Integrating the Personal and the Political: The Body Politics in "Daughter of Earth"

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INTEGRATING THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL

The Body Politics in *Daughter of Earth*

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Program of American Studies
The College of William and Mary

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Han Shen
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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of

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Master of Arts

Han Shen

Approved by the Committee, April 2005

Richard Lowry, Co-chair

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M. Lynn Weiss
To my family for their unfailing support and understanding and to all those who patiently waited for me to finish and helped me along the way
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ABSTRACT

First published in 1929, *Daughter of Earth* tells the story of a woman’s coming of age. It is the author Agnes Smedley’s testimony to a prolonged effort of self-understanding and healing. For Agnes Smedley, the book was in part a very personal exploration of an “inner” self. Yet more importantly, it also tells the story of the emergence of a political being, an “organic intellectual” endowed both with a personal, indeed, bodily knowing of material life, and a grasp of the larger theoretical knowledge that allowed her to put her own life in broader perspective.

This thesis aims to provide a close reading of *Daughter of Earth* and argues that through the act and form of autobiographical writing, the ultimate personal narrative, the book works to integrate what is normally understood as separate: the personal and the public/political. For Smedley, writing the book brought both a healing, a recovery, that allowed her to go on with her life (as she did), and a political perspective, a sense of how her personal travail was typical even in its very uniqueness, how her experience partook in larger social experiences, and that those, like hers, could be changed through action.

I will examine the process by which Smedley, through telling the story of Marie Rogers, comes to terms with her multidimensional identity—a female, a white person with Native American ancestry, a politically enlightened free thinker sympathetic to the oppressed—through a first hand experience and observation of bodily ordeals undergone by herself and people around her. I argue that Agnes Smedley tried to revisit and comprehend those moments in her life that had been in the darkness through the representational means of autobiographical writing. As a result, she achieved a sense of self that is molded by her personal travails but also represents her metamorphosis into a politically informed individual functioning actively in the public sphere.
INTEGRATING THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL

The Body Politics in *Daughter of Earth*
Introduction

First published in 1929, *Daughter of Earth* tells the story of a woman’s coming of age. It is the author Agnes Smedley’s testimony to a prolonged effort of self-understanding and healing. This autobiographical novel was written when she was at the abyss of her fortune and searching for meaning in life. If she had any audience in mind when she started writing, she could probably see herself sitting in the very front row. In a letter to her friend Margaret Sanger on September 5, 1925 about the book, Smedley says: “It will be based upon my life and I plan to make it a document that will be direct and true…I am so utterly unhappy all the time that I don’t care much for life and I think if I write a book I may either feel better afterwards, or it will be finished anyway and I will have done what I could in this damned experience called life. It will be about all I have to give.” ¹

Smedley did give it all. As Alice Walker put it, she “lays bare her heart and soul.”² *Daughter of Earth* was originally published in 1929 as a novel. It tells the story of the coming of age in both the personal and political life of its protagonist Marie Rogers. The book traces Marie’s life’s journey, starting in the dirt-poor northern Missouri farming country, to the mining towns in Colorado where she is exposed to the capitalist control of human social life in its starkest form possible, and then to numerous towns in the Western

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frontier states where she travels to sell magazine subscription, surviving people’s prejudice, starvation, and the dangers of sexual assault. Then the novel witnesses her first involvement in social activism to support women’s rights and freedom of speech on the campus of a normal school in Arizona, listens to her grappling with racial inequality in the classroom of a university in San Francisco, and finally follows her to New York City where she throws herself into the heat of the Indian nationalist movement while overcoming a string of personal misfortunes.

What makes *Daughter of Earth* autobiographical is not simply the first-person narration technique that Agnes Smedley uses in the book. Much more importantly is the similarity that the storyline bears with the author’s true-life trajectory. As Alice Walker observes, the book “is the true story (give or take a few minor changes, deletions, or embellishments) of one’s own life. Marie Rogers of *Daughter of Earth* is Agnes Smedley, and through her story we glimpse the stories of countless others who could not speak, and who, in any event, were never intended to be heard.”

For Agnes Smedley, the book was in part a very personal exploration of an “inner” self—it is fictional, but veiled autobiography. Yet more importantly, besides serving the purpose of personal therapy, it also tells the story of the emergence of a political being, an “organic intellectual” endowed both with a personal, indeed, bodily knowing of material life, and a grasp of the larger theoretical knowledge that allowed her to put her own life in broader perspective. This thesis aims to provide a close reading of *Daughter of Earth* and argues that through the act and form of autobiographical writing, the

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3 Walker, 2.
ultimate personal narrative, the book works to integrate what is normally understood as separate: the personal and the public/political. For Smedley, writing the book brought both a healing, a recovery, that allowed her to go on with her life (as she did), and a political perspective, a sense of how her personal travail was typical even in its very uniqueness, how her experience partook in larger social experiences, and that those, like hers, could be changed through action. Smedley recounts her political awakening in the most intimate manner possible and locates it at the site of bodily experience. She uses the domestic sphere as the classroom where she is exposed to social realities and encompasses issues of gender, class and race. Moreover, she also places her body at the center of her strenuous struggle to construct a selfhood. I will examine the process by which Smedley, through telling the story of Marie Rogers, comes to terms with her multidimensional identity—a female, a white person with Native American ancestry, a politically enlightened free thinker sympathetic to the oppressed—through a first hand experience and observation of bodily ordeals undergone by herself and people around her. Among the first Feminist Press reprints of “lost” literature by women, *Daughter of Earth* was rediscovered during the rebirth of women’s activism starting in the 1960’s. Yet predating the “second wave” by over thirty years, Agnes Smedley addressed in her first book almost all the issues that are still at the focal point of academic discussion today.
Chapter I: Autobiography, Public/Private and the Body

Autobiographical writing as a literary form fits ideally into the dialectic fields of private/public, personal/political. First and foremost, Daughter of Earth is a fictional autobiography whose grounds lie in very personal, subjective motivations. Yet its ends seem tied into very public politics. Tracing back the history of autobiographical writing as a genre and the development of related criticism, one will find that it ties deeply into our understanding of the development of consciousness.

According to James Olney, the word “autobiography” was coined toward the end of the eighteenth century “at which time three Greek elements meaning “self-life-writing” were combined to describe a literature already existing under other names like “memoir” or “confession.” The first time “autobiography” appeared in a book title was when a gentleman named W. P. Scargill published a book called The autobiography of a Dissenting Minister in 1834. Yet Olney goes on to argue that whether officially called autobiography or not, “all writing that aspires to be literature is autobiography and nothing else.” Categorizing into the rank of autobiographical writing such works as T. S. Eliot’s Four Quartets, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’ Confession, Michel de Montaigne’s Essays, and Plato’s seventh epistle, Olney argues that “what is autobiography to one

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6 Olney, 5.
7 Ibid., 4.
observer is history or philosophy, psychology or lyric poetry, sociology or metaphysics to another.”

