

# ARCHIVAL MEMORIES – BETWEEN HISTORY AND EXPERIENCE

**Margherita Sprio**

In the film *Raining Stones* (1993), Ken Loach explores the complex anxieties experienced by the various family members when the daughter of the family is being prepared for her First Holy Communion. The devout father of the family, Bob (played by the actor Bruce Jones) goes to great lengths in order to gather the funds needed for the costly new Communion dress and the added accompaniments that make up the Holy Communion day. The daughter is the innocent onlooker, she bears witness to the parental struggles that can mark such occasions. This particular day remains special to the memory bank that stays with the Catholic daughter for life. The holy day acts as a backdrop to the poverty experienced by this particular Catholic community in the late 1980s in Britain. The out-of-work father is determined to buy his daughter a new Holy Communion dress rather than dress her in one previously worn (as suggested by his priest). We do not learn whether they are able to photograph the event – the narrative resolution is levelled at the emotional poverty of the environment and the roles that the various community members perform within it.

In a comparable way to the temporal image, photography requires performance, and the documenting of any family occasion is fraught with complexities. The occasion is experienced (and hence, remembered) in contradictory ways, by those who are being photographed. What are the photographs for? Who are they for? Colleen, the daughter in *Raining Stones*, is as excited about the prospect of dressing up as some of the daughters appear to be in the disregarded photographs collated here by Johnson. Equally, some of the narratives that accompany other photographs reveal contradictory voices to the smiling images that are being portrayed. Layered voices, our own, those performing within the photographs, those who took the photographs, those who disregarded the

photographs (gave them to junk shops, threw them away, sold them) and then finally Johnson, who retrieved the photographs, are all present here.

The aura of shyness is visible as a constant within these images. In Walter Benjamin's essay, *A Short History of Photography*, written in 1931, the strange weaving of space and time, the unique appearance of a semblance of distance (no matter how close the object may be) is how to begin to understand the photographic aura.<sup>1</sup>

The shy, childish faces in this work help to ask questions about the original photographer and the new viewing experience through Johnson's reconstruction.

The aura of the spaces previously occupied by these photographs, both literal and metaphorical, is what gives this work (as a whole) its edge of melancholia.

The sadness of time having passed, and of important moments rendered meaningless through the disregarding of the original photographs by their owners, adds sadness to an already performed world. Why were their owners prepared to give up on these photographs? What circumstances rendered it unnecessary to have these images around them?

Unrecognised family members have been tossed aside; others have been digitised and made 'real' once more.

That these same images can occupy such different marked spaces in their own right is what also gives Johnson's achievement here its prominence.

Although Johnson works with photographs that document the Holy Communion event for both sons and daughters, it is important to note that all of the written narratives that accompany the work are by daughters. The focus on the apparent bridal day operates at different levels for sons and daughters. The miniature wedding dress alludes to and colludes with specific sets of categorisation that remain with the child (of either gender) forever more. Additionally, all of the thirty-three confessions are daughters, and

women feature in every one of the photographs (occasionally there is a lone male priest among the young girls, see for example p. 26; in other photographs, a brother accompanies the girl when it is also his own Holy Communion).

Professional photographers construct some of the photographs resurrected by Johnson, and it is starkly possible to see the tools of their trade (the studio set-up, the contrived backdrops, the posed expressions, the banal physical posturing). Others are staged differently and probably taken by familial, intimate hands (posed for in the street, outside family houses, inside poorly lit rooms). Era and consequences may change slightly in this archive of Holy Communion photographs but some distinctions remain. Aesthetic principals are consistent, whether the photographs have been created by an experienced hand or by one that is assumed to be more subjective. The focus can vary from first-person close-up (final image of the series), to the daughter being at mid-range and alone at the centre of the frame (for example on p. 161), to a distant group shot (such as p. 15). One thing that all the photographs make apparent is the detailing of the paraphernalia that accompanied the Holy Communion dress – the white veil, the white gloves, the white shoes, the white socks or tights, the white bag. Curiously, it is often only possible to tell the period of the photograph because of the technological advances evidenced within the photographs or by the clothing of the non-participants of the Holy Communion – most of the white dresses are remarkably similar.

As Annette Kuhn has argued about her own family photographs, photographs are evidence and in order to show you what they are evidence of, a photograph must always point you away from itself.<sup>2</sup> She continues, 'but the fact that we experience our memories as peculiarly our own sets up a tension between the "personal" moment of memory and the social moment of making memory, or memorising; and indicates that the process of making meaning and making memories are characterised by a certain fluidity'.<sup>3</sup> The photographs in this work operate between history and experience, and they provide a fluid and anonymous

autobiography. Where once these images would have been displayed within the private location of home and other familial surroundings, their viewing is now held within an anonymous world. Despite this, what makes them so compelling? The sharp light that is shone upon those in white acts as a metaphor for the surveying, the witnessing that marks the Holy Communion day.

The confessions are divided into seven groups, each of which are enveloped within a particular thematic and continue for eighteen or more pages at a time. The first of these, 'Wash Me Clean from Every Stain of Sin', begins with an epic narrative image of a group of children caught off-guard while queuing to receive the holy bread; the stark shoulders complete with angel wings frames the right of the photograph. Partly evoking a possible still from a Pasolini film, such as the black-and-white *Mamma Roma* (1960), and also reminiscent of a moment possibly shared with those in the image, the photograph is more than a recorder of a Catholic ceremony. 'This Is My Body', the second part of the overall piece, is as with each of the seven sequences more easily narrativised via the accompanying 'confessions' than by the specifics of the photographs choreographed. 'I felt all day like a doll, which has just been taken out of its box, with its beautiful white clothes; a bridal doll I suppose' (p. 54). The third of the sequences, 'Blot Out My Iniquity', begins with one of the most moving images from the whole work. A close-up portrait of a child looking passively away from the camera as she holds up for display her rosary beads at the centre of the frame. The performative nature of the photograph, her white-gloved hands clasped together in mock prayer, the cross of her rosary positioned so that the circularity of the fingertips is redrawn through the circular decorativeness of the actual beads, all highlight the innocence that is both lost and gained through the Holy Communion experience.

If photography confirms death then this is most evidenced in the work in the fourth sequencing of these photographs, 'Have a Foretaste of Heaven'. In this section there is an echo of Siegfried Kracauer's assertion that photographic production devastates the

memory image.<sup>4</sup> Nameless daughters present themselves to be photographed, to perform a ritual that they themselves have little control over. As Colleen, the daughter in *Raining Stones*, is at the centre of a narrative that is more about the emotional poverty experienced by the world that surrounds her, so the images in this sequence frequent a world that is both lost and present to the contemporary sphere. The memory image that marks each of these works at both an individual and collective level leaves the viewer in a place of strangeness. Recognising the performative nature of an image such as that on p. 83, helps to foster an unease that is not easily digestible. The crinkled edges that help to date this image add to the deathly silence provoked by photographs of every form. The child stands in front of a statue of Christ whose hands are displayed outwards, while her white gloved hands cradle a candle. She stands to the right of the image so that the statue is given the central place in the frame. Her candle is tilted away from her face so that both faces (that of the statue and her own) are in full view. Her innocent smile is made complicated by the tilting of her left foot – how alone she stands, how recognisable is her strange white dress among the memory images that all recall the religious paraphernalia that surrounds her. Her facial expression is so very evocative of a thousand other photographs of children who have no control over the performed images that they are forced to take part in. Some of the other images that surround this one help to further emphasise this feeling of repetition and loss.

