shelley's play calls attention to another discourse of suppression: that of trauma.⁶ But by centralizing the character of Beatrice, who threatens the patriarchal system with vocal and physical insurrection, Shelley's prevailing interest in the Cenci legend seems to lie not simply in silence, but in the interstices between speech and silence, action and inaction, power and oppression; particularly Shelley explores how liminal spaces (the stage, the closet, the reflexive self, the castle at Petrella, the scaffold) simultaneously serve as sites of violence and sites of personal change and political revolution.

⁶ According to Groseclose, all other adaptations of the Cenci legend prior to Shelley "including the one from which Shelley worked, mention Francesco Cenci's attempt to seduce his daughter but no consummation" (*Incest* 225). Additionally, at the trial of the Cenci family, Roman lawyer Prospero Farinacio used the incestuous rape as justification for the parricide in his defense of Beatrice. But, as Groseclose notes, his appeal "was rejected by the adjudicating Roman Catholic prelates as unproven" (225). See "Translation of the Pleading of Prospero Farinacio in Defence of Beatrice Cenci and her Relatives" from *A Dissertation on the Statutes of the Cities of Italy* pp. 73-115.

“The Act Seals All”: From Suppression to Action

To begin, I would like to address Shelley’s use of incest in *The Cenci* and consider the thematic implications of the rape of Beatrice and its suppression. The incestuous rape is simultaneously an instance of action and non-action. As the climax of the drama, first alluded to by Count Cenci at the beginning of the play, the rape motivates the subsequent action—the parricide, the trial, and the execution—yet, paradoxically, remains silenced as, concealed off stage, it is neither seen nor heard. After the act is committed, Beatrice returns to her stepmother, Lucretia, unable to name the deed that has left her “veins” “contaminated” and her “limbs” “putrefy[ed]” (3.1.26, 96). In *Justice in The Cenci*, Laurence Lockridge suggests that by “not naming the incest, [Beatrice] tries to lend it an unreality” (97) in an attempt to evade and nullify the trauma of the incestuous sexual assault. But this evasion is not sufficient as Beatrice’s refusal to articulate the act in answer to Lucretia’s persistent questions still leaves her mentally and physically debilitated. Lucretia notes: “Thou art unlike thyself; thine eyes shoot forth / A wandering and strange spirit. Speak to me, / Unlock those pallid hands whose fingers twine with one another” (3.1.81-84). In fact, it is the conflation of physical and psychic defilement that makes it particularly difficult for Beatrice to articulate what has occurred. Her first words immediately following the rape, “Reach me that handkerchief! –My brain is hurt; / My eyes are full of blood” (3.1.1-2), suggest that she cannot locate the

wound because it is both a physical infestation (signified, metaphorically, by the blood / tears) and a mental trauma (signified by the brain). Likewise, Beatrice later exclaims, “The air is changed to vapours such as the dead breath in charnel-pits! Pah! I am choked!” (3.1.14-16). Here again Beatrice conflates the finite/physical (choking/death) with the infinite/metaphysical (vapour). Ostensibly, this passage indicates that Beatrice has encountered death in the form of incestuous sexual defilement—a death that is engendered by blood (a blood relation), infects through blood (incest/intercourse), and one that she considers resolving through an act of blood-letting.⁷ But it also covertly signals the miasma of oppression that the hegemonic discourse of patriarchal power generates for those who fall outside its system of privilege.

In light of this, it becomes apparent that the act of incest is concealed in silence in an attempt to, as Lockridge suggests, “lend it an unreality” (97), but also because its dual effects *exceed verbal comprehension*: Beatrice cannot name the act because it cannot be atoned by words: “no law...can adjudge and execute the doom of that which I suffer” (3.1.135-7). This generates a paradox of language within the play evidenced by Beatrice’s conviction before the rape—“You see I am not mad: I speak to you” (2.1.34)—and its reversal after: “If I try

⁷ Oh blood, which art my father’s blood,
Circling though these contaminated veins,
If thou, poured fourth on the polluted earth,
Could wash away the crime, and punishment
By which I suffer—no, that cannot be! (3.1.95-99)

to speak / I shall go mad” (3.1.85-6). Michael Worton suggests that, in her first conviction, Beatrice “accept[s], as Cenci does, that language dominates thoughts” (111) but then later, upon being violated by her father, realizes “the language of speech breaks down when faced with the necessity to express extreme emotion, since language serves only to structure thought” (111). But this change in sentiment also attests to the trauma of the sexual encounter. As I suggested earlier, by incorporating the incest motif, Shelley introduces another discourse of suppression, that of trauma. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma manifests itself as a paradox between destruction and survival, silence and speech. Specifically, the traumatic experience is the “oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life* (Caruth 7, italics original). Caruth goes on to analyze “what Freud encounters in the traumatic neurosis” as “not the reaction to any horrible event but, rather, the peculiar and perplexing experience of survival” (60). In other words trauma asks the question: “What does it mean to survive?” (60). In this sense, trauma begins not as a discourse of suppression, but one of *expression*, evidenced by the fact that a traumatic experience is one that cannot be fully repressed—a notion that, Caruth indicates, perplexes Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*—as the traumatic dream is “the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits” (59). Therefore, the experience of trauma is the experience of *having survived*, of encountering death but eluding it so that one can actually *talk* about the confrontation. But to code

an experience that occurs *in extremis* into an ordered system of language is not easy. The “enigma of survival” (58) often leaves one incapable of articulating the encounter with death. In fact, Caruth suggests, “It is only by recognizing traumatic experience as a paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival that we can also recognize the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience” (58). It is in this sense that trauma becomes a discourse of suppressions, where one “get[s] through an overwhelming experience by numbing oneself to it” (58, 2n), which is how Beatrice initially responds to her traumatic experience. Yet, Beatrice eventually resolves:

Something must be done;
...something which shall make
the thing that I have suffered but a shadow
In the dread lightening which avenges it;
Brief, rapid, irreversible, destroying
The consequences of what it cannot cure” (3.1.86-91).

That something is the bold act of parricide, which “put[s] off, as garments overworn, [mental preoccupations with] forbearance and respect, remorse and fear” (3.1.208-9). This new conviction that the “act seals all” (3.1.4.3.7) is problematic in that it directly contradicts Beatrice’s initial claim that the consequences of the rape cannot be cured, and ultimately produces consequences that are incurable—specifically her and her family’s execution. But this move to action is significant in that it points to Shelley’s interest in the permeability of silence, or the tensions that arise when dialogues (or acts) emerge from within a

discourse of suppression. Shelley's preoccupation with these tensions extends back to the preface where he raises the question of perseverance versus violence as it relates both thematically and formally to tragedy. In the preface, Shelley suggests that "no person can be truly dishonoured by the act of another" and that "revenge, retaliation, atonement, are pernicious mistakes" ("Preface" 730), but goes on to conclude, "if Beatrice had thought in this manner she would have been wiser and better; but she would never have been a tragic character" (731). Endurance in the face of oppression answers to a higher moral ideal, yet acts of violence are necessary for the action of the play and for its tragic form. This statement seems to project tragedy as a metonym for political insurrection, where a moral ideal of behaviour is sacrificed in favour of immediate action. But though this connection between tragedy and political insurrection works to justify Beatrice's rebellion, it also implicitly posits the parricide as a form of spectacle—a point that will become problematic upon further analysis of Shelley's engagement with the nineteenth-century stage.

The Stage: From Action to Spectacle

As a site of contact for a variety of political, social, and commercial discourses, the stage is an informative place to explore the tensions that emerge from discursive conflict. What attracts this variety of discourse is what Julie Carlson calls theatre's "indissociability from the social" (195). Since the time of Greek tragedy, dramatists assumed that staged corporeal action generates a

potent visceral response in the spectator. Particularly with the burgeoning of Britain's imperial enterprise in the eighteenth century, the period leading up to Shelley's composition of *The Cenci*, English drama became an influential site for the enactment of national and imperialist fantasies. As colonial expansion was continually calling concepts of nationhood into question, dramatic fantasies of Britishness presented idealized historical narratives of British supremacy and stability.⁸ Theatre's ability to create this affective sense of nationhood relates to the power of spectacle: "Where readers are scattered up and down the country...an audience is concentrated in once place, and as the feelings of each individual are communicated to his neighbour the mass emotion may rapidly become overwhelming" (Sutherland qtd. in Conolly 180-1). In fact, it was thought that the "social experience of audience interaction" (O'Quinn 11) would be powerful enough to render the audience, when stimulated by patriotic images, into a surrogate nation.⁹ However, these images of British harmony, and the nationalism they were thought to occasion, only amounted to an idealist discourse—a *fantasy* of Britishness—that had "little, if any, value beyond [the] confines" of the theatre (Marshall 183). Not only were the various histories of British supremacy in constant contradiction with one another (which, as Marshall notes, simultaneously disavows the stability they attempt to create), but

⁸ See Louise H. Marshall, *National Myth and Imperial Fantasy*.