Even though the practice of autobiographical writing has been around for centuries, critics have observed some critical changes in its evolution. Olney points out that there used to be a rather naïve three-fold assumption about the writing of an autobiography:

First, that the *bios* of autobiography could only signify the “the course of a lifetime” or at least a significant portion of a lifetime; second, that the autobiographer could narrate his life in a manner at least approaching an objective historical account and make of that internal subject a text existing in the external world; and third, that there was nothing problematic about the *autos*, no agonizing questions of identity, self-definition, self-existence, or self-deception—at least none the reader need attend to—and therefore the fact that the individual was himself narrating the story of himself had no troubling philosophical, psychological, literary or historical implications.

He contends that autobiographical writing and relating critical literature underwent a two-step evolution. The first is a “refocusing from *bios* to *autos*.” Scholars of autobiographical writing moved forward from a discussion of the content of the life experience narrated to a more complicated study of “how the act of autobiography is at once a discovery, a creation, and an imitation of the self.” They started to realize, using Olney’s words, the *bios* of autobiography, is what the “I” makes of it. Another

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8 Ibid., 5.  
9 Olney, 20.  
10 Ibid.  
11 Ibid., 19.
groundbreaking theorist Georges Gusdorf adopts a similar approach. He holds that
"Every autobiography is a work of art and at the same time a work of enlightenment; it
does not show us the individual seen from outside in his visible actions but the person in
his inner privacy, not as he was, not as he is, but as he believes and wishes himself to be
and to have been."\textsuperscript{12}

Indeed, autobiographies are now more often considered a record of some personal
struggle to construct a rational identity out of an otherwise fragmented and irrational
being, by both the author and the reader, than a coherent account of a lifetime of success
stories. In her book titled \textit{Missing Persons}, Mary Evans points out that under the
influence of early modernism, the genre of autobiography started to show particular
attention both to the development of self-consciousness and an "increasingly problematic
negotiation of the boundaries between the public and the private."\textsuperscript{13} Sharing the same
opinion is Georges Gusdorf. He observes that "the man who recounts himself is himself
searching his self through his history; he is not engaged in an objective and disinterested
pursuit but in a work of personal justification... For the one who takes up the venture it is
a matter of concluding a peace treaty and a new alliance \textit{with himself and with the world}'
(italics mine).\textsuperscript{14}

Only fairly recently did critics' attention start to focus on the act of writing, which
constitutes the second step in the development of autobiographical writing. Influenced by
the structuralist, post-structuralist and deconstructionist theories, critics have observed
that neither the self nor the life is there before the text of autobiography is produced. It is

\textsuperscript{13} Mary Evans, \textit{Missing Persons: The impossibility of Auto/biography} (London: Routledge, 1999) 12.
\textsuperscript{14} Gusdorf, 39.
only through the act of writing that “the self and the life, complexly intertwined and
entangled, take on a certain form, assume a particular shape and image…”15 Gusdorf
argues that there is an almost dialectic relationship between the autobiography and the
life that it tries to record. “Any autobiography is a moment of the life that it recounts;” he
contends, “it struggles to draw the meaning from that life, but it is itself a meaning in the
life. One part of the whole claims to reflect the whole, but it adds something to this whole
of which it constitutes a moment.”16 Advancing a bolder line of reasoning is James
Olney, who thinks that post/structuralist theories have granted “a life of its own” to the
text of autobiography, “and the self that was not really in existence in the beginning is in
the end merely a matter of text and has nothing whatever to do with an authorizing
author.”17

The comparatively recent attention given to the acting of writing and the text echoes
back to another fundamental issue on the genre of autobiography, namely the artificial
boundaries between fiction and autobiography. The text of autobiographical writing
being a separate entity from the life it tries to narrate leads to an inevitable situation
where the self “is a fiction and so is the life…all that is left are characters on a page, and
they too can be ‘deconstructed’ to demonstrate the shadowiness of even their
existence.”18 Autobiographies have long been found to be unable to represent the
“whole” life of a person. Yet the very notion of a “whole” person has also been declared
a fiction, “a belief created by the very form of auto/biography itself.”19 Mary Evans
suggests that instead of non-fiction writing, it may be useful to consider autobiography as

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15 Olney, 22.
16 Gusdorf, 43.
17 Olney, 22.
18 Ibid.
19 Evans, 1.
“a mythical construct of our society and our social needs to experience life as an organized and coherent process, in which rational choices are made.”

Since the point of interest in the critical literature of autobiography shifted to privilege the relationship between “autos” and “graphe,” a new kind of autobiographical writing—"a writing neither wholly autobiographical nor wholly fictional, but rather a provocative blend of both"—has assumed a “hybrid” form that’s been known as autobiographical fiction. Almost considered an oxymoron, autobiographical fiction has put into question our expectations—indeed, our very definition—of what constitutes the “autobiographic.” The fading away of the previously clear-cut line between the fictional and the autobiographical allows both the author and the reader a better understanding of the act of autobiographical writing. Louis A. Renza has observed that authors of traditional autobiography have to overcome “a split of intentionality.” The writer’s awareness of his life becoming private even as he brings it into the public domain: the “I” in the text becomes a “s/he,” and writing about one’s own existence ironically entails a denial of this existence as one’s own and thus as a secure referential source for such writing. In “autobiographical fiction,” however, even authors who are not completely comfortable with the fictional aspect of all kinds of writing can take comfort in the fact that they are engaged in a literary recreation of their private life and in this way overcome the “pronominal crux” much easier. On the other hand, maintaining an arbitrary boundary between the autobiographical and the fictional may result in a paradoxical

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20 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 278.
reaction on the readers’ part. Christy Rishoi notes that readers are generally less forgiving of seemingly unlikely events or attitudes in fiction while exercising a greater “suspension of disbelief” and allowing the writer greater latitude “in the construction of truth” when reading non-fiction. It seems quite ironic that fictional writing is sometimes under much more intense pressure to produce a “realistic” line of plots while the very label of autobiography can put readers into a more trusting mood. With the fictionalization of the genre of autobiography, or, for those who are not ready to make such a compromise yet, the emergence of autobiographical fiction as a genre, readers are gradually honed into becoming more at ease with ambiguities that constitute the reality of life.