How do they do this? The silence in the image on p. 97 of the same sequence is disrupted by the testimonial of one of the confessors who compares the experience of the Holy Communion to that of other forms of meditation – ‘where you have to empty your room, empty your mind, then hope for something else’. This work and its specific order of sequencing, enables another space to be constructed. The muteness of the photographs is disrupted by the accompanying texts; the oral narratives that are part of the over-arching photographic project that is *FEAST*. The embittered silence that is communicated via Colleen in *Raining Stones* is often present in these images – enagement

often helps the daughters in the images come to life. In the same way that, despite its first impression for Benjamin Buchloh, in ‘Gerhard Richter’s Atlas’: ‘neither the private album of the amateur, nor the cumulative projects of documentary photography could identify the discursive order of this photographic collection’.<sup>5</sup>

The line of daughters dressed in white that opens this fifth section is enveloped by the harshness of the surrounding blackness. Within this section, ‘From the Abyss of My Nothingness I Adore Thee’, a more direct relationship between Johnson and Richter is made apparent. Both works establish ‘a cultural model of probing the possibilities of historical memory’<sup>6</sup> and what it is that remains at stake once these images, once cherished, become disregarded. The artist’s collecting (which continues<sup>7</sup>) of these disregarded photographs makes possible what once seemed impossible. A re-viewing of these photographs makes the viewer rethink the limits of photographic practice and its collation and archiving. What was once an intimate and hence important image of a Catholic rite of passage for any of the daughters in the images has now become an image for public consumption. The private moment of enagement for those being forced to perform in front of the camera has now become something once again cherished by the artist through this work.

The opening photograph that accompanies the sixth section, ‘Print Deep in My Soul the Memory of Thy Bitter Pains’, is one that shows a mother and daughter together. The bleached effect of the white dress is heightened by the serious and sensible nature of the dark coat worn by the adult. The bodies could easily have been superimposed next to one another, such is the harshness of the light source – one is forced to construct a narrative even when the actual relationship between the two women can never be known. This photograph makes visible Gillian Rose’s assertion that the everlasting melancholia (that provides the framework for the postmodern era that was the twentieth century) accurately monitors the refusal to let go.<sup>8</sup> What she calls ‘activity beyond activity’<sup>9</sup> is a useful way of engaging with Johnson’s project as a whole and with this section in particular. The constant

risk faced by posing and failing and posing again is present here – the work is audible and yet mute, it is mute and yet made audible.

In the seventh and final section, 'The Fruit of Each Mystery', a mute daughter poses alone in a garden; 'June 28 – 1939' is handwritten on the edge of her image. The sun is in her eyes, and like so many of the other daughters, she appears uncomfortable. Like the first photograph that opens this work, the final image in the Afterword leaves a haunted stain no matter how many times it is viewed and re-viewed. The pure white bow envelopes the pre-pubescent daughter's face and her sparkling eyes look beyond the viewer and into another world. A heavy, non-transparent head veil, additionally burdens the angelic tilting of the daughter's head, while also being reminiscent of Colleen's repetitive facial expressions in *Raining Stones*. How weighed down the daughter looks, how enraged by the demands of others – silence is the experience of space. Her lips are slightly parted as though she were wishing to speak – who could know what she would have wanted to say?

What Johnson has created here is supported by the Ricoeurian idea that the most valuable traces are those that were not intended for our information.<sup>10</sup> The known levels of critique applied to the found image, and those images that have previously been understood to be documenting an event remain at the level of involuntary testimony. But Johnson makes problematic the very notion of the testimony. The various types of testimonials or confessions made public in this work operate through and between the different voices that are being displayed both within and around the work. The work as gallery exhibit and the work as a book operate as diverse interchanges between then and now – time past/passed and present. The many Colleens, previously unnamed and newly christened, that appear in this archive, have been given a new and important airing in the world. Moments from other film stills collide with one's family-album pictures (not necessarily of Holy Communion ceremonies) and intermingle with reportage images, perhaps recognised from a multitude of other sources.

In Benjamin's seminal photographic essay (mentioned at the start of this piece<sup>11</sup>), he argues that every age has the passionate inclination of wanting to bring things closer to ourselves or to the masses – this is a useful idea in relation to the over-arching project that is *FEAST*. The more one scrutinises the individual images, the more one is left with the taste of a melancholic experience. The work as a whole acts a memorial to those past frozen moments, shown and re-shown to family, friends and other interested parties, that some time later pass into insignificance. The artist's decision to allow the viewer to get a closer look at the work, her re-creation of it in exhibition and book format, all make for an insightful journey. The question of the role of the historical document – how some images become more significant than others – acts as an entry point into the sadness of this journey.

The experience of each child and their frozen moment having been disregarded and once again re-regarded adds poignancy to this artwork that is very timely. What is the role of this kind of photographic experience in the digital age? The photographs in Johnson's work were printed and displayed – what of our digitised world? How might digitised images be consumed differently – how many of them are ever printed at all? What is perhaps most compelling about *FEAST* is that it marks a possible conclusion to an era when the image was invested with an aura that is not visible in the same way through the endless enhancements that are possible through digitisation. The faded appearance of some of the older images adds historical data to the anonymity of the original photograph (do others like it also exist and if so, why was this copy disregarded?). For Hal Foster the mega archive that is the internet is not necessarily the most appropriate place for archival art.<sup>12</sup> If this work could be labelled as 'archival art', what does its framing through this type of constructed reception (in book format) enable that would not otherwise be rendered possible?

The intimate reading of the body of photographs that is *FEAST* adopts the same coding of the First Communion book held in the hands of so many of the daughters in

the photographs. The holy book and the rosary beads are symbols of Catholic consumption that are passed on to the child on the Holy Communion day. Together with the taking of the bread, these cultural markers make the ritual of communion taking (and the assumed maturity that accompanies the Holy Communion day) entangled with the memory of the first occasion. The first taking of the bread, after the first taking part of the confession establishes that the child is now part of a different world order. They are now different to their non-Catholic friends and different again to the child they once were. The shyness (about the rituals that accompany the Holy Communion day) is made apparent through the hands clasping the prayer book which we are being drawn to. As is apparent in the text that accompanies p. 154, the present-giving that is part of the occasion is mystifying to the child (it is neither their birthday or Christmas, but there is a party, a cake and usually plenty of food).

The child's reaction to being at the centre of attention for that day is pivotal to their subsequent memory of the occasion. Our own engagement with the work is specific to the faces we are never able to fully know. Questions of memory are historicised in a variety of forms – this work gives visual focus to identities that would otherwise have been lost or even destroyed forever. The constructions of identities that are deemed worthy of scrutiny are often privileged through the remaining remnant of lives once lived. Photographs, of course play a huge role in the constructions of these histories. The anonymous faces that formulate the many images within *FEAST* present us, the viewers, with questions that we cannot answer. We shall never know who these faces belonged to, what their names were and how their frozen moment became something to disregard. The quality of the re-displaying of this work asks further questions of photography (in the digital age) but little can be added about those who are performing in the images that we address.

For Nicholas Bourriaud this type of art is 'post-production'; the secondary manipulation that creates its very being is innately present in the work.<sup>13</sup> The

visibility given to these faces has only been made possible through Johnson's intervention – her voice is of course, also present with those of the confessors. The unnamed faces remain locked in their anonymity until now, when we can at least restore them a place in our minds. The experience of the continual address now made possible through this 'post-produced' work gives it the authority that a disregarded set of photographs would not have had. Curiosity could have given way to disinterest in images already disregarded and here we are once more able to (continually) look. The (sacred) book format, the texts and the images – all lend an air of importance that is imperative to the original experience of the Holy Communion day. The authorial nature of the rituals rehearsed through the holy day are bound up in the consumption of its recording through the photograph – however, this authority escapes into anonymity through the passing of time. Once cherished, now these images are in need of artistic intervention to afford them restoration to their rightful place. Johnson has understood this and has incorporated questions of authority within the construction of both the images and the accompanying texts.

