

**Two Tits, a Hole, and a Heartbeat:
The Fantasy of Romance and the Fact of Violence
in Jane Campion's *In the Cut* (2003)**

[An Excerpt from The Wound and The Suture: Trauma and National Identity in the 20th Century U.S.]

"We must always make our distinctions so that they cut between the bones" (Plato, *Statesmen*, 262).

On September 14, 2001, George W. Bush announced to a recently traumatized United States public after the terror of 9/11: "I can hear you. I can hear you. The rest of the world hears you. And the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon."¹ In the cut from the singular ("you") to the plural ("us"), Bush attempts to lend voice to the nation's pain in a declaration of national solidarity. It is both a strategic and rhetorical call to arms, spoken from an implied foundation of social unity. Presidential historians have deemed such rhetorical strategies, used during times of national crisis to enact partisan legislation, the "rhetoric of crisis."² In the new millennium, the "rhetoric of crisis" surrounding the trauma of 9/11 in United States culture is characterized by the public rhetoric of a "seamless bureaucracy,"³ an assimilation of cultural difference and meaning precipitated by the wartime ideal of unified national identity.

Based on the novel by Susanna Moore, Jane Campion's *In the Cut* (2003) suggests that the "rhetoric of crisis" is also a crisis of rhetoric, where the nationalist discourse of a newly-united U.S. self threatens to consume individual and individuating narratives of personal and political selfhood. Campion's film cuts at the seams of this crisis with a narrative of trauma that simultaneously joins and severs categories of identity at the scene of writing. *In the Cut* suggests that the (re)construction of U.S.

¹ Remarks by the President to Police, Firemen and Rescue Workers at the World Trade Center, New York City.

² Karen Larson, *Post-9/11 Haze*, 1.

³ *Ibid.*

identity as a coherent and stable subject is a product of national fantasy, as well as a possible regulation and reification of discursive relations. What is interrogated in the film is not simply the politics of identity, but the place from which questions of selfhood are institutionally posed. The film begs the question: Where do you draw the line between languages? Between cultures? Between peoples? It is Campion's division and displacement of these discursive categories that pushes *In the Cut* to the cutting edge of identity politics and cultural relations.

Contemporary discussions about traumatic expression theorize that the experience of trauma is essentially unspeakable, resistant to articulation or representation. Critical discussions about violence, on the other hand, are typically animated by the insistence that violence is intimately related to and primarily disseminated through discourse.⁴ *In the Cut* investigates the violence of discourse and traumatic representation from within the space of the written narrative and the scene of writing. The film's visual narrative is punctuated by the written word – lines of poetry and literature are displayed like diacritical marks, adhering and structuring one scene to the next. At the level of diegesis, the film sustains two lines of plot: The first tells the story of a turbulent love affair between an English teacher (Meg Ryan) and a police detective (Mark Ruffalo). The second follows the trail of a serial killer “with a taste for blood” who romances then violently dismembers his female victims. By cutting between these visual narratives of love and murder at the scene of writing, Campion dissects the injury and the intimacy that occurs in the relation between individual and cultural bodies.

In the film, the scene of writing does not just articulate a body of narrative discourse, it is also the site of inscription where bodies of identity are simultaneously carved and (re)constructed. Sociological observations are intercut with literary artifacts,

⁴ See Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. See Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling*.

and poetic vision is brought up short against the deadening prose of violence and female violation. It is from within this linguistic geography that Campion explores areas of United States ambivalence with categories of selfhood. It is by shifting the frame of identity from the field of vision to the space of writing that Campion articulates the struggle between psychic representation and social reality.

The opening credits of *In the Cut* show disparate images of urban terrain: broken objects, a pile of trash, a wasteland of graffiti in Lower Manhattan. It is in the cut between these signs of a traumatized post 9/11 U.S. landscape that the relations of race, gender and cultural difference take place. The camera moves from the harshness of the city to an image of a woman in a garden, dreamily enjoying a flower storm, her body strewn with petals. At the same time, another woman sleeps, dreaming in black-and-white of falling snow and a courtship dance between two ice-skaters. As the blade of a skate slices the ice, its trail fills with blood. The stark transition between isolated shots of urban decay and the romantic vision of a springtime garden coalesce in the dream of courtship and the insinuation of violence.