If the trouble-making quality of autobiographical writing, namely its upsetting interdisciplinarity, makes it more susceptible to any particular school of thought, feminism is definitely one of them. James Olney notes that autobiography has become “the focalizing literature” for such disciplines as American studies, African American studies and women’s studies that “otherwise have little by way of a defining, organizing center to them.” Whether these “studies” have any defining and organizing center to them is still up for debate, yet autobiographical writing does offer some qualities conducive to any subject that defies conventional boundary-marking. As discussed above, it sits right on the borderline “between fact and fiction, the personal and the social, the popular and the academic, the everyday and the literary.” The most ideal genre to examine constructions of subjectivities, autobiographical writing has become a central preoccupation and testing-ground for feminism.

Yet the relationship between autobiographical writing and feminism has not always been a smooth one. On the contrary, the law of genre that defines much of traditional autobiography studies has been formulated in such a way as to "exclude or make supplemental a discussion of gender." It is no coincidence that in their discussions of autobiographical writing, early critics like James Olney, Georges Gusdorf and Louis Renza all referred to authors of autobiographies as "he." It is not that women have not been engaged in autobiographical writing. Mary G. Mason claims that Margery Kempe wrote *The Book of Margery Kempe* (ca. 1432), which is actually the first full autobiography in English "by anyone, male or female." So it is not a lack of women autobiographical texts but rather a neglect of such texts in the critical literature of autobiography that was responsible for "the near absence" of a discussion of gender as a theoretical dimension.

Furthermore, there is this question of what kind of writings should be considered "autobiography." Before the twentieth century, autobiography was the province of the exceptional individual, and because "exceptional" individuals were usually men who lived an active "public" life, written accounts of women's lives tended to be classified into more "private" forms as diaries and letters, which were seldom granted the honor of being "literature." In a word, autobiography is "what men write, and what women write belongs to some 'homelier' and minor traditions." As a result, the genre of

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29 Rishoi, 26.
30 Gilmore2.
autobiographical writing, which "functions as the closest textual version of the political ideology of individualism" is gendered as "male."\(^1\)

As the feminist movement set about salvaging the domestic realm as a major sphere for women’s political struggle, it also redefined autobiographical writing as one of the most promising forms of literature for its cause. With its focus on the construction of subjectivity, autobiography has long been recognized as one of the master discourses of the Western Enlightenment tradition. Yet only recently did critics, under the influence of feminist and other deconstructionist theories, start to examine it as a discourse that has "served to power and define centers, margins, boundaries, and grounds of action."\(^2\) If all discourses function as some kind of empowerment, and that all overturning of existing centers in the field of power ultimately benefit the suppressed, the fictionalization of autobiography and the notion of fictional self-writing, a subversion of the traditional discourse of autobiography, seems to be congenial to the marginal subject, in this case, women.

Unfortunately, not all subversive developments of traditional autobiographical discourse serve the purposes of the women’s movement.\(^3\) And feminism has arduously pursued its own agenda amidst a torrent of theoretical discussion. Among the items on feminism’s agenda is to restore to the center of autobiographical studies an analysis of the body and its role in subjectivity construction. In the Western philosophical tradition, women have long been assigned to represent, first "nature," as opposed to men epitomizing "culture", and secondly, the physical "body," as opposed to men typifying

\(^{1}\) Ibid., 1.
the intellectual “mind.” Somehow the subjective consciousness overshadowed the corporal body and became one of the “special meanings...elevated by social ideologies to a privileged position” in the formation of a “selfhood” that is at the center of Western thought. Sidonie Smith traces the development of the western selfhood from the emergence of the “individual” in the dawn of Renaissance, to the surfacing of a “human subject” through a series of specific historical phenomena that include eighteenth-century enlightenment, early nineteenth-century romanticism, expanding bourgeois capitalism, and Victorian optimism. Francis Barker suggests that in achieving a “self-hood,” the subjective consciousness underwent a process of dual alienation. It first shed all association with an “outer world” which, although including social relations, was most often referred to as the nature. Then there came the second process of escaping all forms of embodiment. Barker notes that, with the move toward “the newly interiorated subjectivity,” the body itself as a mere object is disassociated from mind or conscious being and situated elsewhere: “Neither wholly present, nor wholly absent, the body is confined, ignored, exscribed from discourse, and yet remains at the edge of visibility, troubling the space from which it has been banished.” In this way, the self has functioned as a metaphor for soul, consciousness, intellect, and imagination, but never for body. Reflected in autobiographical studies is the “striking” effect that the self is presumed to completely exclude the body, as if self-conception could be formed without a body. Since the mind/body split is reproduced through the public/private, outside/inside, male/female categories that order the traditional and still dominant manner

34 Smith, 5.
36 Ibid., 63.
37 Gilmore, 84.
of perception and experience, reinstating the body back to the discussion of selfhood construction has become one of the foremost missions of feminist movement.

Autobiographical writing, a genre defined by the very practice of selfhood formation and interpretation, has become an ideal field for such an effort.

If autobiography was never intended as a genre especially suitable for furthering a feminist agenda, neither was the discourse of public and private. It is not feminists who invented the vocabulary of public and private. The dichotomy of public/private has been established in the western socio-philosophical tradition for centuries. Yet if the contemporary academia were to owe a renewed interest in this topic to one person more than anybody else, he would be Jurgen Habermas. In his important early, and arguably most influential, book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas made the subject of his study the historically specific phenomenon of the bourgeois public sphere created out of the intermediating relation between the modern capitalist society and the state in seventeenth-and-eighteenth century Europe. He traces the formation of a bourgeois public sphere where "private people come together as a public" through the "public use of their reason," to its transformation and partial degeneration into a consumer mass culture of the twentieth-century late-capitalist society.\(^\text{38}\) Habermas defines the private realm as either the "conjugal family's internal space" or the "civil society" where exchange of commodity and social labor take place, while the public sphere shaped up when the printing press made the circulation of information beyond pure commercial news possible and the discussion groups of coffee houses and salons were engaged in topics other than literature.

Habermas contends that a proper relationship between the public and the private is crucial to the functioning of the bourgeois public sphere. He emphasizes that the citizens' participation in public life depended on their private autonomy as masters of households. In the 19th century pre-mass-production economy, individual households were mostly self-sustainable thanks to an occupational sphere ("civil society") that was free from government interference.\textsuperscript{39} "The model of the bourgeois public sphere," Habermas contends, "presupposed strict separation of the public from the private realm in such a way that the public sphere, made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state, was itself considered part of the private realm."\textsuperscript{40} With the disintegration of the occupational sphere in the late-capitalist mass-production, mass-consumption welfare economy, the conjugal family lost its self-sustaining ability and has had to rely on public protection to ensure its members' livelihood. As a result, the private domain, "abandoned under the direct onslaught of extrafamilial authorities upon the individual, has started to dissolve into a sphere of pseudo-privacy."\textsuperscript{41} In the meanwhile, the public sphere was necessarily transformed as the distinction between public and private realms blurred, and the formerly rational-critical debate staged by autonomous and equal individuals gave way to a simply one-way consumption of mass culture.