⁹ See Kruger, "'Our National House': The Ideology of the National Theatre of Great Britain," pp. 37.

also their efficacy depended upon “the assumption that the audience would spontaneously recognize itself as a unified nation” (Kruger 36). But, as Marshall contends, “beyond the simple act of looking, there is no imperative to assume any further cohesive act within the transient community of the theatre audience” (2). The stage is, after all, a site of various discourses, each with the potential to generate diverse meanings for the spectator.¹⁰ For example, Friedrich Schiller’s hope that the theatre could be “a moral institution (*moralische Anstalt*) [and] a provider of aesthetic education” (qtd. in Kruger 37) is complicated by the fact that the stage was a source of income and a place to profit from spectacle:

“Theatrical activity was driven by the needs of managers, performers and writers to make money, to capitalize on the desire of audiences to be entertained”

(Marshall 3). For those who maintain a higher moral purpose for drama (and Shelley is included in this camp), these conflicts become a source of anxiety as they suggest the loss of the stage’s moral potency to vulgar interests in spectacle.

For Shelley, this anxiety is a central preoccupation in both his theory of drama and in *The Cenci*. In *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley calls for a return to “drama of the highest order,” exemplified in “the tragedies of the Athenian poets” (285), in

¹⁰ Likewise, the theatre itself is a site of multiple stages, where “the entire house, and not merely the stage, [can operate] as a performance space” (O’Quinn 11). O’Quinn suggests that the “most obvious” example of the house as a playing space is “when the theatre erupted into violence either aimed at the production itself or, more routinely, among the audience” (11)—further evidence that the concept of a unified and controlled/controllable audience is an illusion. See, for example, the Old Price Riots (1809).

contrast to drama where “the accumulation of the materials of external life exceeds the quantity of the power of assimilating them to the internal laws of human nature” (293). Mark Bruhn suggests that in the latter description of drama, Shelley points “most immediately to the eighteenth century. With its ever-expanding market economy and all-consuming ethos of economic individualism, it cultivated, as no previous age had, both selfishness and materialism, a preoccupation with the bodily and external at the expense of the intellectual, spiritual, or otherwise internal qualities of human nature” (717). In *The Cenci*, Shelley is critical of a fixation on the bodily and physical aspects of spectacle in the moments following Beatrice’s trial. Not a true exercise of justice but a charade set up to systematically destroy Beatrice, the trial scene becomes a spectacle of exploitation that attests the tyrannical power of the patriarchy. After she is sentenced to the scaffold, Beatrice challenges the judge’s decree by calling attention to the vulgarity of spectacle:

What! Will you give up these bodies to be dragged
At horses’ heels, so that the vain and senseless crowd,
Who, that they may make our calamity
Their worship and their spectacle, will leave
The churches and the theatres as void
As their own hearts? (5.3.33-40)

By conflating the scaffold with other institutional spectacles, Beatrice signals the emptiness of the observer (specifically the mass observer) and also the emptiness of the spectacles themselves. Likewise, Shelley seems to imply that

the moral decline of the theatre will lead to a decline in other institutional spectacles or that other sites of public exchange could lose their ability to serve higher moral purposes. This becomes particularly significant in relation to the scaffold because it calls into question the efficacy of forms of public punishment, especially when spectators are, as Beatrice suggests, more concerned with displays of physical entertainment rather than with questions of justice or the political significance of execution.

But as much as Shelley aspires to an elevated moral ideal in the play, its content is also highly sensational.¹¹ The sensationalism is particularly apparent in the eroticism of the young, suffering “*bella parracida*” (Carlson 198).¹² Therefore, what Shelley creates in *The Cenci* is what Bruhn terms a “‘modern’ mixed style” (714) of dramatic representation that combines neoclassical elements, such as an emphasis on “passion and psychology” (731), with decidedly non-neoclassical representations of the sexual and the “human-

¹¹ Moreover, in a letter to Leigh Hunt Shelley describes *The Cenci* as “totally different from anything you might conjecture that I should write, of a more popular kind” (Rossington 714).

¹² In the preface Shelley exhibits a deep interest in Beatrice’s physiognomy. His description of Guido Reni’s portrait of Beatrice discusses at length her “exquisitely delicate” face and her eyes, “swollen with weeping and lusterless, but beautifully tender and serene” (735). (The veracity of the attributions of the portrait, in both the identity of the subject matter and the artist, has been heavily disputed. See Barbara Groseclose, “A Portrait.”) Moreover, in public reception Beatrice was similarly eroticized as Groseclose notes, “The trade in copies of Guido's portrait becomes virtually a mania after 1819; tellingly, this is accompanied by a noticeable mutation of sweet to sensual in Beatrice's physiognomy” (“Incest” 235).

creatural” (732). Bruhn postulates that Shelley hoped this mixed-style form “would finally expose and subvert itself in favour of ‘ancient’ standards” (714).¹³ But, in fact, it is Shelley’s aspirations for the stage that are ultimately subverted by censorship laws. Shelley composed *The Cenci* with his eye on the stage, evidenced by his employment of the conventions of the star system, his explicit visioning of Edmund Kean and Eliza O’Neill in the main roles, and by the fact that his preface directly affirms his interest in the story’s “fitness for dramatic purpose” (“Preface” 729); yet, his use of non-neoclassical elements in the mixed style tests the limits of nineteenth-century dramatic decorum and creates problems for the Censor. Because of this, the play was relegated to the closet as soon as it was printed and for a hundred years thereafter.¹⁴ Yet even in its relegation to the closet, or—perhaps more precisely, because of its closet status—the thematic and formal tensions of speech and silence gain emphasis.

¹³ Bruhn concludes that this self-subversion actually miscarries—that Shelley “ironically engendered not a dramatic return to the first principles of classicism but rather...a truly radical departure from them” (715) that anticipates later adaptations of the Cenci legend, including the work of Antonin Artaud and George Elliott Clarke.

¹⁴ On Shelley’s commission, Thomas Love Peacock took *The Cenci* to Thomas Harris, manager of Covent Garden, to solicit its performance, but Harris “pronounced the subject to be so objectionable, that he could not even submit the part to Miss O’Neil [*sic*] for perusal” (*L.* ii. 279).

The first public mounting of *The Cenci* in England was at the New Theatre in 1922, as “...a censor’s decree became void a hundred years after a play’s publication” (Curran, *Shelley’s Cenci* 223). Prior to this, there was an enactment of the play by the Shelley Society in 1886, but this was staged unbeknownst to the Censor under the guise of a private production for members and friends of the Shelley Society only.

Mental Theatre: Resistance From The Closet

In the early nineteenth century, English “literary drama” experienced a significant decline that Daniel Watkins and other scholars attribute to a “crisis of social class,”(9) or the movement “from an aristocratic to a middle-class social order” (6).¹⁵ According to Watkins, traditional literary drama began to lose popularity with English audiences because “it carried with it too much ideological baggage from the past that denied the new content and consciousness of social life, and was thus formally unable to envision that past—or the present—in terms of the bourgeois ideology that had become dominant” (9). Consequently, the isolated success in romantic literary drama was “usually, though not always, confined to the closet...where the genre thus seemed more manageable” (7). But Watkins is quick to add that “the closet did not insulate the drama from the social energies of the age; their works reveal the same anxiety and sense of crisis pervading the period that are found in the melodramas and spectacles favored by the theatergoing public” (7). In fact, closet drama could, as Louise Marshall suggests, “by its very nature...be more defamatory and explicit in its approach to political comment” (13). Certainly, in the case of *The Cenci*, its relegation to the closet enhances the discourse of suppression that operates

¹⁵ By “literary drama” Watkins is referring to “legitimate” or “traditional” drama as defined by Raymond Williams in *The Long Revolution*. In this sense, the decline of the genre refers to a movement away from the themes and style of English Renaissance drama, it is not to suggest that there was a decline in the production of plays in the nineteenth century.

within the play. This occurs in two ways. First, as a text that is structured as a drama but denied stage presence, the play implicitly insists upon performance by this very denial. Similarly, Simpson contends that a verse drama's "confinement in the closet allows [it] to assert the political necessity for action more vehemently, precisely because the denial of this action makes it more imperative" (5-6). Throughout the play, Beatrice struggles to achieve vocal and physical liberation from patriarchal oppression. Yet her attempts to gain visibility in the system in which she is marginalized are constantly stymied, first by her father, and later by the system that sentences her to death for parricide. Moreover, the banning of the play from the British stage reinforces the public suppression of Beatrice's voice. In this way, the play itself serves as an extension of the political exercise of control over abject bodies and their voices and thus emphasizes the problems with this kind of censorship.

Second, the confinement of *The Cenci* in the closet enhances the complex relationship between public and private that the play thematically explores. The components of the closet encompass both the private and the public. For example, Michael Simpson likens the literary closet to the "*private room of the gentleman*" (310, italics original), which functions as both a study, "a place of reading and writing for one person alone (Kerr qtd. in Simpson 309) and as a place "where he conducts his less than private affairs" (310): that is, where he receives both business and personal visitors. Similarly, the dramatic

closet embodies this negotiation between both the public and the private as acts that are censored from the external stage are endorsed and explored on the closet's mental stage.