The re-working of the ready-made has a particular and special place in the world of artistic production and some of these histories are better known to us than others. This (personal) history, enveloped in anonymity – the familial resemblance that is coded in the knowledge held by our most immediate family members – is given visibility here. Equally, the many histories of news reportage come with an authority of purpose – one whose premise is too often not questioned. Family photographs came with no such authority – until now. Johnson's welding of identities from a range of eras, while enabling other kinds of voices to co-exist (via the oral narratives that accompany the images) re-figures the work in such a way that it is both part of us and outside of us. *FEAST* has the ability to wound us, to stay with us and to mark us forever. Barthes's idea that a photograph can wound us is made experiential in this work – his writings on photography and mourning are critical to an engagement with private photography (images from the

family album) being made public.<sup>14</sup> His own writings about the experience of photography are, in part, through the creation of a memoir of the death of his mother.<sup>15</sup>

When this book is eventually closed, some of the questions *FEAST* evokes remain open. The photographs continue to haunt the onlooker in a similar way to the pained face of Colleen in *Raining Stones*, when she realises the pressures her parents are under in their attempts to ensure that she has a new Communion dress for her First Holy Communion day. The haunting associated with loss is present in all photography and its presence in those images intended for private consumption can make the viewer feel uncomfortable. The more one feels engaged with the level of intimacy demanded by this work, the more one's relationship with it feels disturbed. This disturbance operates at the level of the psychic as well as that of the physical. The ghosting of the present forces one to negotiate with the past, and *FEAST* is a living embodiment of how to experience mourning through the visual. To be visible is to be forever present – the confessions here live on in ways that would have been unimaginable to them. The indelible traces that leave the viewer once the work is away from the gaze live on in the space between history and experience. The non-authority originally

experienced by the individual photographs is confronted by the collective endeavour that is made possible through this artistic practice. The newly constructed authority is made present in the rapport that one develops with the unnamed faces and the oral narratives that give structure to the images. The stories that literally surround the images help to evoke signification that might not otherwise be there – equally, the seven sequences give order to lives that might have, otherwise remained without it.

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## Notes

- 1 Walter Benjamin, reprinted in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, CT: Leete's Island Books, 1980).
- 2 Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets, Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London: Verso, 1995, 2002), p. 13.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 4 See Siegfried Kracauer, 'Photography' (1927), in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. and trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).
- 5 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 'Gerhard Richter's Atlas: The Anomic Archive' (1993), in *Deep Storage*, ed. Ingrid Schaffner and Matthias Winzen (Munich and New York: Prestel, 1998).
- 6 A shorter version of the original essay is reprinted in *The Archive, Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Charles Merewether (London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), p. 85.
- 7 Personal interview conducted with the artist Christy Johnson in London, 15 December 2006.
- 8 Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 11.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 10 *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 117. English trans. of Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, vol. 3 (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1978).
- 11 See n.1 above.
- 12 Hal Foster, 'An Archival Impulse', *October*, 110 (Fall 2004), p. 21.
- 13 See Nicholas Bourriaud, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Lukas and Sternberg, 2002).
- 14 See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York, Hill and Wang, 1981).
- 15 *Ibid.*



# RETRIEVAL AND TRANSMITTAL IN A FICTIVE PHOTOGRAPHIC EXPERIENCE

Catherine Clinger

On the twenty-eighth day of May in 1894, an Italian photographer Secondo Pia saw a face at the bottom of his developing tray. Right before his eyes, the negative of a photograph of the Shroud of Turin was 'becoming' the indicator of a catastrophic holy event. In its state as the photographically conjured mirror image on ancient cloth, the death mask of Christ appeared through solarisation; converted into a picture of the negation of life as well as light. 'It tells nothing in itself about its origin', states Georges Didi-Huberman in his seminal article on the relic.<sup>1</sup> The critic claimed the shroud documented a trace; a subtle, but an undeniable physicality lending it a material legitimacy and, at the same time, destabilising the claim for miracle. Does Christy Johnson empower images through her digitisation of private memorials to perform similarly? Do the retrieved communion photographs of young Catholic females both document and dispute a holy occasion? One witness to Johnson's process of requisition of the recovered images might not think so, and I believe he was wrong.

'I need to get out of here', said the man fleeing the studio space whose walls displayed testimonials to a fictitious act of divine cannibalism (Fig. 1). It is difficult to imagine a man being so frightened of virgin brides of Christ that he would literally run up a flight of stairs in order to escape the presence of their inky stare. Even more perplexing is that the fearsome virgins, several long since departed, were digital prints from scanned images of found photographs. These powerful harpies are in long-term storage, their survival contingent upon the durability of the paper and dyes that accommodate them. The girls – dressed in white and wearing expressions of beatitude, fear or loathing – surely were unable to harm the man physically, although one supposes their recent feast upon the flesh of a man-god could explain the fleeing man's unfocused dread. Those



Fig. 1

subtle lips and the chaste intestines hidden under young skin (and doubly veiled by the ritual garment of First Communion) had recently received and digested flesh and blood. When the agitated man arrived in the living quarters at the top of the stairs, he registered his extreme reaction as the result of his rejection of their legitimacy as art objects. He did not admit to any anxiety other than that of aesthetic repulsion.

The setting for this gothic tale of monster virgins and cursory judgement was an artist's studio in Bethnal Green, London. Too bad the event wasn't captured on film, like the monsters, so that the recording could provide evidence for the theory that visceral social analysis tends to 'displace attention from the photograph itself'.<sup>2</sup> The original for each of the large digital prints was itself displaced. The images are only a few of the more than three hundred First Communion commemorative pictures collected by artist Christy Johnson. Presumably, most resided at one time in a family album or on a mantelpiece, then were passed down to heirs, discarded upon death, thrown away or sold, eventually finding their way to bins and boxes in markets, junk shops, antique and book stores in New

York, London, Paris, Rome, Prague, Berlin, Vienna, Los Angeles ... and Santa Fe, New Mexico.

After meticulous archiving by the artist, the photographs were then matched with text generated from a series of interviews with thirty-three women ranging from the age of eight to eighty who had partaken of First Communion – the ultimate takeaway – an ecclesiolatric, mnemonic devotion consisting of the consumption of a son whose father had ritually sacrificed him. Through the miracle of Transubstantiation, his flesh and blood remain hidden in the form of a stale biscuit known as the Host. The Catholic dogma of the Real Presence advocates that Christ meta-spatially occupies the material substance of the bread. The Host consists of wheat flour and water that has been baked at 120°C by nuns on a flat iron pan, then steamed and cut into specified sizes using a stamping process. Despite the possibility of killing a member of the flock with a severe wheat allergy, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in August 2004 made firm the requirement for the grain's inclusion in the communion host. On the Vatican's behalf, Father Williams stated, 'the church would not deliberately attempt to poison its communicant members' – although Father Tony Doherty of St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney, Australia suggested that 'the Vatican's instruction reflected a Latin-American mindset that considered gluten-free hosts an expression of *American excess*', thus signalling another dietetic rift in the international community.<sup>3</sup> Apparently the host production process is delicate – any sudden change in temperature will spoil the batch, so an infernal presence would likely not be welcome – hence, it is doubtful Father Doherty would be allowed into the wafer kitchen of a Carmelite convent in Guatemala.