The publication of Habermas' book in 1962 in Germany coincided with a new intensity in the discussion of gender relations in the 1960s' US. As Linda Nicholson conveniently puts it: "Something happened in the 1960s in ways of thinking about gender

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 175-76.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 157.
that continues to shape public and private life.” That something was later widely considered as “the second wave” of feminism in America. It did not take feminist theorists too long to identify the ramifications of gender relations in the public/private dichotomy as one of their major issues.

As feminist scholars strived to make public the injustice against women in the private realm, they found Habermas’ insistence on a rigid boundary between the public and the private increasingly problematic. Indeed, feminist thought has probably done more than any other intellectual discourse to point up the difficulties inherent in assuming the public/private dichotomy exists as neatly as Habermas assumes. While acknowledging that any theory of publicness, public space, and public dialogue must presuppose some distinction between the private and the public, feminist scholars have made the case that the way in which the distinction between the public and the private spheres has been drawn has served to confine women, and typically female spheres of activity like housework, reproduction, nurturance to the “private” domain, and to keep them off the public agenda in the liberal state. For the struggle over what gets included in the public agenda is itself a struggle for justice and freedom. Seyla Benhabib points out: “Questions of justice were from the beginning restricted to the ‘public sphere,’ whereas the private sphere was considered outside the realm of justice.”

Directly confronting Habermas’ notion of the public sphere, scholars like Joan Landes, Mary Ryan, and Geoff Eley contend that his account idealizes the liberal public sphere. They argue that, despite the lofty ideals of publicity and accessibility, the official public sphere functioned on the basis of a number of significant exclusions in reality.

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Landes contends that Habermas’s idealized model of the universal public fails to account for the ways in which “a system of (Western) cultural representation eclipsed women’s interests in the private domain and aligned femininity with particularity, interest, and partiality.” Ryan accuses Habermas of “patently excluding women from the bourgeois public sphere.” She observes that women were read out of the fiction of the public by virtue of their ideological consignment to a separate realm called the private. Geoff Eley extends Landes’ argument and further points out that in Germany, France, as well as England, gender exclusions were linked to other exclusions rooted in the processes of class formation. And Michelle Rosaldo’s hypothesis that neither biology nor reproductive functions, but the denial of access to the public realm, was the basic underpinning of women’s secondary status has become a classic postulate of feminist theory. In a word, the public/private distinction has deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the feminist movement.

Feminist revisionist interpretations of the public/private dichotomy can be best illustrated by the way in which the female body is restored to the focal point of personal/political discourse. It is no coincidence that Simone de Beauvoir started The Second Sex with a discussion of “The Data of Biology.” “WOMAN? Very simple, say the fanciers of simple formulas: she is a womb, an ovary; she is a female — this word is sufficient to define her.” Biological difference between the male and the female is situated at the center, if not always the starting point, of much feminist literature. The female body, depending on the specific line of theory as one’s vantage point, reflects

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46 Ibid., 196.
women's socioeconomic oppression, represents the reification of a psychological trauma, or symbolizes a more relational worldview. The possibilities are by no means limited to what has been suggested above.

Despite the various theoretical interpretations of women's physiological features, it seems that, more often than not, the discourse on the body is ultimately oriented toward some sort of social revelation. Didn't De Beauvior also proceed to a discussion of social history in general? And many feminist theorists have followed suit. For instance, in The Dialectic of Sex, Shulamith Firestone maintains that women's ties to childbearing and early childrearing caused a basic power imbalance between women and men that contributes to all other gender power imbalances. 47

In many cases, women's physiological/reproductive features provide an existential point of departure. The focus of discussion evolves from the female body as a point of interest to an expanding circle of issues that include women's role in the domestic arena, the reality of women being restricted in the domestic sphere and the factors that contributed to this, women's struggle to break out of the snare of familial responsibilities, and the challenges that women are confronted with once outside of the household etc, etc. In a sense, one can almost speak of the feminist movement as traveling a trajectory from the individual to the social. "Having found the substance of women's politics in the family, sexuality, and the relations of reproduction, feminists took their grievances directly into the public arena through any pragmatic avenue possible." As Joan Landes

puts it nicely, “feminism offered women a public language for their private despair.”\textsuperscript{48}

Hence the slogan: “The personal is the political.”

*Daughter of Earth* best exemplifies the sublimation of personal experience of bodily knowing into an integral political consciousness. Through the act of autobiographical writing, Agnes Smedley not only achieves a therapeutic understanding of her personal life. She also articulates a coherent political outlook whose roots can be found deeply embedded in her private travails. As an “organic intellectual,” she transforms her bodily knowing of the harsh social realities into a public stance that is politically informed. When first published, *Daughter of Earth* was widely considered as the prototype of women’s proletarian literature. According to many contemporary and subsequent critics, its publication in 1929 “signaled the beginnings of proletarian realism as a literary movement in the United States.”\textsuperscript{49} Walt Carmon, editor of the *New Masses*, hailed the book in his enthusiastic review. “The broad healthy stride of this novel is that of a woman, a proletarian to her marrow,” he declared. “She is a fellow-worker. She is one of us.”\textsuperscript{50} The book also gained instant international recognition after it was published in a Russian first edition of one million copies; subsequently it was translated into fourteen different languages.\textsuperscript{51}

However, the book faded out of critics’ focus as the momentum of the 1930’s radical socialist movement underwent a downfall after WWII. It only returned to print in 1973 with an afterword by Paul Lauter, owing to the rebirth of women’s activism, and, with it, the founding of the Feminist Press. Founded in the fall of 1970, the Feminist

\textsuperscript{48} Landes, 1.
\textsuperscript{50} Walt Carmon, review of Agnes Smedley, *Daughter of Earth, New Mass 5* (August 1929): 17.
Press set out on a mission to recover literature produced by women to challenge the existing literary curriculum that basically sanctioned only three possibilities for women: “marriage, death, or both marriage and death.” Followed by *Life in the Iron Mills*, *Daughter of Earth* was Tillie Olsen’s second recommendation to the Feminist Press for publication. Claiming it to be a “classic,” Nancy Hoffman observes that the book “compares remarkably well with the best of the recent feminist novels written out of the compulsion to understand women’s situation; it is also prescient in anticipating the questions raised and the answers given in the new anthropological, psychological, and economic scholarship about women.”