A similar negotiation of space occurs thematically in *The Cenci*, where the public and the private are distinguished but also intricately connected by a complex network of tyrannical power relations. I have already considered how the triumvirate of male power sanctions the authority of the father where, as Groseclose succinctly notes, “an autocratic Pope such as Clement VIII...rel[ies] on the derivation of the authority of the “Holy Father” from God the Father and, at the same time, refuses to discipline Cenci [for his crimes] who is also a father” (*Incest* 228-9). The authority of the father indicates a clear distinction between voices that are publically permissible (the voice of the patriarch) and those that are not (voices of subjugated individuals—usually women, though not exclusively as poor, unemployed men, like Giacomo, who are also marginalized within this discourse). But at the same time, the authority of the father suggests an essential link between the public and the private as it points to the reciprocal sanctioning of fathers within the system. In other words, if the domestic father is dependent on the Holy Father for socio-political power in the same way that the Holy Father depends on God the Father for the sanction of his power, it follows that the stability of the father's control in the home comes to represent the stability of the papal government. Therefore, papal authority publically sanctions

private acts of abuse and abjection, such as the physical and verbal abuse Count Cenci inflicts on his wife and children, as they serve to maintain the socio-political control of the patriarchy. Evidence of this is found in the allusions to the variety of payoffs Cenci makes to the papal government in order to cover his murderous and debauched acts. In turn, the papacy, as Orsino notes, graft the “revenue of many a wealthy” (1.2.65-5) in order to sustain their treasuries. Despite their inherent co-dependability, the prospect of the boundary between the public and the private being traversed is a key source of anxiety for those in power.

This is most apparent when Beatrice speaks out against her father at the banquet he gruesomely holds in celebration of the deaths of his two elder sons. In this scene, which explicitly conflates the public and the private, as public dignitaries are brought into the Cenci household, Beatrice presents herself before the patriarchy as a physical and vocal challenge to the system of privilege. In appealing to the guests to relieve her and her family from Cenci’s tyranny, Beatrice’s act of vocal insurrection endangers the stability of the patriarchal order and generates anxiety for her father, driving him to quickly suppress the moment by dismissing the guests: “Goodnight, farewell: I will not make you longer spectators of our dull domestic quarrels” (1.3.162-3). Because Beatrice’s voice threatens to undermine Cenci’s control as domestic patriarch and expose a vulnerability that he does not want transmitted into the public sphere, he

dismisses the situation as “a dull domestic quarrel” in an attempt to maintain a distinction between public and private.

The patriarchy’s fear of social insurrection points to a more general relationship between word and deed, specifically the idea that speech equals action, or the potential to act and is, therefore, a form of power. In fact, as Watkins observes, the “near obsession with language, particularly the relationship between language and power” is one of the central preoccupations of romantic drama (11). In *The Cenci*, this relationship operates as a “hoary hair” anxiety where members of the patriarchy feel vulnerable to voices that challenge despotic power. In relaying the Pope’s final death sentence to the Cenci family, Camillo communicates the Pope’s fear:

Parricide grows so rife
That soon, for some just cause no doubt, the young
Will strangle us all, dozing in our chairs.
Authority and power and hoary hair,
Are grown crimes capital. (5.4.20-24)

In order to ease their fears and defend their power, the patriarchy, as I have already shown, adopts tactics of smothering or closeting voices that threaten the authority of the father. Likewise, the links between speech and action are of concern within the Cenci household, evidenced when Count Cenci accuses Lucretia of teaching Bernardo “by rote / Parricide with his alphabet...” (2.1.131-2). Here Cenci suggests language itself constitutes a weapon of potential insurrection. This accusation also reinforces the notion that, in Cenci’s mind,

only the solitary voice of the father should be heard in the home. When challenges arise, Cenci sends his family to the enclosed Castle of Petrella in an effort to keep them silent:

Safely walled, and moted round about:
Its dungeons underground, and its thick towers
Never told tales; though they have heard and seen
What might make dumb things speak. (2.1. 168-172)

Ironically, this move does not achieve its purpose because Petrella ultimately becomes the stage for insurrection, as it is within its ‘safe walls’ that the parricide occurs. Although Cenci sees a connection between speech and power, he does not realize that silence can also generate action. It is to these moments, when silence is transformed into action, and rebellion, that I now direct my analysis.

Double Consciousness and Diva Citizenship: Resistance Within the Self

In addition to the duality of silence as it operates both thematically and formally in *The Cenci*, Shelley is also concerned with another kind of doubling: double consciousness. Shelley’s interest in double consciousness extends back to what he saw as the driving tragic force behind the Cenci family history, what he calls in the preface the “restless and anatomising casuistry with which men seek the justification of Beatrice, yet feel that she has done what needs justification” (“Preface” 731). But double consciousness, or self-consciousness, also operates on the level of character, as it is the trait that sets Beatrice above the multitude.

This is not to suggest that Beatrice is the only character who is self-reflexive, for Orsino brings it to our attention that self-scrutiny is a “trick of this same family” (2.2.108), manifest in both Cenci and Giacomo (and even Orsino himself shows a penchant for the same “trick”). But what is distinctive about Beatrice’s acts of self-reflection is the sublime fearlessness with which she turns the “wide gaze of day” (2.2.90) on herself and the transcendent morality to which her acts of self-reflection constantly aspire—a morality that transposes “hate” and murder into “the only worship I could lift to our great father” (5.2.127-9).¹⁶ Scholars have attempted to define the theme of double consciousness in *The Cenci* in a variety of terms. Lockridge posits it as a “split in [Beatrice’s] consciousness between being and doing...and a “doubleness, not duplicity” that he sees as “characteristic of her throughout” (97). Michael Scrivener in *Radical Shelley* addresses self-consciousness by demarcating Shelley’s characters into two groups: “those who are naïve, at one with their social role and self-concept, and those who are self-conscious, having undergone a process of doubling the self into knower and known, analyzer and analyzed” (188-9). Julie Carlson attributes

¹⁶ Beatrice’s fearless self-scrutiny only falters once, in my estimation, after she is raped by her father: “Misery has killed its father: yet its father / Never like mine—O, God! What thing am I?” (3.1.37-8). But the abject fear expressed in this moment is the effect of the physical and psychological trauma engendered by the circumstance (the violence Cenci inflicts on Beatrice’s body) and, in this sense, exterior to the self. Moreover, I would suggest Beatrice’s inability to self-reflect in this moment of crisis is one of the motivating factors for the subsequent insurrection. In other words, Beatrice’s act of rebellion is motivated, in part, by her need to reclaim self-consciousness and, by extension, the self.

the theme to the romantic theatre's proto-psychoanalytic preoccupation with remorse, as delineated by Coleridge: "For remorse as mental trait exemplifies the psychic state of theatre—double consciousness, or the ability to 'know' one thing and 'feel' another"(206). Likewise, to return for a moment to a discussion of the constructs of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theatre, "beginning in the eighteenth century, European theorists of the stage developed the idea of double consciousness as a psychological explanation for the paradox of acting. Hence Diderot: 'One is oneself by nature; one is another by imitation; the heart you imagine for yourself is not the heart you have' (Roach, *Cities* 82-3). The paradox Diderot presents also speaks to the socio-political climate of *The Cenci* in that it calls attention to how social identities are constructed or imagined.¹⁷ In light of this theory of identity, the system of political and domestic privilege that the members of the patriarchy adopt is not a network of natural entitlements (even though the system claims to rest on the divine sanction of the Pope) but one of imagined constructs. Likewise, those who are disenfranchised by the system are not naturally inferior, but systematically subordinated. In this sense, oppression becomes a site of trauma as, according to Caruth, "in trauma, there is an

¹⁷ In the preface to the play Shelley alludes to the links between professional and social acting. He posits the stage as a place to re-embodiment history and to examine human nature through this re-embodiment: "Such a story, if told so as to present to the reader all the feelings of those who once acted it, their hopes and fears, their confidences and misgivings, their various interests, passions and opinions, acting upon and with each other, yet all conspiring to one tremendous end, would be as a light to make apparent some of the most dark and secret caverns of the human heart" (728).

incomprehensible outside of the self that has already gone inside without the self's mediation, hence without any relation to the self, and this consequently becomes a threat to any understanding of what a self might be in this context" (131-132, 5n). Both oppression and trauma therefore are forms of double consciousness as they give rise to moments when one's self-concept is incongruous with how others (or a society) perceive him or her. This duality of self generates a sublime, even Gothic, trauma of identity. Double consciousness operates as a site of trauma in *The Cenci* most clearly in Beatrice's "doubled" relationship to her father after the rape. The act of incestuous rape is, quite literally, an incomprehensible, unmediated physical intrusion, or penetration, that threatens the victim's concept of self. In the act of incest, the boundaries in the familial relationship deemed *natural* or *permissible* become blurred through doubling; Beatrice is now forced to see herself through the eyes of her father who acknowledges her as both a daughter and a sexual object. The combination of a natural (familial) relationship with her father an unnatural one (as an object of sexual abuse) propels Beatrice into a state of trauma that borders on madness. Beatrice, however, does not let this trauma destroy her. Instead, she recovers her power of self-scrutiny and uses it to manipulate her double-conscious state into a source of liberation and rebellion. In other words, the psychic state of double consciousness is a liminal mental place suspended between knowing and feeling. This state, as I have already suggested, can elicit psychological trauma when

one's knowledge of the self becomes challenged or limited by external forces of power. But by contrast, this state of double consciousness also provides room for resistance because the ability to know one thing and feel another allows the individual to imagine alternate possibilities for the self. In this way, the individual can assert his or her value in a system where he or she is essentially valueless and can *feel* empowered despite *knowing* he or she has been socially relegated to a position of powerlessness. It is precisely the tenuousness of liminal spaces that creates a sense of flexibility and “transparency in the otherwise opaque surfaces of regular, uneventful, social life” (Roach, “Culture and Performance” 54-5), which allows narratives of power and privilege to be called into question. The resistance that double consciousness occasions allows for actions to become reactions, opening the door for insurrection.