The sacrilege of desecrating the unlikely Host of such a celebrated Guest is a major topic in the catechism preparing the youth for Communion. The ubiquitous anecdote of the over-heated or overly-excited child involuntarily heaving up the Host and the ensuing thrashing by a nun or priest as punishment for such a heinous act figures prominently in Catholic oral

folklore. Contributing a more provocative yarn, one of the women interviewed by Johnson recalls a story invented during World War II that told of Nazi soldiers who entered a Catholic church and stomped on the Host resulting in a torrent of blood gushing out from under their boots – a malodorous reversal of the event in Genesis 3.14–15, a popular typological tale in fifteenth-century picture-books of the *Biblia Pauperum*, where the serpent who successfully tempted the Original Sinners was warned that it would be his head that found itself crushed under the heel of a woman. The implausibility of such phenomena must be hard for the priest to explain to a young child, 'when I say Body of Christ, don't think you're actually going to eat Jesus Christ's little finger'. The woman who recalled this pearl of priestly wisdom said she could not get that image out of her head. 'I was completely OK with the symbolism before he tried to dismantle it.'<sup>4</sup>

The re-enactment of the Last Supper before the mystical slaying is not the matter the children are supposed to focus on – instead they are to concentrate on the separation of the blood (wine) from the flesh (bread) that symbolises the sacrifice of the man-god. His death is equated with the liquidity of a spirit leaving a vessel. This action of haemorrhage is remedied by the provision of a new vessel, the communicant. By concentrating on the two materials rendered apart from one another, the supplicant performs a gastronomic remembrance of the physical form of the sacrifice. It wasn't the killing of the divine progeny by the Roman soldiers or asphyxiation on the cross; it was bucking up and swallowing his fate, his *surrender* to bloodletting, that is to be remembered by the child trying not to think of the wafer as Jesus' little finger. 'By the power of the Holy Spirit, the bread would turn into, symbolically and energetically, the Body of Christ ... I do remember the three persons and all of that and just trying to, trying to grasp the concept of the Trinity. It blew the sockets in my brain. It was too big for me to understand, so you just sort of had to accept it.'<sup>5</sup>

In a rite of secular remembrance, the artist transcribed over one hundred and seventy-five pages of taped dialogue with the help of editor Victoria Millar of

Bloomsbury Publishing. When the two women sat down to edit the transcription, they re-enacted the interview, performing the dialogue together so as to reclaim the conversational quality of the discourse while they minimised the intervention of the interrogator and left the answers intact. They did not rewrite or remove anything from the responses except for the occasional 'h-mm' or pause for breath. No one put words into anyone's mouth ... except the interviewees themselves, who entered the photographs by way of a subversive dialectic structure, thus sanctioning the real experience of the repressed object in the image rather than subjecting herself and her chemically encapsulated counterpart once again to the fiction pictured by the surveillant authority. The mechanism for authority was the trade photographer who transubstantiated not the body of Christ but the virgin's spiritual passage to adulthood without tangible penetration by anything other than wheat, water and wine. He adopted the role of the priest in his quest to materialise the spiritual in a fabricated after-glow following her opening act of ritualised anthropophagy. Strangers to one another, interviewee and pictured communicant unwittingly conspired to create an authentic fictional state through the fusion of a factual document with a true story. Johnson assembled these two distinct archives into the artist's book *FEAST* and, together they tell a multifarious tale of seduction, revulsion and redemption.

Returning to the Shroud of Turin ... the image of the Christ countenance was created, as the story goes, through direct physical contact. It is, in a sense, the negation of the iconic through touch. Secondo Pia's photograph of the Shroud is only a document; the image provides proof of touch. In anthropological science, evidence is sought to support or document cultural practice – and in Western tradition, it is the archive that substitutes for the real subject. Rejecting the 1980s model of the objective archivist/ anthropologist artist (over-used to the point of pointlessness in the 1990s), Johnson commandeered these commemorative documents and refused to dismiss them as afterthoughts. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes declares that the 'death of the subject' is

evidenced in objective studio portrait photography, where the photographer is absent as narrator and the subject is recorded without symbolic value.<sup>6</sup> In the *FEAST* project, the narrator, 'nobody', is resurrected as 'somebody' in the text of memories. Johnson's reinstatement of irony in the act of appropriation, in a sense, restores subjectivity to its rightful place in structured arrangements that are 'firmly embedded in the particular and the real rather than the universal and symbolic'.<sup>7</sup> Her gesture of exposure, however, is a Romantic trope not an anthropological one, thus the particular becomes peculiar and the real, imaginary. In Johnson's method of fieldwork, the subject of the photograph is not interviewed and, the interviewee is not photographed. This would not please Margaret Mead who said the best method for telling others' stories was to accompany the text with a picture or film of the actual narrator.<sup>8</sup> Michael Taussig suggests that most ethnography tells other peoples' stories rather badly and *FEAST* steers clear of this methodological blunder.<sup>9</sup>

As evidenced by the reaction of the man in the studio space, however, clearly this was not a Boltanski site for shared collective memory. Unlike an exhibition of private materials by Christian Boltanski, a self-styled recycler artist, the *FEAST* project does not try to 'create democratic kinds of cultural identification' (pp. 150–1).<sup>10</sup> Johnson did not show the interviewees the First Communion pictures. They were not reacting to, or identifying with anything other than their own experiences. The women interviewed – American, Colombian, East Indian, English, Irish, Italian, Mexican, Polish and South African – were humorous as well as reflective. The photographs can be amusing too. On pp. 58–9 of *FEAST*, I am certain that we are looking at Björk at the opening ceremony of the 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens, who tells us, 'It's a funny affair this Communion thing because first of all you stand outside of yourself and examine your conscience, as Marcus Aurelius did, like a Roman general, and then the next day you turn up like a Baroque marshmallow.'<sup>11</sup> Sometimes the comedy is disconcerting, 'Getting seven-year-olds to examine their conscience must be kind of funny. You had a list of sins and you asked yourself



Fig. 2



Fig. 3 bpk/Hamburger Kunsthalle Photo: Elke Walford

whether you'd committed any of these. Of course you were horrified to find that, because the list had been specially prepared for seven-year-olds, you'd committed all of them.<sup>12</sup> It was not until 1910, when the age was lowered to seven years old, that the Church allowed children younger than twelve to attend First Communion. In France, employers required proof of this rite of passage to adulthood and one must worry why the age limit was lowered.<sup>13</sup>

Johnson's treatment of the transition from childhood to adulthood through the socially identified circumstance of a shared meal in a religious context is without guile. Her engagement with the text and image is skilful, yet she does not attempt to construct a narrative out of some covert, postmodern position. However, there is a theoretical attitude embedded in the work. Johnson insists on the priority of seeing the subjects as autonomous beings, in the spirit of Adorno's *Sache* and in the process of cultural reformation through a dialectic structure.<sup>14</sup> The theorist Baudrillard committed the blunder – which a theorist sometimes does in order to make his or her theory more

plausible – of distorting the character of an image through dislocation. In *FEAST*, there is dislocation, however, distortion is absent. The historian of photography, Geoffrey Batchen, states notably that 'we need to invent a way of dealing with the photographs that emulates its own way of being, that acknowledges rather than represses photography's particular qualities and characteristics'.<sup>15</sup> The photograph of the Shroud allows us to discern, sift and decide what it is that happened. Its particular quality of detail is a commemoration that acts as an anthropologist would – archiving the event through documentation. By combining the archive of commemorative images with one of text shaped by interviews with invisible communicants, Christy Johnson invents a fictive location of experience and memory – a buffered space that shields the girls and the women from the social, religious and familial forces.