*Daughter of Earth* fits the agenda of the 60s and 70s feminist revival ideally in that it traces the social injustices against women, which were still present forty years after the book’s publication, right back to the “domestic” sphere and the institution of marriage. A large part of the book’s success in achieving an emotional rapport with its readers can be attributed to the way it communicates with them though a very personal autobiographical voice. Agnes Smedley wrote the book as an effort to understand her own life during the process of psychoanalytical treatment. The form of autobiographical fiction allows her to tell her life’s stories from the point of view of an “I”-narrator, but still keep a secure, though superficial, distance from unnecessary and overwhelming emotional entanglement when she was yet able to achieve an absolute detachment from her past. This partial involvement and identification of the author in the narrator, however, serves the book extremely well. The intimate outpouring of the author/narrator’s most private experience,

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then again, is designed to levy some fierce accusations against women's traditional role in society.

Although *Daughter of Earth* is most rightly celebrated as an archetypical feminist text, its significance goes far beyond the women's movement. When first published, the book was most influential and welcomed in the radical leftist circles of the 1930s. It won acclaim foremost as the "Ur-text of women's literary proletarian fiction of the 1930s." As class struggle moved out of sight from the American mainstream, *Daughter of Earth* was discovered in 1970s mainly for its relevance and contribution to the feminist cause. Although gender inequality is, without a doubt, one of the most obvious themes of the book, I intend to illustrate the sophisticated manner in which Agnes Smedley organizes her book to discuss issues of gender, class and race. Preceding the full-scale academic discourse on "the personal and the political" by almost forty years, *Daughter of Earth* manages to accomplish a thorough deliberation of the contemporary social reality by presenting a gendered, classed and raced body at the center ground in relating a coming-of-age story.

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54 Rabinowitz, 10.
Chapter II: Gender Politics

*Daughter of Earth* is a book about an individual’s struggle to find meanings in life. What makes it extraordinary is that the protagonist of the story happens to be a female, which makes a world of difference in the early 20th century. Born on February 23, 1892, Smedley grew up with a heavy dose of feminist influence. Her formative years in the teen’s and twenties happen to overlap the height of the suffrage campaign and a shift of emphasis within the modern feminist movement from a politically oriented agenda focused mainly on suffrage to a much broader spectrum of social issues. Smedley first heard Emma Goldman lecture on Ibsen, Nietzsche, and Margaret Sanger’s birth control movement in the spring of 1915 on the campus of San Diego Normal School. The two later became friends and corresponded regularly. She was imprisoned in 1918 for her involvement in the Indian nationalist movement, but also on charges of possession of birth control material. After Smedley’s release from jail, Margaret Sanger threw a party for her and put her in charge of the daily management of *Birth Control Review*, which was then the only reliable source of birth control information for many women around the country. Compared with writings of these ardent women activists, the fierce and fearless radical feminist voice of *Daughter of Earth* was, and perhaps still remains, a rarity. As gender specific as can be, the title of the book makes it clear that the author is very self-conscious, and determined to tell a gendered story.

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Indeed, gender difference is one of the very earliest lessons that Marie Rogers, the protagonist of the book, learns from life. Growing up in northern Missouri, where the "rolling, stony earth that yielded so reluctantly seemed to stretch far beyond the horizon," Marie is always kept out of the "shame and secrecy" of sex by the best efforts of her parents. Yet she also learns "other things—that male animals cost more than female animals and seemed more valuable; that male fowls cost more than females and were chosen with more care."\textsuperscript{56} And when her little brother is born, her father buys a box of cigars, a real luxury in a family where the two most valued possessions are a sewing machine and a clock, and distributes them among his male friends "who drove up to congratulate him as if he had achieved something remarkable." They even pass a whisky flask around just because "a son had been born!"\textsuperscript{57}

Aware of gender difference at an early age, Marie, nevertheless, has a quite ambiguous sense of identity. Written at a time when Smedley herself was undergoing psychoanalytical treatment, \textit{Daughter of Earth} abounds with Oedipal language. With much affection, she portrays the father as a colorful figure that stands out from their drab existence. Tracing back to the very start of memory, Marie recollects "a strange feeling of love and secrecy": "I was a baby so young that I recall only the feeling—nothing else. My father was holding me close to his huge body in sleep."\textsuperscript{58} The father is remembered as a storyteller. When hiding in a cave from a cyclone, he tells his wife and kids about a cyclone he had seen in St Joe. According to him, this monster "sucked up cattle an' horses in it." It also "sucked up a smokehouse in one place an' left the house, ten feet

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 8.
away, standin' as clean as a whistle!" The account leaves such a vivid impression that long afterwards Marie still remembers telling a girl friend about a cyclone using exactly the same language her father had used, for, she proudly announces, "I was my father's daughter!" A leader in the annual harvest dance and dinner, John Rogers easily draws attention. And even his clothes distinguish him: "There was his broad leather belt of many colors, with its buckle of real silver...Any other man would have been ashamed to wear so much color. But [her] father was a colorful man who dared what no one else dared."

As a little girl, Marie always looks up to her father with adoration but harbors a much more ambivalent attitude toward her mother. If early memories about the father are vague but loving, Marie's recollections about her mother are a lot clearer and of a different nature. They start with whipping. Marie recalls her mother's distinct style of whipping with much detail: "standing with her switch in her hand, she would order me to come before her...Without taking hold of me, she forced me to stand in one spot of my own will, while she whipped me on all sides." When one time after the whipping, Marie continues to sob as children oftentimes do, even against her mother's warning to "stomp [her] into the ground," "with one swoop [the mother] was upon [her]—over the head, down the back, on my bare legs, until in agony and terror I ran from the house screaming for my father." Once the mother finds out that her whipping gradually loses its power, she begins to threaten Marie with her father. Yet "she failed; for he had never struck [her] and [Marie] knew he never would." "His word was enough for me," Marie confesses, "I obeyed." One night, at home where Marie and her sister share one bed while her parents

59 Ibid., 14.
60 Ibid., 15.
61 Ibid., 28.
the other in the same room, she, "trembling in terror," witnesses her parents having sex for the first time. And after that "the mother who was above wrongdoing disappeared," Marie writes, "and henceforth I faced another woman. Strange emotions of love and disgust warred within me, and now when she struck my body she aroused only primitive hatred." Yet oddly to Marie "she was fallible but he was not." The father still remains a positive role model: "To be like him, to drive horses as he drove them, to pitch hay as he pitched it, to make him as proud of me as he was of my new baby bother George, was my only desire in life." It is especially worth noting that what Marie tries to accomplish here is not simply to make herself into "Daddy's favorite girl," but rather an almost complete identification with the father figure. She not only wants her father to be proud of her as he is of her baby brother. She also just wants "to be like" the father. This desire to be able to identify with the father figure derives ultimately, as I will argue in the following paragraph, from Marie's understanding of the social reality of the western frontier.