This is exactly what happens for Beatrice when the initial trauma of the rape subsides. After a moment “absorbed in thought” (3.1.179), Beatrice concludes:

And lest I be reserved, day after day,
To load with crimes an overburdened soul
And be –what ye can dream not. I have prayed
To God, and I have talked with my own heart,
And have unravelled my entangled will,
And have at length determined what is right (3.1.216-221).

Through an act of self-scrutiny Beatrice resolves to not submit herself, and her soul, to what she perceives as a destined state of social abjection. Instead, she uses the moment to imagine the possibility of an alternate course of action and ultimately determines to have her father murdered, an act that momentarily overturns the systems of power and privilege which has reduced her to a position of political, vocal, and sexual subordination. The tension felt in this moment of double consciousness—the tension that generates reflective action—is similar to the tension that turns the closet into an “echo chamber in which the developing specificity of its own silence can be detected” (Simpson 313). In this moment of tension, voices that are forced into silence within the closet’s imagined walls begin to echo, reverberate, and gain energy until, with nowhere to go but out, they break through the closet walls in an act of self-assertion.

Beatrice’s movement from silence to speech echoes Lauren Berlant’s notion of “Diva Citizenship” where “a person stages a dramatic coup in a public sphere in which she does not have privilege. Flashing up and startling the public, [the Diva Citizen] puts the dominant story into suspended animation...[and] renarrates the dominant history...[where] abjected people have once lived *sotto voce*” (223).¹⁸ Ostensibly, Shelley’s Beatrice participates in three acts of Diva

¹⁸ I was introduced to Berlant’s concept of Diva Citizenship in an article by Maureen Moynagh entitled, “‘This History’s Only Good For Anger’: Gender and Cultural Memory in *Beatrice Chancy*.” Moynagh applies Berlant’s work on Diva Citizenship to the

Citizenship. The first, and the most debatable under Berlant's terms, is the murder of her father. I am classifying this event as an act of Diva Citizenship because it is clearly a dramatic coup in the most extreme and violent sense, as the murder of Count Cenci is the most corporeal moment of rebellion against tyranny in the play. But the problem in regards to Diva Citizenship lies in the fact that in Shelley's play, even though Beatrice has a substantial role in planning the murder of her father, she does not actually kill him; she hires assassins to commit the act. But as tenuous as this moment as an act of Diva Citizenship is, Shelley's Beatrice participates in two other acts that definitively mark her as a Diva Citizen—the first is when she speaks out against her father at the banquet and the second is at her trial, where she voices a direct challenge to patriarchal tyranny.

Berlant categorizes acts of Diva Citizenship as “moments...[where] acts of language can feel like explosives that shake the ground of collective existence” (223). Similarly, Beatrice's acts of vocal insurrection shake the foundation of the socio-political system of privilege that marginalizes her, particularly because this system of power is predicated on her subordination and, quite literally, built on her back. In her first act of vocal insurrection, at Cenci's

character of Beatrice Chancy in George Elliott Clarke's libretto adaptation of the Cenci legend.

banquet, Beatrice takes advantage of the presence of religious and political dignitaries in her home to address the injustice of her situation:

I have borne much, and kissed the sacred hand
Which crushed us to the earth, and thought its stroke
Was perhaps some paternal chastisement!
Have excused much, doubted; and when no doubt
Remained, have sought by patience, love and tears,
To soften him; and when this could not be,
I have knelt down through the long sleepless nights,
And lifted up to God, the father of all,
Passionate prayers: and when these were not heard
I have still borne; — until I meet you here,
Princes and kinsmen, at this hideous fest
Given at my brothers' deaths. Two yet remain,
His wife remains and I, whom if ye save not,
Ye may soon share such merriment again
As fathers make over their children's graves (1.3. 111-125).

In this moment of elocution, Beatrice becomes a true Diva Citizen as she “testifies [to]...the muted and anxious history of her imperilled citizenship,” and trust in the prospect of social change:

Her witnessing turns into a scene of teaching and an act of heroic pedagogy, in which the subordinated person feels compelled to recognize the privileged ones, to believe in their capacity to learn and to change; to trust their desire to not be inhuman; and trust their innocence of the degree to which their obliviousness has supported a system of political subjugation. (Berlant 222)

But this act of “heroic pedagogy” is terminated by Count Cenci who threatens Beatrice’s audience: “I hope my good friends here / Will think of their own daughters – or perhaps / Of their own throats – before they lend an ear / To this wild girl” (1.3.129-132). Because of this, Beatrice’s speech is met with silence

“Dare no one look on me? / None answer? Can one tyrant overbear / The sense of many best and wisest men?” (1.3.132-4), and she discovers that it is not obliviousness that supports this unjust socio-political system, but a lust for power. Even when directly confronted with injustice, the dignitaries prefer to be silent spectators opting not to act in order to maintain their positions of privilege for, as Simpson notes, “[when] oppression seeps inevitably into the exercise of absolute power, the fictions which shroud its actions must be carefully maintained” (228-9). Likewise, Scrivener addresses the ethical problems of non-action and suggests, “Not to admit the full extent of evil and not to act ethically once confronted with it...both allow the social actor to maintain his privileged status without questioning his role in the system of privilege” (190). Even in momentous and courageous acts of elocution, Beatrice’s voice, the voice of the marginalized that calls the powers that be into question, is ignored out of fear of its revolutionary potential. Moreover, in Beatrice’s second great moment of elocution, the scene of her trial, she delivers a captivating defense, calling for justice and an end to patriarchal oppression; yet her words are entirely lost on the members of the court. Even Camillo, who in the past was one of the few members of the patriarchy to register some sympathy for Beatrice’s appeals, responds to this moment saying, “As that most perfect image of God’s love / That ever came sorrowing upon the earth. / She is as pure as speechless infancy!” (5.2.68-70). Although Camillo is not explicitly trying to disavow

Beatrice's voice with this statement, by reducing her arresting vocal performance to "speechless infancy" he associates her voice with infantile babble, or sounds that have yet to develop into recognizable words (and are therefore speechless), which ultimately serves to subvert her voice and the social change it demands. Additionally, his comment signals what Dunn and Jones cite as further "associations of the female voice with bodily fluids (milk, menstrual blood) and the consequent devaluation of feminine utterances as formless and free-flowing babble, a sign of uncontrolled female generativity" (3). Moreover, sexualizing the female voice in this way contains it in the female body, and this embodiment has several implications.¹⁹ In one sense, this association suggests, as does the act of incestuous rape, that social politics are in fact issues of sexual politics, that intimate sexual encounters are representative of political issues.²⁰ In fact, Berlant's concept of Diva Citizenship stems from what she calls a "genealogy of sex in the nation," which posits that "the existence of official sexual underclasses has been [vital] to national symbolic and political coherence" and that "experiences of violated sexual privacy" are linked "to the doctrine of abstract national personhood" (221). Acts of Diva Citizenship expose this exploitation of marginalized bodies. In another sense, the link between the

¹⁹ The concept of embodiment in relation to the female voice is taken from the Introduction to *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture* (pp. 1-15), edited by Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones.

²⁰ The act of incestuous rape physically marks Beatrice as an object body in the eyes of the patriarchy and thus consolidates her position of social abjection.

female voice and uncontrolled female generativity reinforces the grey hair anxiety that I discussed earlier as it implies that Beatrice's voice of revolution could beget other voices of the same kind. Furthermore, the reproduction of rebellion can be completed without the assistance of the male; for example, Lucretia can, according to Cenci, teach Bernardo "parricide by rote" (2.1.132), behind his back, making the female voice both politically and sexually threatening. However, regardless of how threatening the female voice may be, because it is associated with sexuality it is implicitly rooted in the body and is, therefore, terminable. Even though Beatrice effectively challenges the system of privilege sustained by the patriarchy through her acts of elocution, it is the patriarchy that ultimately prevails by terminating her life and extinguishing her voice, consolidating the discourse of suppression that governs the play.

Chapter Two: *Beatrice Chancy*

George Elliott Clarke's first encounter with Shelley's verse drama *The Cenci* in 1992 during his doctoral studies at Queen's University marked the beginning of a long process of transcultural adaptation, and collaboration with composer James Rolfe, that eventually came to fruition in 1998 as the chamber opera, *Beatrice Chancy*. This adaptation not only proved to be groundbreaking in the world of new Canadian opera.²¹ It also reshaped the way in which Canadians engaged with their past, as it unveiled the often silenced or censored history of slavery in Canada. In their interpretation of the Cenci legend, Clarke and Rolfe draw on the themes of tyranny, oppression, citizenship, and sexual violence that Shelley explores in his verse drama, but re-imagine Beatrice as the mixed-race daughter of Francis Chancy, a white slave owner in the Annapolis Valley, Nova Scotia in the year 1801. This narrative recontextualization employs a European history of social and domestic violence in order to expose Canada's historic intimacy with racial violence and oppression. In doing so, the opera disrupts Canada's past partiality towards "a classical African-American discourse...that construct[s] the nation as the promised land, or Canaan, for fugitive African Americans" (Clarke, "Contesting" 2). Moreover, this recontextualization re-codes Beatrice's courageous act of insurrection

²¹ *Beatrice Chancy* has been one of the most successful contemporary Canadian operas to date, achieving a multi-production run across Canada. It has aired on both CBC Radio and CBC-TV, being "the first Canadian opera broadcast on television in more than 30 years, and the first opera of any sort broadcast on CBC-TV since 1989" (Bernstein B4). Additionally, the role of Beatrice was the debut performance of Measha Brueggergosman who has gone on to become one of Canada's leading internationally acclaimed sopranos.

after she is sexually abused as a contestation of the abjection of African Canadians in Canada's narrative of national identity. Clarke and Rolfe's adaptation also generically reconfigures Shelley's verse drama into a chamber opera, and one that deftly experiments with traditional operatic forms.²² It is therefore through the powerful voice of Beatrice as a diva and the experimentation with the formal structure of opera, that *Beatrice Chancy* re-narrates the history of a group that has lived, to borrow Lauren Berlant's term, *sotto voce* in Canadian national consciousness.