The dream of blood and romance at the film's outset belongs to Frannie Avery, an English teacher unwittingly drawn into the investigation of a young woman's murder – the first in a chain of serial killings. Frannie is haunted by the legacy of her father, who “cut her mother to pieces” when he strayed for another woman. Her father, we learn, is the ice-skating lothario we see in the dream and the most likely source of Frannie's disillusionment with romantic love. From her father, Frannie inherits a paternal legacy that engenders heterosexual desire with a potentially constricting institution of marriage. Frannie recognizes the threat of this legacy in the violence that her dream implies.

Rather than pursue a relationship, Frannie immerses herself in a world of words, her time spent either teaching literature or researching an upcoming book on urban slang that she is writing. Frannie's fascination with language indicates her desire to re-

articulate the conditions of paternal legacy on her own terms. Words enable Frannie to re-member her narrative, putting together pieces of the past (dismembered as it is by her father) in order to make sense of the trauma of the present. Frannie's narrative is, quite literally, the writing on the wall – her apartment walls are littered with snatches of poetry and literature scribbled like so much graffiti. When Frannie learns that the recent murder of a young woman in the neighborhood was an act of “disarticulation” (“throat was slit with a straight razor . . . tried to take her head”), she writes the word down, adding it to her collections. Frannie recovers and remembers the narratives of her past and present in a private landscape of written words.

The cultural implications of Frannie's relationship with and to words are revealed in her personal project of translating urban slang into white mainstream vocabulary. Frannie's effort to define black vernacular is a catalogue of cultural difference that fixes otherness in language. When Cornelius, a student that Frannie resources for new words and phrases, argues that his teacher's attempt to articulate urban slang is possibly a “dis,” Frannie asks “a dis on whom?” By refusing to acknowledge the possible exploitation of black youth and subculture that her project entails, Frannie adds injury to insult. She graphically violates and “disarticulates” the very difference that she is trying to explain. Frannie's co-optation of a black male lexicon is a cultural “dis” that silences the cultural voice of the individual by inscribing it within conventional white society.

Noting the disparity between Frannie's adoption of black male vernacular and her identity as white female, Cornelius argues: “people like you think brothers are guinea pigs, the way they talk and shit . . . you said every word a writer writes is a reflection of him or her, even the commas. That what we be doing is writing to express our vision.” Embedded in this exchange is the politics of difference, where Frannie's artistic “vision” reflects a desire to arrest black culture in a body of words, while at the same time liberating herself and her legacy by writing from that space of difference.

It is from within the trope of vision, specifically faulty vision, that Campion deconstructs the conditions of identity and meaning. Crucial to the film's narrative is the discrepancy between what Frannie sees and what she imagines in her mind's eye. The film's most definitive encounter with identity occurs at the point at which something exceeds the camera frame and eludes the eye. Through the half-open door of a basement room, Frannie notices a sexual encounter between a male and female who are the soon-to-be murderer and his soon-to-be-victim. Frannie watches as the man's penis disappears into the woman's mouth. She sees his black trousers and white shirt. She sees the tattoo on the man's wrist. Frannie's eyes break up the man's body and in that act of epistemic violence her own frame of reference is transgressed, her field of vision disturbed: the objects of her gaze occluded by shadow, she mistakes these visual clues for markers of identity – filling in the blanks of her vision with fantasy. When Frannie meets Malloy, the police detective assigned to investigate the murders, she notices the tattoo on his wrist and suspects him to be the killer. It is only at the film's end that Frannie discovers that Malloy's partner, Rodriguez, has a matching tattoo and is the one to be feared.

If Frannie's dimmed and faulty vision lead her to mistake the true identity of the killer, it also reenacts a killer's violence. Frannie dislocates identity in a piece-by-piece dismemberment of Rodriguez's body. Much like the disarticulation of black vernacular, Frannie's vision of heterosexual desire – captured as it is by her mutilating gaze – displaces selfhood in her attempts at identification. Frannie's vision of self mirrors and is bound up in the violence of her gaze, framing and reproducing the threat of violence.