Children did not always go to First Communion with the full blessings of the parents. Communist party members in Italy who rejected Catholic principles still allowed their children to participate in communal rites

of passage; they tried to supply new ones in the 1950s but failed.<sup>16</sup> The French Socialists came closer to relinquishing the symbolic rituals so beloved by them. Early in the century, they invented a new holiday to replace Whitsunday, a favourite time for the Communion ceremony, with the 'Feast of Reason' substituting a diet of knowledge for the consumption of a deity. In Paris, the hostility towards the Church had grown to the extent that the tone was 'the worst it had been in twenty-five years' and this is supported by the author of an 1904 article in *The American Journal of Theology* (he asked then that his name be withheld), who stated that 'clergymen are treated as rebels and their monks and nuns as outlaws'.<sup>17</sup> The abuses of the Church in 1904 were seen as universal not personal. Citizens of France in the first quarter of the century objected to the moral education of children in the guise of secular pedagogy. In the late twentieth century, the laity's hostility developed out of reports that aberrant priests were providing a less sacred lesson for their young flock.

Often, the FEAST images are starkly beautiful, and one cannot help but to fall in love with some of the young women who appear haunted, noble, pure or immensely happy. A number of the ephemera are beautiful as objects and they evoke memories of other works on paper, such as the image with a faux spider-web treatment on the gossamer overleaf protecting the photograph's surface (Fig. 2). The network of lines reminds one at once of Odilon Redon's *Reader of the Ramayana* (1869) or the melancholic woodcut of Caspar David Friedrich's *Woman beneath the Web* (Fig.3). Some Church Fathers have used the spider's web as a metaphor for their descriptions of the doctrine of Emanation; the word from the Latin *emanare*, 'to flow from'. The image of water from a spring and light from the sun have been used to describe the doctrine; however, use of the spider's web as an example is unique in that the emanation produces a dwelling at best and, at worst, a deadly snare. The Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 roundly condemned the doctrine of Emanation. At the same time, they took care of other business such as confirming the requirement of Jews and Muslims to wear special dress



Fig.4

in order to distinguish them from Christians (Canons 78 and 79) and, creating the rules of engagement for the anticipated crusades to follow.<sup>18</sup> Emanation was seen as an excessively mystical metaphor that could interfere with both exclusionary and expansionist agendas.

Needless to say, the doctrine of Emanation (giving off) is not taught in the catechism, only the idea of consumption (taking in) of a man-god's flesh and blood through remembrance (giving in). In *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), Sigmund Freud believed the consumption of the son gave rise to the consciousness of guilt prevalent in Christianised Europe; though it didn't seem to prevent events that should have warranted remorse. 'I remember something about them telling us that our soul – was it our soul? Yeah, it was – was like this white mass ... with lots of little black dots on, which were the sins. And there was always loads of black and you had to try and get rid of all the black' (Fig.4).<sup>19</sup>

Avicenna, the Persian philosopher/physician, celebrated the release of the Soul in his *Treatise of the Bird (Risālat at-Tair)*.<sup>20</sup> His story tells of doves who, when ensnared by hunters, grow complaisant in captivity until a few succeed in escaping the net and the others long to follow. The story is an allegory for the soul's (the spiritual world) containment in the body (the material world). It is the remembrance of the protected park (heaven) that invests the bird with the longing to ascend and eschew captivity. Avicenna states that the gain of metaphysical knowledge reminds the soul of its origin and longing signals its desire to return to the Godhead. This early Islamic idea differs radically from the Christian Doctrine of Original Sin that was generated from the famed consumption of fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. Guilt is not associated with the ingestion of knowledge according to Avicenna. It is in the abuse of intelligence that Avicenna finds fault. 'It's used for weddings, first communions, baptisms, you know, very special occasions. So, she made me that cake and then she made a birdhouse out of sugar ... It looked like lace, the little birdhouse. And it had little doves going in and out ... A complete birdhouse, because you're receiving a form of the Holy Spirit when you do your First Communion. Everything with religion for me is like the white bird, you know: peaceful, pure, white.'<sup>21</sup> Christy Johnson's *FEAST* is a birdhouse that doesn't ensnare the doves – rather it releases them. Too bad the man running up the stairs was afraid of birds.

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## Notes

- 1 Georges Didi-Huberman, 'The Index of the Absent Wound (Monograph on a Stain)', *October*, 29 (Summer 1984), pp. 63–81.
- 2 Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), p. 10.
- 3 Barney Zwartz, 'Wafers must have wheat, says Vatican', *The Age*, 20 August 2004.
- 4 Christy Johnson, see p. 88 of this volume.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- 6 Barthes suggests photography suppresses narration. However, Baudrillard claims that historical photographs like historical objects function only to suppress time. He also argues that collecting such objects is too concrete and discontinuous for the collection to create texts, that they can only be possessed. See Jean Baudrillard, *System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 1996), p. 106.
- 7 Sheryl Conkelton, 'The Deceptive Play of the Individual, or In the Archive', in *Deep Storage*, ed. Ingrid Schaffner and Mätthias Winzen (Munich and New York: Prestel, 1998).
- 8 Margaret Mead, 'Visual Anthropology in a Discipline of Words', in *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, ed. Paul Hockings (The Hague: Mouton, 1975).
- 9 Michael Taussig, from author's notes at *Fieldworks*, a symposium at the Tate Modern, London, 27 September 2003.
- 10 Rebecca J. DeRoo, 'Christian Boltanski's Memory Images: Remaking French Museums in the Aftermath of '68', *Oxford Art Journal*, 27, 2 (2004), pp. 219–38. See also Didier Semin, Donald Kuspit and Tamar Garb, *Christian Boltanski* (London: Phaidon, 1997).
- 11 Christy Johnson, see p. 59 of this volume.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- 13 Ralph Gibson, *A Social History of French Catholicism 1789–1914* (New York: Routledge, 1979), p. 165.
- 14 Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Routledge, 1973), p. 144. Baudrillard uses visual representations accompanied by discursive verbal texts to give an account of postmodern uses of the photograph.
- 15 Geoffrey Batchen quoted in Brian Dillon, 'Forget Me Not: An Interview with Geoffrey Batchen', *Cabinet*, 14 (Summer 2004), pp. 40–2.
- 16 David I. Kertzer, 'The Liberation of Evelina Zaghi: The Life of an Italian Communist', *Signs*, 8, 1 (Autumn 1982), pp. 45–67.
- 17 A. G. B., 'The Religious Situation in Paris (July–August 1903)', *The American Journal of Theology*, 8, 1 (January 1904), p. 1.
- 18 *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Heinrich Denzinger (St Louis, MO: Herder, 1957). English trans. of Roy Deferrari, *Enchiridion Symbolorum et Definitionum* (Würzburg: Sumptibus Stahelianis, 1854).
- 19 Christy Johnson, see p. 31 of this volume.
- 20 Abu Ali al-Husain ibn Abdallah ibn Sina (973–1037), one of the leading philosophers of the golden age of Islamic tradition was born in present-day Uzbekistan and died in his adopted Persia (Iran). His influence on intellectual thought was immense, from Thomas Aquinas to Spinoza. He was a master of mathematics, physics and medical science. His treatises on the Soul and Love are among the most beautiful of philosophical texts.
- 21 Christy Johnson, see pp. 174–5 of this volume.