The counterdiscourse that this opera offers is an example of "what Toni Morrison has called 're-memory,'" or the "construct[ion] [of] a history of slavery in a nation actively invested in forgetting that slavery was ever practiced there" (Moynagh 98). This process of re-memory, or re-narration, is part of Clarke's larger effort to rebuild and reclaim an archive of Africadian identity within Canada's discourse of nationhood.²³ The relegation of African Canadian experiences to the margins of national narrative has occurred, in part, because of the selective nature of Canada's archives.²⁴ The amount of archived sources relating to black Canadians is minimal in comparison to the "wealth of public, archived sources...about 'white Canada'" (Wyile 148). Likewise, the content that does exist is

²² The opera integrates both traditional operatic forms like the aria, Italian madrigal form, and English folk songs, with musical forms deriving from African-American music, such as the ring shout, spirituals, blues and work songs.

²³ In the foreword ("Portage") to *Lush Dreams, Blue Exile*, Clarke describes the neologism *Africadia* as follows: "Merging *Africa* and *Acadia* (a word which derives—like *Acadie*—from the Mi'kmaq suffix, *cadie*, which means "abounding in"), *Africadia* signifies Black Nova Scotia, an African-American-founded "nation" which has flourished for more than two centuries" (i).

²⁴ See: "Opera from the soul." *The National*. CBC. 5 Oct. 1999. Television.

“exclusive or selectively inclusive” (160) in its depictions of African Canadian identity. For example, in looking for archival photographs of black women in Canada to include in *Whylah Falls*, Clarke only discovers images that portray these women in subordinate roles that “reinforce stereotypes...[and] social inequalities” (160). The strategic positioning of the black body in the archives, through the inclusion of images that depict subordination and the contradictory silencing of the nation’s violent exercise of despotic racial power and privilege, prompts Clarke to turn to what he calls “unconventional sources” (148), specifically “oral records, folklore, orature” (148) in order to fill the silences of a history that has not been fully written.²⁵ In other words, in opposition to a nationally privileged textual history that he recognizes as fundamentally flawed in its limited depiction of black Canadians, Clarke seeks out various forms of collective memory to contest this erasure and re-narrate the dominant history. As Clarke’s work demonstrates, in the transmission of cultural knowledge “the persistence of collective memory through restored behaviour” in forms such as rituals, ceremonies, folk songs, and oral story telling, “represents an alternative and potentially contestatory form of knowledge—bodily knowledge, habit, custom” (Roach, “Culture and Performance” 47). This notion of collective memory as both contestatory knowledge and embodied knowledge is particularly appropriate considering Clarke’s work originates in embodied memories (oral histories) and attempts to recover

²⁵ In a conversation with Herb Wylie on the subject of writing Canadian historical fiction, Clarke states: “No one has written the history of Black Nova Scotia between 1925 and 1949, or of Black New Brunswick for that matter, but luckily there are plenty of people still living who have memories...who can give you a perspective on what it was like” (148).

bodies (identities) that have been lost or written out of the dominant cultural narrative.²⁶

Moreover, the notion of collective memory as a form of restored behaviour positions it within the discourse of performance, suggesting a link between acts of collective memory (and the cultural knowledge that these acts relay) and formal performance genres. In this way, Clarke and Rolfe's choice of opera as the medium through which to relay their narrative becomes significant, especially since opera is also regarded as an embodied art form.²⁷ By focusing on four scenes—the opening ring shout (1.1), Beatrice's return to Francis's house (1.1), the incestuous rape (2.3), and the resulting trauma Beatrice experiences from this violation and her subsequent act of insurrection (4.1)—I will explore how the opera, as an embodied genre, functions as a viable outlet for the contestation of dominant history and the reconfiguration of concepts of citizenship.

²⁶ Cf. Clarke, George Elliott. "We Have to Recover Their Bodies." *Speaking in the Past Tense: Canadian Novelists on Writing Historical Fiction*. By Herb Wyile. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007. 147. Print.

²⁷ The intense physicality of the genre is seen in the corporeal quality of the voice. Operatic singing exerts physical stress on the body of the performer. Likewise, the voice is physically fragile, evidenced by how easily the throat of the performer can be damaged and the voice lost. But there is also an erotic element to this physicality. Leonardi and Pope define opera as "fragile throats, open mouths, powerful lungs, swollen epiglottises, larynxes on the edge" (8). This sexualization extends from the body of the performer to the visceral response opera evokes in the listener. Opera is embodied in the intimate and erotic encounter between the singing voice and the receiving body of the listener. See Leonardi and Pope who pursue Koestenbaum's question, "At the opera... what does your body do?" (8), as well as Barthes who posits the reception of the singing voice as "an internal, muscular, humoral sensuality" that "passes over the entire surface of the body... [and] can effect orgasm" (*S/Z* 110). See also Poizat, Abbate, and Clarke and Rolfe: "Opera to me is an intimate physical experience—the singers should bathe the audience with their sweat and blood" (Rolfe 78).

Staging Acts of Collective Memory

Collective memory is an invaluable resource in the recovery of marginalized histories for, as Roach concludes, “In opposition to the official voice of history, which...has tended to emphasize the cultural annihilations of the diaspora, the voice of collective memory, which derives from performance, speaks of the stubborn reinventiveness of restored behaviour” (“Culture and Performance” 58). In the context of *Beatrice Chancy*, this stubborn reinventiveness refers, in one sense, to the opera’s reinventing of a narrative of African Canadian identity in which a history of violence is revealed. Beatrice, the daughter of Francis Chancy and one of his deceased black slaves, is sent by her father and his wife Lustra to a convent in Halifax in an effort to cultivate her whiteness. Upon her return to the Annapolis Valley Beatrice declares her love for Lead, one of Francis’s slaves. Enraged by their prospective union, Francis tortures Lead and rapes Beatrice, reinforcing their abjection within the socio-political system. Beatrice, Lead, and Lustra then conspire to murder Francis in an attempt to achieve liberation from the system of despotic power that denies them autonomy. The plot is carried out by Beatrice and Lead but subsequently leads to the conviction and hanging of all three by Nova Scotia’s English authorities under the direction of Governor Wentworth.

Although the eponymous opera tells the story of one woman, the narrative accounts for the history of many as it invokes the memory of the “Many thousand gone” (Clarke 4.2.9), those lost to the brutality of slavery and to the national erasure of its existence in Canadian history. Clarke and Rolfe’s recovery project thus reverses

ensorship and silence, exposing the audience to two deeply unsettling instances of corporeal abuse. What makes these two scenes particularly disturbing is the way in which the violence is articulated. Chancy's language in the torture scene is uncomfortable and explicit in its disparagement of Lead: "But I'll decided on love and death- / And on pain—which is all you're worth" (Clarke 1.2.108-9). Similarly, Chancy's sadistic anticipation of the act itself functions as a violation: "Sex instigating the black rasp of knives— / To be darkly entered the viscous prize, / Sap-eating triangle, housing noxious buzzing of incestuous / Insects buys at sex" (2.3.12-15) and Beatrice's blunt description of the act immediately after: "His scythe went shick shick shick and cut / My flowers; they lay in heaps, murdered" (3.1.8-0) heightens the discomfort. Musically, however, these uncomfortable scenes are both placed in apposition with two poignant spirituals that contain elements of the blues: "I must walk my lonesome valley" and later, "The sun burns us / The rain soaks us" (1.2.114-117, 3.1.33-42). The two spirituals, both led by Deal, contain beautiful, yet sorrowful blues-style bent notes that reference the sound of the cry. These moments, removed from the immediate violence of the narrative, still reinforce the articulation of violence as the voice of the blues is characterized by its ability to express pain and the possible transcendence of this pain through musical form.²⁸

²⁸ "The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and then transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism" (Ralph Ellison qtd. in Young 12).

In another sense, the stubbornness of “the voice of collective memory” (as Roach’s aurally charged language connotes) refers to the persistence of voice in its ability to “speak across [a] crushing plot” (Abbate xi).²⁹ In other words, in terms of that which is unique to opera, it can refer to the persistence of the singing voice. As I have shown, *Beatrice Chancy* prominently features voices that speak out against and challenge the dominant discourse of suppression, and these voices resound even more emphatically in opera because of the visceral power of the singing voice.³⁰ A “physical and sensual force,” the operatic voice “has the capacity to assail us with its sheer sound” (Abbate x, 12).³¹ As a diva, Beatrice’s empowered voice resonates as it speaks of past injustice and insists on identifying Chancy as her rapist. Before she and Lead are about to carry out the murder of Francis, Lustra reminds Beatrice that Chancy is her father. Beatrice rejects this term by stating, “Call him what you like. / I call him my raper” (Clarke (4.1.47-8)).³² The naming of Francis Chancy as raper reconfigures the practice of naming as an imperial tool for ownership. Particularly by using the noun form of the word, the naming becomes not an explicit *narration* of the event but *identifies* Francis, making its utterance a reciprocal

²⁹ In his critique of Catherine Clément’s *Opera, or The Undoing of Women*, Paul Robinson contends that the diva can transcend and triumph over (traditionally androcentric) narratives of death and destruction by the sonic power of the her singing voice

³⁰ Linda Hutcheon suggests opera is a “form that is emotionally powerful, that allows people to connect in a very strong way” (“Opera in Conversation” 186). In opera music and voice combine to generate an affective response in the listener.