Smedley’s psychoanalytical treatment with Dr. Elizabeth Neaf, an associate of the Berlin Psychoanalytical Institute shaped her understanding about gender difference to a large degree, and she duly transferred her newly gained knowledge into her book. Smedley began analysis with Dr. Neaf in late 1923 when her marriage to Virendranath Chattopadhyaya, the leader of the Berlin Indian Revolutionary Committee, was falling apart. She told a friend in a letter that although it was still too early to find the cause of her earlier nervous breakdown, she learned that she had a deep "castration complex" which colored all her relationships. "I gained the earliest impression that I was made into

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62 Ibid., 17.
63 Ibid.
a girl by my penis having been cut off!" In the spring of 1924, working with Dr. Neaf, Smedley began to discover how her attitudes toward women and sex had been formed. On April 1, she wrote to the same friend:

When I was a girl, the West was still young, and the law of force, of physical force, was dominant. Women were desired, of course, but the rough-and-ready woman made her place, and often the women of the West, the mothers of large families, etc. were big, strong, dominant women. A woman who was not that was scorned, because the West had no use for "ladies." And the woman who could win the respect of man was often the woman who could knock him down with her bare fists and sit on him until he yelled for help. At least this was so in my class, which was the working class. Of course my mother, being frail, quiet, and gentle, died at the age of 38, of no particular disease, but from great weariness, loneliness of spirit, and unendurable suffering and hunger. She wasn't big enough to hammer my father when he didn't bring home the wages, and so we starved, and she starved the most of all so that we children might have a little food...

Now, being a girl, I was ashamed of my body and my lack of strength. So I tried to be a man. I shot, rode, jumped, and took part in all the fights of the boys. I didn't like it, [but] it was the proper thing to do. So

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I forced myself into it, I scorned all weak womanly things. Like all my family and class, I considered it a sign of weakness to show affection..."65

The western frontier of the early 20th century was a place where physical strength was the most important factor in determining power relations, which ultimately translate into gendered terms. Strength and power were often considered manly while womanly affection led to weakness and misery. At a very early age, Smedley already learned to associate her mother's, and perhaps most women's, sufferings to “being frail, quiet, and gentle” and chose to identify with the other side, the male side. In all her efforts to try to be a man, Smedley was actually trying to break away from the existing power structure that was framed in gendered features.

Smedley’s scorn for all weak womanly things is clearly reflected in *Daughter of Earth*. When the mother shows the earliest sign of an independent will, the father just takes off and deserts the whole family. As a result, Marie has to work at a cigar shop after school to boost her mother’s meager earnings from taking in washing. Yet she is fired when the boss finds out that she reads too many books, as he considers that as the reason why Marie is slow at work. That night Marie cries, but stuffs the blanket in her mouth “so that no one could hear.” “They might laugh,” she worries, “for in our world no one was supposed to show affection or pain. Only weaklings and women did that.”66 A few years later, when Marie decides to leave home to pursue her own dreams, she nevertheless feels guilty about abandoning her younger brothers and sister. Yet she will not let herself be drowned by such feelings: “Love, tenderness and duty belonged to women and to

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65 Ibid., 94-95.
66 Smedley, 90.
weaklings in general; I would have none of them!”⁶⁷ When told that to “go on the road” soliciting subscriptions for a magazine is “no work for a woman,” Marie at once knows that “that in itself was sufficient reason” why she should go.⁶⁸ Trying her luck first at private homes, Marie is not too successful with housewives, who would come to the door, listen to what she had to say, and then slam the door in her face.⁶⁹ It is with men at business offices that she is able to get many subscriptions. So Marie concludes: “When I stepped into the presence of men I began to feel a confidence and a mastery such as I had never felt before, as if something were saying to me ‘Here is your world!’ I never went to a private home again and when I thought of respectable women I shivered.”⁷⁰

This incident reflects less on a confirmation of a gendered public/private split than a challenge to the very same conventional wisdom. If in early 1900s most females were still blocked from the public space of the “business offices,” Marie’s success and the kind of ease with which she interacts with men in the working environment prove that the home is not the only place women can excel. In a letter to a friend who commented that women should not attempt to “take the place of men in nature,” Smedley wrote in her usual outspoken manner:

I do not know just what woman’s “place in nature” happens to be, except sexually—that “place” is quite clearly marked out. But as to socially, I do not know but that nature has been mauled over the head by men, and woman has been forced to occupy positions for which she is not fitted by nature, but which she is forced to fill only because it pleases the vanity of

⁶⁷ Ibid., 142.
⁶⁸ Ibid., 151.
⁶⁹ Ibid.
⁷⁰ Ibid., 152.
men. I think the development of the human species in the future is going to see woman occupying a place other than she occupies today. Your line of argument is dangerous: the old-time gentlemen used such arguments when they said women should not enter churches, when women could not sit in anti-slavery congresses because of their sex, when they were not able to vote because of their sex, when they were forced out of the medical, legal, and every other profession because of their sex. To the old reactionaries—may their souls roast forever—women were trying to “take the place of men in nature.”

At a time when most social constructionist theories were not fully developed, Smedley was able to reject the use of “nature” to explain away all gender differences and their related social ramifications.

As much as Marie tends to identify with the world of men, she never needs to look too far for women who are not “weaklings.” Since childhood, Marie has been familiar with women who are strong-bodied and strong-willed. Her grandmother is a typical example of the “big, strong” women that were respected in the West. Managing a family of thirteen children, the grandmother was a “tall, strong” woman with “the body and the mind of a man.” Marie recalls admiringly that once married, her grandmother “assumed control of her new husband and all that he possessed.” Since the grandfather was slowly dying of consumption, she oversaw all activities on their farm: from milking the cows, picking and canning of fruits, slaughtering of beef and pork, to the social etiquette of the love affairs of her daughters.