# ALL IN WHITE FOR THE FEAST: WHITENESS IN THE CHRISTIAN IMAGINARY

**Jenny Dagers**

The Mass is a dramatic performance that is at one and the same time an incarnation, a crucifixion, a resurrection, a birth, a wedding and a feast.<sup>1</sup>

Christy Johnson's *FEAST* is rich fare indeed. Clinger's intriguing musings reflect on photographs of First Communicants, which she perceives as being divested of their symbolic value through their relocation by Johnson in the discursive site of *FEAST*. In contrast, this essay reappropriates both images and text for the Christian imaginary, and enquires of their symbolism in that context.

Johnson's *FEAST* is an abundant panorama of symbolism and imagery associated with the liturgical event of Catholic First Communion. An over-riding impression, on viewing images and reading text, is of whiteness. Adolescent girls, in the older images, are succeeded by little girls of six to eight years, all caught by the camera in their dresses of white. Some wear veils, some carry lighted candles, others are set against an arrangement of flowers, often white lilies. One figure attracts my gaze – a white girl dressed in white with both lighted candle and lilies (p. 163). A text catches my attention – the recounted experience of a girl, her photograph an epiphany of herself as a single brown face immersed in white veils, dresses and faces: this sole black witness tells of how odd she felt to be 'the only little brown face stuck in a sea of white faces'. After fasting to cleanse body and soul her thought was 'Well, I haven't changed colour so I can't be pure'. She, with her brown mum and white dad, had never before seen herself 'as a colour' (p. 27).

Her transgression of normative whiteness is reflected in only two images and one other confession within the entire collection: here the colour symbolism is

ambiguous – a black girl in a white dress ... boys of colour, some in frilly white shirts (p. 70); there the confessor remembers being called 'La Negrita Consentita' by her grandmother; 'I was the favourite grandchild ... And I think it had to do with being the darkest one'; the confession perfectly matched by the image (p. 28). But these instances disturb an otherwise consistent gender symbolism: (white) girl in white dress; (white) boy in black.

One confessor remembers being told the soul was like a white mass, covered in black dots – your sins – which you must eradicate (p. 31); just as the perfect dress must remain unmarked, and unspoilt. Another tells how the whiteness of the lily or dress 'always signifies purity' (p. 15). Yet another speaks of feeling cleansed that day (p. 25). On the one hand, the flowers were themselves symbolic of the child in white: 'you were an angel, a flower' (p. 108). On the other, the imagery blends the poetry of the late Franciscan saints, where flowers fall from heaven, lilies and roses, with the pagan spring rituals of the May Queen, taken up into mariological May celebrations – 'Oh Mary we crown thee with blossoms today' – the wearing of white at Whit festivals, all associated with the young girl in her dress. This voice confirms the link between the First Communicant's dress, and the white dress already worn in the Whit procession (pp. 110–11).

Another confession discloses the subject's naive attempt at living her married life in the image of the Virgin: 'When I first got married, I thought I had to be pure, just like Mary. I didn't think sex was part of marriage ... I wanted to be just like her' (p. 52). Yet another voice established the link between the First Communion dress and the white wedding dress: 'it's something about the significance of white that happens again when you get married ... whether it's the lily or

the dress or whatever, it always signifies purity (p. 15)'. The wedding symbolism is powerfully present in one (com)posed studio photograph: First Communicant girl and boy stand alongside, facing the camera, each holding candle and book; she in white, he in black. But, between them and behind, is an altar with the figures of Mary and Jesus, placed either side of a crucifix. The wedding trope is thus interrupted, by the Mother–Son relationship binding Second Eve with Second Adam (p. 102).

As with the slide from Franciscan to pagan imagery, the bridal references slip into other meanings, crossing and recrossing the boundaries of a distinctive Christian imaginary. For the little girl drawn into romantic dressing up, 'there's a slightly bridal thing, but also a sort of princess thing, you know ... being really special' (p. 48). And again, 'the bridal thing' but also 'a sacrificial lamb thing as well, because lambs are white and fluffy and you're going up to eat the Lamb of God' (p. 117).

Then a different genre of bridal imagery appears, steeped in the mystical tradition, where the bridal experience is infused with St Teresa of Avila's breast pierced by the shaft of burning love, a kind of eroticism where celibate nuns keep themselves for Jesus, spousa and spouse. 'There's something erotic in terms of the look – the gaze' (p. 118). Here the little girl is the 'archetypal spousa', 'the image of the purity of the soul' (p. 121).

An altogether different kind of slippage is evident in the reflection: 'this row of very pretty little brides ... looked so good in that dark, ecclesiastical kind of way ... there is that kind of slightly sado-erotic-y sexual thing of a woman in white in a dark, dark space. Strange' (p. 117). One commented that the religious experience, the church, the confessional, is dark (p. 65), whereas for another religion is 'peaceful, pure, white' (p. 174).

Entwined in image and text, and deeply embedded in the Christian imaginary, lie over-determined Eurocentric notions of whiteness in relation to purity, sexuality and the continuing discourse of 'race', these three being themselves entangled. The Platonic binary,

light and dark, with light as the superior, elevated term, informs the binary white and black of the self-confident racial discourse arising from the nineteenth-century colonial heyday. Notions of purity are already implicated here, as epitomised in the imagery of whiteness and purity associated with the marketing of cleansing products, where the inferior black body was portrayed as scrubbed 'white' and therefore clean.<sup>2</sup> Sexuality also already animates this racialised binary.

According to Alistair Bonnett, as early as the period 1890 to 1930, white self-confidence was giving way to white crisis, evident in a growing literature attempting to defend and affirm white identity.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, a renewed discourse of 'whiteness' in the final decade of the twentieth-century again attempts to problematise whiteness as the unmarked norm, or, as Mason Boyd Stokes puts it, to place critical emphasis on whiteness 'as a form of textual, political and sexual anxiety'.<sup>4</sup> Despite the focus of both early and late twentieth century discourses on (differently perceived) problematics of 'race', entwining of purity issues and questions of sexuality with anxieties around whiteness is palpable. Thus, for Stokes, whiteness is situated 'within a larger system of oppressive and normalizing structures',<sup>5</sup> with heterosexuality being the main ally in its normalising mission. Richard Dyer makes a stronger case for heterosexuality as 'the cradle of whiteness',<sup>6</sup> with concepts of race being 'always concepts of the body and of heterosexuality'.<sup>7</sup> Stokes points out the 'amalgamationist terror' evident in nineteenth-century racial theory, and explores the way in which white women become silent markers in the homosocial systems of exchange that produce both whiteness and heterosexuality as cultural givens.<sup>8</sup> Women's subjectivity is severely curtailed by their location in this masculine white supremacist and heterosexual symbolic order.

Stokes focuses attention on the significance of the shift from 'reproduction-based' to 'pleasure-based' heterosexuality, wherein heterosexuality is simultaneously the means of ensuring, and the site of endangering, the reproduction of 'racial' difference.<sup>9</sup> A slogan adopted in 1885 by the Women's Christian

Temperance Union, in the US, exemplifies not only this relation between whiteness and heterosexuality, but also whiteness as a symbol of Purity. As D'Emilio and Freedman point out, the slogan, 'The White Life for Two' signals the centrality of heterosexuality to maintaining both the white race, and a white – in the sense of pure – morality.<sup>10</sup> Yet racist fears of 'amalgamation' highlight the fact that 'to reproduce whiteness sexually is to risk contamination', and thus, paradoxically, homoeroticism becomes the only structure of desire that can be sure to keep whiteness white.<sup>11</sup>

There have been historical moments when the Christian imaginary has been seduced by racial theory, and annexed to the racist cause. Toni Morrison perceives an unacknowledged, but never silent, Africanist presence, or blackness, as underpinning the [American] white literary imagination of freedom, autonomy and individualism.<sup>12</sup> Stokes examines nineteenth-century racist renderings of the Eden Genesis myth, and concludes, in the light of Morrison's insight, that retellings of the Eden mythos, which portray a black tempter in the garden, are central to the American imagination.<sup>13</sup> The history of apartheid in South Africa is a second example of racist appropriation of Christian imagery, also now discredited.