³¹ See, for example, Deal’s “cry” in the two spirituals cited earlier.

³² This act of naming distinguishes Clarke and Rolfe’s adaptation from Shelley’s verse drama, where it is left unarticulated.

act of ownership through which Beatrice re-claims her body and her past. In naming Francis as her raper, Beatrice remembers and articulates the violence that has been inflicted not only upon her, but also upon her mother and her ancestors. This reverse act of naming creates a shift in power relations that is consolidated by Chancy who later claims, “In smutting her, I smote myself” (4.1.41), and is an important step in the process of cultural re-narration that the opera sets out to accomplish.

The association of voice and body is integral to collective memory and to the cultural re-narration within *Beatrice Chancy*. The physicality that Abbate stresses in the reception of music also characterizes its production:

So immediate and inescapable is music’s assault upon us...that we are inclined to assign it a source who speaks it. We tend to ask ourselves, even if only subliminally, where the music comes from. Music is not merely a gaudy interruption of silence, which converges from ambient space. It is not a text writing itself, or historical events ‘speaking themselves.’ Music originates from human bodies. (12)

If collective memory produces alternative, bodily knowledge through performance, then in the case of opera access to this bodily knowledge comes not only through the physical presence of the performer, but also through the corporeality of the singing voice. In employing unconventional generic devices, such as the ring shout, the operatic performance *invokes* the historic bodies to which this narrative counter history belongs, rather than simply relaying their histories. This allows for the performing bodies on stage to re-embodiment the suppressed history in an imaginative act of narrative and musical (re)creation. In this way, the cultural restoration that occurs in the opera is musical as well as narrative. In researching the diverse musical landscape of early nineteenth-century

Nova Scotia, which included “sacred and secular musics of African, American, English, Irish, Scottish, French and Mi’Kmaq ancestry,” Rolfe discovers a lack in the recorded history of African-Canadian music of the time, similar to that which Clarke finds textually (Rolfe 78). Rolfe comments on this in his introduction to the libretto:

The early music of African-Canadians is a matter of conjecture, as neither recordings nor sheet music exists and written records are scant. I studied recordings and accounts of African-American music from remote locales—costal islands, rural areas, and prisons—of the southern United States, in the belief that they offer the nearest clues as to how African Canadian music of that era might have sounded and functioned. Recorded and printed sources from Nova Scotia furnished further clues. (Zapf 65)

In composing the sonic world of the opera, Rolfe must also engage in the process of reconstituting the sound of the early Africadian community. This entails, as he explains, piecing together various African diasporic musical histories through imaginative acts of musical re-creation.

The opening ring shout is a key example of this process of musical adaptation, for it derives from African American traditions of the southern United States. In terms of its historic practice, the ring shout is one of the foundational forms of African musical expression maintained throughout the diaspora. Defined as “an early Negro ‘holy dance,’” it consists of participants rhythmically shuffling in a circular pattern:

Accompanied by a spiritual, sung by lead singers, ‘based’ by others in the group (probably with some kind of responsorial device and by hand-clapping and knee-slapping). The ‘thud’ of the basic rhythm was continuous without pause or hesitation. And the singing that took place in the shout made use of interjections of various kinds, elisions, blue-notes, and call-and-response devices, with the sound of the feet against the floor serving as an accompanying device. (Gordon qtd. in Floyd 266)

The staging of a ring shout in the opening moments of *Beatrice Chancy* connects the opera to the deep corporeality of traditional African American music and performance rituals as well as to the embodied aspect of the ring shout as a funerary ritual. The funerary associations of the ring shout can be traced to other African funerary practices such as Louisiana “festivals of the dead” and Jazz Funerals, both of which operate under the “religious belief in the participation of ancestral spirits in the world of the present” (Roach, “Culture and Performance” 58). Likewise, the ring shout is defined by the same principle as it is a predecessor of these practices: “In New Orleans...the ring [shout] was an essential part of the burial ceremonies of Afro-Americans” and over time “straightened itself to become the Second Line of jazz funerals, in which the movements of the participants were identical to those participants in the ring” (Floyd 267). In the ring shout, voice and ritual movements combine to create a musical performance that conjures the memory of the dead in the present moment. The integration of this ritual into the performance of the opera, a ritual that reinforces the cultural understanding that “the dead stay among us so that we may not forget” (bell hooks qtd. in Roach 57), is significant considering the cultural re-memory work that Clarke and Rolfe undertake in *Beatrice Chancy*.

When the performers participate in the ring shout in the opening moments of the opera, they invoke the presence of those whose history is being re-narrated through the renewal of this cultural ritual and being the process of re-embodiment that is carried out in the rest of the performance. The ring shout, therefore, links history and memory to the

process of operatic creation—specifically what Abbate terms a self-reflexive “coincidence of narrati[on] and enactment” (64).³³ This connection is reinforced by the fact that the ring shout conjures the dramatic narrative of the opera. The shout commences with Moses leading the group of participants in the spiritual “Massa Winter be dyin’ now.” As it continues, Lead takes over the improvisational role of the leader and the shout evolves into the first dialogue of the opera: an argument over whether patience and religious fortitude or rebellion and insurrection is a more effective means to overcome oppression—a question that recurs thematically throughout the rest of the performance. At this point, the self-reflexive performance instigates the dramatic narrative, a change that is reinforced by the perpetual circling motion of the shout and the later dispersion of the circle as the argument intensifies. Additionally, the ring shout marks the transformation of performers into characters as all of the singers, as well as the musicians and the conductor, participate in the performance of the opening ring shout.³⁴ As the dramatic roles emerge, the characters not present in the opening act leave the stage and the musicians take their respective places. The self-reflexivity of this moment in the opera alerts the audience members to their role as spectators of a performance. Moreover,

³³ The musical recovery or production of bodies is a recurring theme in opera. See Abbate’s analysis of *The Marriage of Figaro* in *Unsung Voices*: “The coincidence of narrating and enactment has, in fact, created a reflexive moment of peculiar force, for the Count’s act of narrating seems to engender the disaster of which it tells” (64). Narration becomes reflexive as it *produces* action (and produces the body of Cherubino) through the synthesis of time.

³⁴ According to Zapf, this collective participation occurred in “both the live performances and the performance televised by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation” but is “a performance option not indicated in the score” (101).

as witnesses to this transformation the audience is implicated in the national performance of forgetting that the opera brings into play, reinforcing the fact that this history of violence belongs to all Canadians. But by the same token, the audience is also invited into the experience of remembering and the process of narrative re-creation. This reflexivity also serves to remind us of the importance of all voices in the transmission and preservation of marginalized histories, that we too have a voice that we can use to connect to the past and to each other.

Urjo Kareeda writes of this very connection in a review of the opera:

In the finale, as the singers and musicians stood together on stage chanting the hymn *O Freedom*, a black woman just to my left in the audience fervently added her voice to the singing. She was right: An experience of the magnitude of *Beatrice Chancy* brought, for all of us, our hearts into our throats. (C5)

The Freedom Chorus in the finale is another instance of reflexive performance that, like the opening ring shout, involves all of the opera's performers. In this moment, the woman in the audience recognizes her role in the performance and the power of sharing in song that is created by the expandability of the procession.³⁵ Her experience attests to what Benedict Anderson calls the "experience of simultaneity" in singing, where "at precisely such moments, people wholly unknown to each other utter the same verses to the same melody. The image: unisonance...singing...provide[s] occasions for unisonality, for the echoed physical realization of the imagined community" (145). Furthermore, the notion

³⁵ Cf: "Opera is a collective art form. It creates a sense of belonging through collective emotional response" (Hutcheon, "Opera in Conversation" 186).

that the opera brings the heart to the throat attests to music's ability to “*evoke* and *provoke*” (Hutcheon 235) an affective response in its listeners, evidenced by the woman's visceral reaction to join in the chorus. Additionally, Beatrice carries her heart in her throat. After all, her voice is the source of her lifeblood. It is what allows her to become an active agent in a discourse of oppression because it is through her voice that she generates a counterdiscourse. And it is the very thing the patriarchy targets in order to eliminate her, evidenced by the striking image towards the end of the opera of the diva with the noose positioned forebodingly around her throat while she sings her final declamation of love and memory. It is to Beatrice as a diva and her powerful voice that I now turn.