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72 Smedley, 17-19.
Grandma has the supreme authority in her family. Marie compares her to “an invading army in a foreign country. And like all invaders, she was a tyrant.” “When her word failed with her own or his children (for she was her husband’s second wife),” Marie recollects, “she used her hand.” And “it was a big hand.” Yet there is one girl that she never lays her hand on, her step-daughter Helen, who goes on to become Marie’s ambiguous role model. At age fifteen, Helen is a girl “with prospects.” Dreaming about making a lot of money and buying clothes with it, she works at a far-away farmhouse, earning three dollars a month. At the yearly harvest dance where Marie’s father plays host, a rare moment of celebration in Marie’s memory, Helen, her “beautiful aunt with the bronze hair,” is her father’s choice for the second dance (Marie’s mother being the partner for the first). The choice is properly made, because “to be a hired girl drawing your own money gave you a position of authority and influence in the community. Everyone at the dance knew she earned three dollars a month; you could tell it by her proud bearing and her independent attitude toward her new beau. She commanded!”

Throughout the book, her insistence on economic independence remains the main source of Aunt Helen’s command for respect. It is at a mining town in Colorado that Marie next sees Helen after the harvest dance. Marie’s father is “making tremendous money” and her mother’s enthusiastic letters bring Helen to join them from back home. Smedley uses very physical terms to portray a female body in bloom. “Flaming and vital,” Helen has grown more beautiful. “No rose petal was silkier than her skin. No queen had more confidence than she.” Her laugh is contagious too. “When she laughed everyone laughed too, even when they didn’t know why.” Helen soon settles at a laundry

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73 Ibid., 19.
74 Ibid., 28.
75 Ibid., 48.
job that pays seven dollars a week. Unlike Marie’s father, who spends his earnings at the
town’s saloon, from the first Helen places her weekly wages before Marie’s mother. And
because of that, Marie figures that “she took an equal place with my father in our home.
She was as valuable and she was as respected as he. The two of them talked to each other
as equals; they laughed and quarreled as equals.” Whenever her parents quarrel, Helen
would “invariably step in and meet [the father] halfway… ‘You can’t talk like that to me,
John Rogers! An’ you can’t boss me around like you boss Elly, for I pay my room and
board here!’” Fully in line with what Smedley said in her letter about the kind of
women who can “knock a guy down with her bare fists and sit on him until he yelled for
help,” Aunt Helen has “a wild, untamed spirit” under her beauty, capable of attacking
Marie’s father even though he is “fully three times her size.” She has never been “broke
in to the bridle,” as men speak of broken wives.

Later it is found out that Helen’s “men friends” have been paying for her nice
clothes and things while she hands over her wage to Marie’s mother. The father, feeling
disgraced by her conduct, calls her names and threatens to throw her out, which drives
Helen into a rage and a bombardment of fierce accusations:

An’ if I was a whore, John Rogers, I want to know who made me one!

You, John Rogers! You! Elly ain’t had enough money to buy grub and
duds for herself and the kids. I’ve give her my wages each pay-day. Yes,
an’ you know it! If ‘twasn’t for my money, she’d have starved to death.

You in the saloon…you comin’ home on Saturday night when every
cent’s gone, then lyin’ or threatenin’ if she complained. How d’ye think

76 Ibid., 49.
77 Ibid., 49-50.
she was to live...Washin'? ...damn you! You’re an ornery low-down dog! You to call me names! You! Where did you think I could git money for my duds....I won’t go in rags....I won’t get married and let some man boss me around and whip me and let me starve! I’ve a right to things. If I’m a whore...you made me one, you, John Rogers, ... you ... you ... you!”

Rather than being a hypocrite and passing on moral judgments like her father, Marie reveals the social origin of Aunt Helen’s personal tragedy. Not willing to compromise her entitlement to worldly pleasures, Helen is left with few choices to meet both her self-placed responsibility to support a household and her personal pursuit for happiness.

Helen later leaves so that Elly will not have to choose between her sister and her husband. She goes to Denver where she sees some more “men friends” but, to support herself, also works in a factory that makes pennants for colleges. Helen never marries, though her one-time fiancé, who is her first and only love, chases her to Denver and proposes twice. For she fears that “when a woman marries a man and can no longer make her own living, he begins reminding her of her past.” For a woman of her spirit, anything less than equality and mutual respect in a marriage is not acceptable, and freedom means much more than the life a housewife.

The polar opposite to Aunt Helen is Marie’s mother Elly, whose tears embitter Marie’s life. Marie makes it clear at the beginning of the book that she does not care for her mother too much as a child, maybe because of all the whippings. “For years,” Marie says, “she and I gazed at each other across a gulf of hostility.” Only later, as a grown-up woman looking back in retrospect, does Marie realize that her mother whips her more

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78 Ibid., 83.
79 Ibid., 141.
80 Ibid., 17.
and more as “the years of her unhappy marriage life increased” and “more children arrived.” Nevertheless, as Marie herself undergoes the process of becoming an adult, she starts to sympathize more and more with her mother. Time and again, Marie sides with her in the couple’s fights and even becomes her protector. When still at their farmhouse in stony northern Missouri, Marie’s father oftentimes talks about moving away and quitting farming to make some big money. Once accused by his wife of “always wanting to change, always complaining, always telling stories that weren’t true and singing songs instead of working,” he threatens to leave the wife and never come back. He calls out to Marie and her baby brother George to come with him. Elly “sank into a kitchen chair and began to weep.” Elated to see that her father is going to bring her along, Marie, however, does not move. “There was something about my mother that made me disobey the father that night,” Marie recalls. “I ran to my mother and placed my hand on her knee and her tears fell on it.” Later the family does move to the mining town of Trinidad. But when John talks about moving again, Elly stands her ground, not willing to take the children away from school. For that the home “was a nest of daily quarrels.” One day Marie comes back home to find her father standing near her mother with rope in hand. “Marie,” the mother calls out with a “lifeless voice, “he’s goin’ to hit me with that rope!” “It was as if she had turned to me for help against him,” Marie recalls. And for the first time, father and daughter become enemies.

I hated him...hated him for his cowardice in attacking someone weaker than himself...hated him for attacking a woman because she was his wife

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81 Ibid., 35.
82 Ibid., 112.
and the law gave him the right... hated him so deeply, so elementally, that I wanted to kill...

My mother’s eyes were still on me.

“Marie... if he hits me, I’ll drop dead!”

“You!”... I spoke to my father.

...

“Do that if you dare, you! If you dare!”

I felt my mother’s frail body against me at the back. My father’s eyes were glistening and hard and his breath reeked with liquor... We stood staring into each other’s eyes, enemies. Then the rope fell from his hand and curled snake-like about his feet. Turning without a word, he walked heavily through the alley-gate...

From that moment on Marie knows that a bond has at last been welded between her mother and herself, “a bond of misery that was never broken.”