A welcome counterbalance is supplied by Brigalia Bam's figuration of the 'Mitochondrial Eve' as the black woman of Africa, common mother of the human race.<sup>14</sup> Here humanity's debt to blackness is made explicit in figuring the mother of the race as black, in contrast with the amalgamationist horror of the pure, white Eve, in danger of contamination by the black tempter. Here, too, the white–black binary relation is subverted.

As David Roediger puts it, whiteness is the 'terrifying attempt to build an identity based on what one isn't and on whom one can hold back'.<sup>15</sup> White symbolises the light, and black the dark: light, white and sacred stand over against dark, black and the profane. It is clear that Christianity has been implicated in the binary of light and dark, as it has informed normative

whiteness, heterosexuality and purity. Under the conditions of late modernity, the binary relation between light and dark, man and woman, pure and impure dissolves, allowing us to glimpse new possibilities in relationality and therefore in subjectivity. Is Christ, the light of the world, locked within this crumbling binary?

Peter McGrail, in his study of First Communion, investigates the way in which 'the community's self-understanding, and its concerns, filter through the highly permeable boundaries of the ritual and become embedded in the event'.<sup>16</sup> McGrail examines the competing discourses dispersed within the discursive space of the First Communion ritual.<sup>17</sup> Traditional ecclesiastical discourse demonstrates anxiety over the potentiality for a sacrilegious First Communion. An example of this anxiety is the cautionary tale rendered by Mary Loyola, in 1896. A girl eats a chocolate on her way to First Communion; ignoring warnings from her guardian angel, she approaches the communion rail 'in her white dress, her white veil and her wreath ... her soul dead in that whited sepulchre'.<sup>18</sup>

However, McGrail argues that 'the broad range of mortal sins found in the early texts is ... reduced to a single focus upon sexual fallibility',<sup>19</sup> providing the impetus for the *Quam Singulari* reform of 1910 'to permit the reduction in age that guaranteed innocence'.<sup>20</sup> As McGrail demonstrates, even as Catholic primary school children in the 1990s are taught that light and a new garment are symbols of initiation into the faith,<sup>21</sup> the reality for many who take part in the First Communion is that this is an elaborate social, as opposed to religious ritual. Thus a mother, herself never married, inducts her young daughter into womanhood through the wearing of a substitute wedding dress that she, the mother, has never worn.<sup>22</sup>

McGrail's study can be read as a document of the decline in the power of the Catholic imaginary, as given expression in the Mass, to capture the imagination of contemporary Catholics undergoing the formal process of induction into the faith. But, elsewhere, the conditions of late modernity are bringing about imaginative refigurations of Catholic sacramentality.

Morrison's identification of the black surrogacy that underpins the white literary imagination, is reminiscent of the insights of both Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva in recognising the unacknowledged cultural debt to the mother in a social order founded on matricide (Irigaray), and the secret, or phallic, mother (Kristeva). Kristeva's work elucidates my use of the terms 'imagination' and 'imaginary'. In suggesting that the psychoanalytic subject be understood as a 'work in progress', Kristeva, recommends imaginary, imaginative speaking and writing to support this fluidity of identity.<sup>23</sup> Though pessimistic about the possibility of feminine subjectivity, Kristeva is clear that 'in the imaginary, maternal continuity is what guarantees identity'. The imagination of the work of art is an inhuman substitution for the continuing, yet unacknowledged, dependence of the (now adult) child upon the mother: this sublimation is constructed upon the secret mother.<sup>24</sup> The subject participating in Christian liturgy may be seen as such a 'work in progress', if symbol and liturgical performance are situated in place of Kristeva's 'art'.

Kristeva's pessimism over the prospects of women's subjectivity contrasts with Melissa Raphael's theological perspective.<sup>25</sup> Raphael's project is the redrawing of boundaries between the sacred and profane, by means of the feminist spirituality associated with the Goddess. As Cynthia Eller puts it, this feminist religion sets out to 'glory in femaleness, to proclaim the spiritual potential inherent in womanhood, to take the "weak vessel" of Christianity and make her the holy chalice of the great goddess'.<sup>26</sup> Where disenchanting nature and desecrated woman are profaned by patriarchal order, feminist goddess spirituality, centred on the Goddess who is holy, resacralises woman and the earth. (Sacred-profane boundaries are redrawn, rather than abolished, so that, for example, holy war is perceived as profane).<sup>27</sup> Significantly, Raphael refers to the 'maternal' dissolution of boundaries separating powerful patriarchal subject, and powerless natural or female object, within the patriarchal sacred/profane dualism.<sup>28</sup> Theological resacralisation, in a recreative act, restores life where patriarchy has desecrated and profaned.<sup>29</sup>

Connecting these insights to the practice of Christian liturgy, patriarchal Christianity can be seen to rest on the unacknowledged debt to the murdered (secret) mother, just as Morrison perceives the white literary imagination to rest on unacknowledged Africanist presence. As the Church building rests on foundations dug deep into mother earth, so the sublimation in the patriarchal Christian imaginary, expressed in liturgy and symbol, is constructed upon the secret mother.

Kristeva's dolorous 'Stabat Mater' sites the Virgin Mary as the phallic mother, whose own subjectivity is sacrificed to the boundary role she performs in underwriting the entry of the (male) child into the symbolic order. *FEAST's* images are redolent of Mary. Our Lady as channel for prayers and messages to God, 'the number one man' (p. 178) to whom Hail Marys were addressed as penance – an extra five to an eight-year-old for her lies in confessing to adultery (p. 69). 'Oh Mary we crown thee with blossoms today' (p. 111), white lilies and roses, for Mary, the mystic rose. As Tina Beattie reminds us, 'The rose, symbol of love and fertility, of mysticism and the Virgin Mary, is also a symbol of the female genitals'.<sup>30</sup> Can those be red roses among the white, below the white lilies and the lighted candle held before them by the little girl (p. 163)? Has the colour of the Sacred Heart – 'there's no red for girls' (p. 178) – seeped into the sepia, to confuse the gendered imagery?

Beattie offers a feminist reading of Hans Urs von Balthasar's voluptuous neo-orthodox masculine imaginary, wherein the Church is both 'cosmic Mother and the holy heart'.<sup>31</sup> Her project is one of 'sacramental transfiguration'<sup>32</sup> wherein the female body, and thus female sexuality, are returned to the scene of salvation,<sup>33</sup> through their symbolisation in 'a maternal, Marian sacramental priesthood'.<sup>34</sup> If, in the words of Pope John Paul II 'At the root of the Eucharist ... there is the virginal and maternal life of Mary',<sup>35</sup> then von Balthasar's notion, that 'Mary surrenders her identity to Christ on Calvary, in a nuptial union in which she becomes "one flesh" with him in the motherhood of the Church',<sup>36</sup> Beattie argues, can be deployed in this sacramentalisation of woman's body, so resisting the

reassertion of its sacramental exclusion, by Catholic neo-orthodox sexual theology.