Abjection to Agency: Place and Displacement in Discourses of Corporeal Control

The nation's tendency to marginalize the histories of African Canadians problematizes their claims to citizenship. As Crooks asserts, “black subjects [must] jostle for a meaningful position within the mainstream Canadian social and cultural narrative” (21). In *Beatrice Chancy*, the repositioning of black subjects occurs through the figure of the diva, as Beatrice moves from a position of social and physical abjection to one of agency by using her voice to indict a system of oppressive racial and sexual hierarchies. At the beginning of the narrative Beatrice experiences a profound sense of place. In her first appearance in the opera, upon returning from Halifax, Beatrice greets Lustra saying:

Dear Lustra, my second mother,
I joy to be home again,
After three long years...
How I longed to eye dark-passioned clouds
Sugar snow, rain, over the river. (Clarke 1.1.87-91)

In this moment, Beatrice affirms her mixed racial identity. Textually she roots herself in the Annapolis Valley through a lush description of its landscape. Musically she signals her African heritage, as the syncopated melody of her vocal line introduces a distant rhythm not yet familiar to the sonic world of the opera. This new melody line distinguishes Beatrice as a new voice, a breath of fresh air, that signals change and ultimately suggests her revolutionary potential. Moreover, in addressing Lustra as her second mother Beatrice enters into what she perceives is a safe and stable familial environment.³⁶ But even more significantly, in this description Beatrice establishes a home for herself by claiming a position in the natural world of the Annapolis Valley.³⁷ It is in the landscape that Beatrice experiences a deeply rooted sense of place and it is out of its lushness that her relationship with Lead comes to fruition.³⁸

³⁶ Beatrice maintains this perspective up until the moment that she first enters Francis's house: Our father, Lustra, and all my folk,
I love you through and through.
If I should miss Heaven when I die.
This memory will be my Zion. (1.2.47-50)

³⁷ By extension, this claim establishes the history of African Canadians in eighteenth-century Nova Scotia and their connection to and presence in the land.

³⁸ Lead also establishes a connection to the landscape, land that he has undoubtedly cultivated. He says to Beatrice, "I wanna talk ta ya / By the mauve river / Under the plum sky" (1.1.58-60). His deep knowledge of the land allows him to conjure its saturated beauty in his description.

But when Beatrice declares her love for Lead to her father she experiences an abrupt displacement as she comes to realize the discourse of corporeal control that governs the patriarchal racist regime under which she lives, and her lack of autonomy within this discourse.³⁹ The discourse of corporeal control stems from Lauren Berlant's conviction that nations operate on unjust systems of sexual power, where notions of citizenship and belonging are predicated on the sexual harassment of marginalized bodies, or what Berlant calls subgroups (238).⁴⁰ Francis Chancy's supremacy in the system of patriarchal power and racial privilege that governs early nineteenth-century Nova Scotia depends upon his ability to commodify women and slaves as "things" (Clarke 1.2.89-90).⁴¹ Within the slave system, Chancy's control is not only established on the basis of servitude, but also as sexual domination. When Beatrice asserts her love for Lead, Chancy interprets this as an undermining of her whiteness, something that he has bestowed upon her (both genetically and by, as he claims, sending her to the convent in Halifax), and also of his sexual entitlement. He attempts to reclaim this entitlement (which, ironically, he already has by law) in two acts of corporeal violence: his torture of Lead and his rape of Beatrice. Subsequently, the home that Beatrice originally claimed breaks down and she

³⁹ This concept of corporeal control is taken from Lauren Berlant's notion of the corporeal conditions of citizenship, particularly in the context of discourses of nationhood under slavery.

⁴⁰ It is not limited to a specific subgroup, for although Berlant focuses on stories of black and mixed-race women (including Harriet Jacobs and Iola Leroy) she also gestures towards "many others, whose locations in hierarchies of racism, homophobia, and misogyny will require precisely and passionately written counterhistories" (239).

⁴¹ As his daughter and a mulatto Beatrice is doubly subjected to this systemic objectification.

comes to understand the ways in which her body is controlled through hegemonic discourses of power and entitlement. After Lead is tortured, Beatrice realizes that as a mulatto the corporeal conditions of citizenship are physically “mapped onto [her] body” (Spillers qtd. in Moynagh 109) and serve to limit her mobility and autonomy. She says to Lustra, “Would my words scorch! My singed skin / Tells white men I’m their whore, / Tells black men I’m their serf” (Clarke 2.1.18-20).⁴² In Beatrice’s case, as is the case in many slave narratives, corporeal control is exercised as physical and sexual exploitation but also extends to control over sexuality (as Chancy decides whom Beatrice can and cannot marry), kinship structure, and place. These various forms of control all culminate in the rape, which is the most explicit instance of the operation of corporeal conditions of citizenship in *Beatrice Chancy*. In the act of rape familial decorum is destroyed, as it becomes incestuous. Moreover, as an act of physical and affective domination, it causes Beatrice to experience the full extent of her abjection in the system. And it is this traumatic “desubjectification” that Beatrice boldly resolves to speak out against.⁴³

Immediately after the rape Beatrice exhibits a traumatic loss of self, which she expresses in the desire to mutilate her body:

⁴² For further discussion of the racial mapping of (il)legitimacy on the body of mulatto women see Berlant 229, 238 and Gueye 43.

⁴³ See Berlant pp. 285-6, nt. 5: “Kristeva actually talks about abjection as a structure of *desubjectification*—in which ‘ordinary’ subjects lose a sense of their rationality or legitimacy as subjects in everyday and national life in response to negatively invested social phenomena. She calls these abjected people ‘dejects’: faced with a substance or phenomenon that unsettles the constitutive rules of order in their horizon of life expectation, dejects become shaken, aversive, incompetent to *subjectivity*. They feel a traumatic loss—of themselves.”

His sweat infests my hair!
Get a knife! I'll hack it off!
He dug his lips upon my breasts:
Hand me a knife, I'll slice 'em off. (3.1.10-13)

However, Beatrice chooses to combat this sense of aversion by harnessing her vocal power in order to reclaim her agency. This is what makes her a revolutionary. In declaring Chancy to be her raper, Beatrice uses her voice to expose the system of sexual power and racial privilege that he embodies. In refusing to remain silent, she disrupts this system of hegemonic power that renders her body and her being abject. Her naming of this violence generates a counterdiscourse that testifies to the alternate national experience of those marginalized by patriarchy and racism. Moreover, her powerful language instigates action as it prompts the murder of Chancy, a power that Beatrice openly acknowledges to Moses after articulating the murder plot: “If my words frighten you I'll go. / But I'll not go on, appeasing his lust” (3.2.57-8). By indicting Chancy and the system that sanctions his power, Beatrice takes on the status of what Berlant terms a Diva Citizen. The Diva Citizen attempts to “establish an archive for a different history” (221). Through public acts of “risky dramatic persuasion” (223) the Diva Citizen dismantles the boundary between the public and the private, exposing the link between “experiences of violated sexual privacy” and “doctrine[s] of abstract national personhood” (221). Even though Berlant does not explicitly link the Diva Citizen to the opera diva, the power that Beatrice's voice has when she exposes the violence that has been inflicted upon her, stems from the associations of the voice of the diva.

Constructs of the opera diva fall under two categories, as delineated by Leonardi and Pope: the masculinist and the revisionary. The masculinist discourse projects the diva in terms of her “traditional representation” as “corrupt, monstrously selfish, ruthless, competitive...destructive and deadly,” a representation “that goes back to Homer’s sirens” (13). It is defined as masculinist “because it constantly figures the woman with a voice as dangerous and ‘unnatural’” and thus serves to “reinforce traditional gender categories and the compulsory heterosexuality those categories support” (13). Conversely, the revisionary discourse counters this masculinist tradition: “While masculinist discourse is preoccupied with what the diva and her voice do to men, the counterdiscourse is concerned with what the diva does for women” (19). In other words, the diva is a woman *with a voice*—a voice that speaks emphatically in the public sphere. In the revisionary tradition, “the diva’s voice is a political force. It asserts equality and earns authority in the public masculine world” (19). Like the Diva Citizen, the opera diva speaks “in a public sphere in which she does not have privilege” (Berlant 223), as in both the masculinist and revisionary discourses, the power of the diva’s voice stems from the fact that it disrupts hegemonic constructs of authority.⁴⁴ As a diva, Beatrice’s voice disrupts traditional gender constructs as well as sexual constructs, as she unveils the corruption within the patriarchy by speaking of incest. As a mulatto, Beatrice’s racial

⁴⁴ As “a loud voice in the public world,” the diva, as Leonardi and Pope suggest, “quite literally wears the pants” (21).

hybridity makes her body a source for the destabilization of monocultural authority.⁴⁵

This combination is what allows Beatrice to disrupt the intertwined discourses of both racial and sexual power. Moreover, Beatrice's voice is politically disruptive because it insists upon recognizing the systemic violence that the nation attempts to efface.

But at a crucial moment in the opera Beatrice opts for silence. The diva refuses to use her voice and all of its threatening power. After Chancy is murdered and the plot is discovered, Deal warns the three conspirators of the impending presence of troops. The tension rises as Lustra and Lead anticipate, with growing distress, their imminent execution. But Beatrice responds saying:

Let them hang me! I'll not cry out!
My whole life has been a prison.
Soon I will be free. (Clarke 4.1. 109-111)

Musically, Beatrice first asserts strength and confidence in her actions by her lyrical and emphatic vocal line, but then alternates to a diminuendo staccato when she declares, "I'll not cry out!" This is followed by another lyrical flourish and then a return to the staccato with, "Soon I will be free." This return to diminuendo staccato reinforces Beatrice's silence and links her silence to the silence of death, as the freedom she anticipates in this line is the freedom from life in death. But this is followed by a repetition of the verse, only this time in one final lyrical cadence. In refusing to cry out Beatrice acknowledges the limitless power of the system that oppresses her. Within the network of patriarchal

⁴⁵ According to Gueye, discourses that privilege monoracialism regard "racial difference" as "politically frightening" because "mixed identity destabilizes essence, deconstructs universals, and decenters monocultural authority" (42).

and racial authority her voice, like her body, is also objectified.⁴⁶ Ultimately, the threatening power of Beatrice's voice is easily terminated by those in power, evidenced by the opera's potent image of the diva and the noose. In this moment, the opera refuses essentialized notions of the voice. Although powerful, Beatrice's voice cannot effect an immediate deliverance of justice. Yet, this is not to suggest that Beatrice is completely powerless. There is still an evident sense of vocal power in her refusal, but it is a power that comes from choosing to remain silent. In withholding her voice, Beatrice opts to no longer be a part of the socially constructed discourse that systematically renders her utterances and sensations as meaningless. It is in silence that Beatrice achieves a measure of liberation.

Conclusion: Songs of Sorrow and of Citizenship

The narrative of *Beatrice Chancy* is one of corporeal stress on both personal and national levels. The opera portrays this by staging multiple acts of violence—the rape of Beatrice by Francis, the retaliatory murder of Francis by Beatrice, and the conviction and hanging of Beatrice by the English authorities. In tracing these acts, the opera depicts the disturbing escalation of violence as it moves from the domestic to the national, ending in a spectacle of execution that implicates the law for condoning this violence and the nation

⁴⁶Poizat discusses the objectified voice as a prelude to his discussion of the voice object. In his analysis of objectification he accounts for the multiple ways in which the voice of the performer can be lost or stolen. Similarly, in *Beatrice Chancy*, the commodification of Beatrice's voice is evident in that it is lost to (or stolen by) the patriarchy when she is executed.

for concealing it. If, as Linda and Michael Hutcheon contend, nationhood is an “affective sense of belonging” (235), Beatrice experiences an affective sense of domination and displacement at the hands of the patriarchy through the act of rape and her subsequent public execution for parricide. Although Francis Chancy violates Beatrice’s body, her body is not protected by law and *she* is the one that the system condemns. The justification of Beatrice is a central preoccupation for Shelley in his adaptation of the Cenci legend, and Clarke and Rolfe’s opera builds on the moral dilemmas that Shelley’s text addresses. Shelley’s first concern is with the language of justification. At the trial, Beatrice refuses to justify the crime for which she has been convicted:

But that which thou hast called my father’s death?
Which is or is not what men call a crime,
Which either I have done, or have not done;
Say what ye will. I shall deny no more. (Shelley 5.3.83-86)

Michael Worton contends that Beatrice refuses justification because “to speak would be to accept the constrictions of a socially determined language” (120).⁴⁷ Shelley’s interest in the “efficacy of language” (105) makes the movement from verse drama to opera particularly intriguing, considering opera’s characteristic ability to signify beyond the limits of conventional language. Moreover, a central distinction between Shelley’s play and Clarke and Rolfe’s adaptation is Beatrice’s exercise of vocal power in the naming of the rape.

⁴⁷ For a similar instance of the way in which patriarchy controls language compare Deal’s conviction: “We own nothing but our breath-...An’ massa even poison that” (Clarke 3.2. 23-5).

In *The Cenci*, more than simply adhering to the conditions of the nineteenth-century British stage, where censorship laws required the indirect representation of indecorous acts, Shelley employs these constrictions of language to thematic effect. In the moments after the rape, Lucretia attempts to coax out of Beatrice an explanation of what has happened. After several coded responses from Beatrice, Lucretia continues to question her. Beatrice finally responds saying, “What are the words which you would have me speak?” (Shelley 3.1.107). Her question is met with silence. Shelley’s exploitation of speech and silence during this critical moment attests to the difficulty that victims of sexual abuse often have in articulating these experiences. Beatrice and Lucretia’s silence suggests a shared understanding of these discursive limitations and of the shame involved with exposing, expressing, and reliving instances of sexual violation. In his analysis of Shelley’s play Clarke contends that in her struggle to articulate the abuse, “Beatrice resembles the African American slave narrative author Harriet Jacobs...[who] dramatizes the difficulties inherent in discussing the savagery of slavery” (*Racing* 178). Yet, Clarke and Rolfe’s Beatrice does not seem to experience this linguistic difficulty. Rather, she insists, without fear and without hesitation, upon full disclosure and on the term “raper.” Beatrice’s ability to articulate the rape re-locates the problem of linguistic expression, moving it from one of personal affect to nationally constructed discourse. Although Beatrice speaks out against oppressive hierarchies, she is still controlled by them (like Shelley’s Beatrice) for language she employs is already politically determined. In the end, Beatrice’s conviction of Chancy has no social or

political credibility because the language of violation does not register on a nationally abjected body. She, in an echo of Beatrice Cenci, will refuse justification and “not cry out” (Clarke 4.1.109).

In this sense, the act of naming in *Beatrice Chancy* also indicates the first movement away from socially determined language. By replacing the word father with raper, Beatrice enacts a complete disavowal of familial structure, and an implicit disavowal of patriarchy. The act of rape strips Beatrice of all affective attachment to Francis. Moreover, because she has denied all attachment to him as a father, Beatrice can refuse the conviction of parricide, and can do so guiltlessly because Francis is the one responsible for the corruption of sensation. Beatrice affirms this in an intense moment of conflict with Lustra before the murder. Lustra warns Beatrice that “Murder’s unforgivable” (4.1.70), while Beatrice retorts, “To destroy love, that’s unforgivable” (4.1.71). The clashing of their voices in the simultaneous declamation of the word “unforgivable” emphasizes a deeper conflict in the issue of justification, that of retributive violence.

The concept of retributive violence is the second aspect of justification that Shelley explores in his play (and is also pursued in *Beatrice Chancy*). In his preface to *The Cenci*, Shelley evinces his preoccupation with what he calls the “restless and anatomizing casuistry” of the Cenci legend, where “men seek the justification of Beatrice, yet feel that she has done what needs justification” (“Preface” 731). Although Beatrice is a victim of her father’s criminal acts, she too becomes a criminal by orchestrating his

murder. Shelley was particularly interested in the moral complexity (and ultimately the tragic nature) of this circumstance. Can (or should) an audience exonerate Beatrice for the crime of parricide because of the abuse she suffers at the hands of her father? This is also a topical question in discourses of slavery in terms of the problems of rebellion: slaves must fight violence with violence in order to achieve freedom from their oppressors. This concept of questionable justice is part of the subtext of *Beatrice Chancy*, first alluded to in the biblical imagery of the opening ring shout and becomes a pivotal part of the finale.

The opera is ambivalent on the point of violence as a means to achieve liberation; for although Beatrice succeeds in the elimination of her father, she is still subjected to the violent control of the law. Yet in the finale, Beatrice is able to envision a new imagined community and a new existence of equality and freedom. In her final aria Beatrice entreats the memory of her suffering, “Remember that we craved only love, / That we were the light that blazed as love died” (4.2.18-19). Memory becomes the foundation for a new imagined community. Beatrice’s voice projects freedom as a reality, but one that is linked to the stark reality of death, evidenced by her adoption of the status of martyr: “Belovèd Jesus, take my blood, / Use it all to scour away our sins” (4.2.20-21). Only in death can this kind of liberation be achieved. This imagined potential, although it provides hope, does not excuse or exonerate acts of the past, nor does it subvert the violence of the narrative. As Clarke contends, “History is a moral force: one that indicts—and never absolves” (*Beatrice Chancy* 63).

Both Beatrice's final aria, with its cadences that invoke blues transcendence, and the final Freedom Chorus share a central characteristic of traditional sorrow songs—a quality of hope, where “the minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence” (DuBois 194). But to pursue a question initially raised by DuBois: “Is the hope found within the sorrow songs justified?” (194). The Freedom Chorus draws attention to a crisis of culture at the heart of Canadian national identity, where acts of racial violence are effaced in favour of an idealized discourse of tolerance and equality. But the opera, and particularly the Freedom Chorus, does not allow for these occlusions. Rather it engages the audience in a self-reflexive performance of communal remembering. As the performers disembody their characters and come to face the audience along with the musicians and conductor to finish the chorus, the polyphony of voices that engage in this traditional spiritual echo the voices of the past. In this act of embodiment the memory of these voices is brought into dynamic confrontation with the present and questions the future of liberationist struggle.

Conclusion: *Beatrice Chancy* as Postnational Opera

This study is valuable because it brings *Beatrice Chancy* into the discussion of postnational Canadian opera. Linda Hutcheon contends that the state of Canadian opera since the 1967 Centenary has been decidedly postnational. Her concept of postnational opera is based on Frank Davey's text *Postnational Arguments* and refers to a narrative preoccupation with ideas of nationhood and nationalism as they exhibit "treachery, betray, and actual or symbolic violence" (Hutcheon 237). Hutcheon maintains that since the surge in commissions of opera in 1967, Canadian operatic narratives, such as Sommers and Moore's *Louis Riel*, have evinced a "distrust...of the political, the social, and the national" (237). *Beatrice Chancy* similarly falls under this category. By re-embodiment a suppressed history of violence, the opera critiques Canada and its propagation of a "myth of nation that represents [itself] as a place of refuge, tolerance, and equality" (Moynagh 105). Many of the current Canadian operas being commissioned continue to address this postnational struggle including *Lillian Alling* (2010), by Estacio and Murrell and *Pauline* (projected for 2011), by Atwood and Hatzis. It is my intention to expand this project to encompass these new Canadian operas that continue to utilize the genre as a viable outlet for the contestation of discourses of Canadian identity.

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