Thus it is not imperative to turn away from Christian patriarchal religion, with its symbolism of sacrifice, to matriarchal theology, in search of the fecundity associated with the female body: rather maternal feminine symbols are retained at the heart of the Catholic Christian tradition; there is a pressing need to '[restore] the sacrificed mother to language and meaning',<sup>37</sup> with the figure of the maternal priest as vehicle for this sacramentalisation. Where Raphael speaks of resacralisation of woman, Beattie speaks of God 'incarnate at last in the divinisation of the female body'.<sup>38</sup> The 'weak vessel' of patriarchal Christianity may indeed be transformed.

The dual impossibilities of the patriarchal Virgin Mary as model for adult womanhood – 'I didn't think sex was part of marriage ... I wanted to be just like her' (p. 52) – and of purity as a state of female subjectivity, haunt the young girls and women of *FEAST*. Meanwhile, modernity, with its confident Protestant and feminist partners, marches on towards its point of exhaustion, where its repressed Other – Catholicism<sup>39</sup> – joins forces with postmodern 'feminisms' of Irigaray and Kristeva to facilitate the construction of a revitalised imaginary, where the male privilege of the ancient gender binary is cast down, and relational and corporeal figurations of subjectivity are invited in its place. In the light of this imaginary, for the girl and boy posed before Mary, Jesus and the crucifix (p. 103), or for we who gaze on their image, the nuptial union of Mary with Christ on Calvary, and the maternal Church coming to birth in this event, offers the possibility of open-ended refigurations of identity: a space for negotiation of subjectivity as both 'relational and corporeal'.<sup>40</sup>

As Kathy Rudy suggests, whiteness studies challenge not only the privilege of white culture, but also its emptiness.<sup>41</sup> Whiteness, with its entwined threads of racist discourse, compulsory heterosexuality and feminine purity – the latter that impossible pedestal on which the privileged white woman is installed while the female is profaned – can be perceived as inscribing an

emptiness, an absence. A theme runs through my swift survey, a theme of fluidity across the binary boundary, of a silent blackness and secret mother informing the white and patriarchal imaginaries constructed upon them, of Raphael's 'maternal' dissolution of the patriarchally defined sacred/profane boundary, and of Beattie's parallel task within the Catholic sacramental imaginary.

As Raphael reminds us, 'One has moral obligations to the holy'.<sup>42</sup> And the holy within the Christian imaginary may, in the end, assist us in the necessary challenge to the emptiness and privilege of whiteness, by resourcing identities beyond the knotted white, heterosexual matrix. Here Christian reflections which exceed those homed in Catholicism join with Catholic reflections. As William Cavanagh suggests, 'to participate in the Eucharist is to live inside God's imagination'.<sup>43</sup> Thus Jeremy Ayers sees primary Christian identity, centred on Eucharistic participation, drawing black bodies into the 'Triune life of God in the broken body of Christ'<sup>44</sup> as helping black Christians to negotiate the constructs of race and sexuality.<sup>45</sup>

A 'White Mass', celebrated in 1995 in St Peter's Church, Cologne, found a different way of living inside God's imagination. Collaboration with the artist James Lee Byars transformed the church into an empty space where whiteness, in vestments, sculpture and the bleached host, symbolised a spirituality where identity is thrown into question.<sup>46</sup> The Mass or Holy Communion as opening is here restated. Denys Turner finds in his theology of Eucharistic presence, primordially located and sourced, the dialectic of the darkness of God and the light of Christ.<sup>47</sup> In this dialectic, light and dark as binary opposition is dissolved in the tension between affirmation and negation which is the hallmark of 'mystical' theological speech.<sup>48</sup> The emptiness and privilege of whiteness have no stability amid this tension.

In this emptiness, where the patriarchal mindset has made women the simultaneous bearers of an impossible purity, and of responsibility for sin, particularly the central mortal sin of sexual fallibility, Johnson has, as Clinger asserts, insisted on the

autonomous subjectivity of the young girls in the images and text of *FEAST*. In Irigaray's nascent female imaginary, angels cross and recross the space between human and divine, body and language: 'As if the angel were a representation of a sexuality that has never been incarnated'.<sup>49</sup> Might the angelic girls in white dresses, who confront us with their gaze, be capable of traversing the space between the community's secular self-understanding and concerns, as they filter through the permeable ritual boundaries, and a re-enanted liturgical sacramentality, in which patriarchal gender relations are reordered? May they indeed 'become the bearers of good news, messengers of annunciations that open the way to a new birthing of God among us, incarnate at last in the divinisation of the female body?'<sup>50</sup>

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## Notes

- 1 Tina Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 300.
- 2 S. Moore and J. Williamson, 'Coming Clean: The Rise of the White King', in *New Statesman*, 130, 4550 (13 August 2001), pp. 27–9.
- 3 Alistair Bonnett, 'From White to Western: "Racial Decline" and the Idea of the West in Britain, 1890–1930', in *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 16, 3 (September 2003), pp. 320–48.
- 4 Mason Boyd Stokes, *The Color of Sex: Whiteness, Heterosexuality and the Fictions of White Supremacy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 11.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 6 Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 20.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 140.
- 8 Stokes, *Color of Sex*, p. 18. Stokes draws on Sedgwick's concept of homosociality.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- 14 Brigalia Bam, 'All About Eve: Woman of Africa', in *Anglicanism: A Global Communion*, ed. Andrew Wingate, Kevin Ward, Carrie Pemberton and Wilson Sitshebo (London: Mowbray-Cassall, 1998), pp. 347–53.
- 15 Cited in Kathy Rudy, 'Subjectivity and Belief', in *Literature and Theology*, 15, 3 (September 2001), pp. 224–40, esp. p. 238.
- 16 Simon Peter McGrail, 'The Celebration of First Communion in Liverpool: A Lens to View the Structural Decline of the Roman Catholic Parish', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2003, p. 33. McGrail's study investigates First Communion in the 1990s, over twenty years after the most recent images in Johnson's collection.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 58.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 154.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 167.
- 23 Toril Moi, 'Introduction', in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 1–22, esp. p. 14.
- 24 Interview with Kristeva by Françoise Collin, in *Les Cahiers du GRIF*, 32, pp. 7–23, cited in *The Kristeva Reader*, p. 14.
- 25 Melissa Raphael, *Theology and Embodiment: The Post-Patriarchal Reconstruction of Female Sacrality* (Sheffield: SAP, 1996). The term 'thealogy' denotes matriarchal divinity, associated with Goddess spirituality.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- 27 *Ibid.*, pp. 34–43.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- 30 Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, p. 293.
- 31 These are Beattie's words, encapsulating an elaborate paragraph from von Balthasar's theodramatic *Heart of the World*; *ibid.*, p. 286.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- 33 Beattie argues von Balthasar eliminates the female body from this site; *ibid.*, p. 111.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 309.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 275.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 275.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 275.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 294.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 257 for this perspective on Catholicism as repressed 'other'.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 257.
- 41 Rudy, 'Subjectivity', p. 238.
- 42 Raphael, *Theology*, p. 42.
- 43 Cited in Jeremy Ayers, 'Towards a Eucharistic Politics of the Black Body: Black Sexuality in the Horizons of Christian Theology', *Theology and Sexuality*, 10, 2 (March 2004), pp. 99–113, p. 108.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 113.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 110, fn. 46.
- 46 Friedhelm Mennekes, 'Liturgy as Question: James Lee Byars' *The White Mass*', in *The Month* (July 1999), pp. 266–71.
- 47 Denys Turner, 'The Darkness of God and the Light of Christ: Negative Theology and Eucharistic Presence', in *Modern Theology*, 15, 2 (April 1999), pp. 143–58, esp. p. 158.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 147.
- 49 Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (London: Athlone Press, 1993), p. 16.
- 50 Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, p. 294.