Marie has grown into a totally different young woman than the little girl who idolized her father and somehow despised her mother. As a child, Marie might have been blind to the complicated social realities around her. Yet she was aware of, consciously or not, the advantages that superior physical strength was able to provide to her father and perhaps other male members of her community. Growing up in the western frontier, Marie comes to learn that the first and foremost oppressive force in her life is the harsh natural environment that yields little reward to her hard-working parents. The father, empowered with a stronger physique, naturally rose above the “frail” mother in Marie’s admiration. As the family moved away from the agrarian northern Missouri farmland to

83 Ibid., 114.
the southwestern mining towns that were under crude capitalist industrial development, Marie grows into a young adult who is keen to her surroundings and starts to realize that in the human world the dominant group often abuses their power. She realizes that "the law" leaves married women unprotected and at the mercy of their husbands, and that it is marriage under such law that condemns women into the most hopeless situation. No longer the little girl whose "only desire in life" was to make her father proud, now Marie hates him "so deeply, so elementally" because he represents all the institutional injustices that are inflicted upon women, with whom Marie shares a common fate.

Always sacrificing for her children, Elly, however, is no passive victim. Still a child, Marie notices her mother's yearning for the independent spirit embodied in aunt Helen. When Helen and her husband talk, laugh and quarrel as equals, Elly would "listen wistfully, her hands folded across her stomach." And if any of the children interrupt, she would scold: "Don't you see your father an' Aunt Helen are talkin'?"84

Elly almost pays the ultimate price in seeking equal footing with her husband in the public sphere when the first opportunity presents itself. In an effort to gain a public voice, Elly comes very close to losing any kind of security in the domestic sphere. The year Helen leaves home is also the year women are given the vote in the State. And Marie sees that her mother's chin "raised itself just a bit." When the father asks how she is going to vote, she does not reply. "Quarrels followed...he did the quarrelling. At last a weapon had been put into her hands. At least she felt it so."85 On Election Day, the father threatens to leave home if Elly does not tell him how she intends to vote. "But, without answering, she walked out of the house as if he did not exist." That night the father

84 Ibid., 49.
85 Ibid., 86.
“asked a question that was a command: ‘D’ye mean to tell me how you voted or not?’”

Elly answers with an unequivocal “no!” The next morning, carrying out his threat, Marie’s father sits on his wagon outside the house, holding the reins, ready to drive away. He asks one more question, but Elly just does not answer, standing on the kitchen porch quietly with her hands folded. Then the father leaves. Two or three times in the following months, the father drives up to the kitchen door and asks Elly, from the seat on his wagon, whether she is ready to tell him how she has voted. Marie recalls: “She stood, her arms and hand steaming with soapsuds, and replied: ‘I ain’t got nothin’ to say.’ Her figure straightened itself when she said that, and there was a dignity about her that caused me to walk to her side and raise my chin just a bit also.” One time, Elly even mentions a divorce, and the father is scandalized:

“That’s a nice thing fer a respectable married woman to say—talkin’ of getting a divorce from her own husband!”

“I know you’re livin’ with that woman cook out in Ludlow, so don’t you go talkin’ to me! She had replied.

“God damn it! This is a nice to-do!” he cursed, as she turned and reentered the kitchen, closing the door firmly behind her.”

When the father drives up before the kitchen door the next time to find Elly critically ill, he stays. But the subject of women’s suffrage is never mentioned in her presence. Enslaved in the conventional marriage that assigns her position not only in the domestic sphere but also the public realm, Elly nevertheless puts up a fight to gain some political voice when the first opportunity presents itself. Consciously or not, she realizes that this public display of civil right in the act of voting can somehow alter the existing gendered
power hierarchy in the private sector as well. In Marie’s memory, it is undoubtedly one of the high points in Elly’s life.

Perhaps more than her mother’s yearning for an independent spirit, it is Elly’s body and the things it says in silence that leave the indelible mark on Marie’s mind. Marie is forever haunted by the image of her mother’s “frail body” in the calico dress, by her hands that “were so big-veined and worn that they were almost black” and by the “wistful, tired face lit up by the beautiful blue-black eyes.”86 They speak to Marie of a lifetime of misery and bitterness. Years of desolation, hard work and starvation finally take tolls on Marie’s mother. At her death bed, Elly confesses to Marie that if not for her, she does not know how she “could of lived till now,” and Marie’s name is the last word she utters.

Awakened by her mother’s tears, Marie has a deep animosity against marriage and the unequal economic positions of husband and wife that were its byproduct, she considers as the root of women’s sufferings. She admires aunt Helen’s free spirit, if not her life style. Even as a little girl, she was curious about a woman who rode a black horse across the forest where her father worked as a woodchopper. After she heard that the lady was said to have been attacked by a tramp and so can not find a husband at “the advanced age of twenty-two,” Marie watches for her with heightened curiosity. “Strange! She didn’t seem at all unhappy that no one would marry her!” Marie remarks, “Her lovely face was dignified and calm. Calmer than my mother’s.”87 Other than her own family, Marie also witnesses the unhappiness in her neighborhood at the western mining town. Working as a domestic helper, she gets to know a newlywed woman named Gladys, who

86 Ibid., 51.
87 Ibid., 36.
used to be a laundry girl like Aunt Helen. Gladys’ husband cannot stand the idea of his wife sticking her money under his nose and forbids her to go back to work at the laundry. Before long Gladys is pregnant. Yet the couple continues to quarrel. “The words that passed between them are still carved into my memory as if a dagger had made its ruthless way there,” Marie recalls:

“Give me back the clothes I bought you!” he bellowed at her one day.

“Damn it, kid, you know I love you!” she begged through her tears—for now she could not go back to work even if she wished.

...There was something in the words so heart-corroding that I could not even repeat them at home; only once since in my life have I been able to repeat them, and that once when I was trying to find the source of my hatred of marriage and my disgust for women who are wives. Those two sentences sum up, in my mind, the true position of the husband and wife in the marriage relationship.\(^8\)

That “true position” in the marriage relationship, to Marie, is nothing else but a contract that binds women to give up personal freedom, basic human dignity and any right to their own body in exchange for a living.

Whether Smedley is referring to her own psychoanalytic treatment here is open to question. Yet Marie’s repulsion of marriage is so deeply seated that it casts a shadow over her own personal relationships. She comments on the unequal social standards about the relationship in the sexual act: “I considered that before marriage men have relations with women, and nobody thought it wrong—they were but ‘sowing wild oats.’ Nobody

\(^8\) Ibid., 73.
spoke of ‘fallen men’ or men who had ‘gone wrong’ or been ‘ruined.’ Then why did they speak so of women?”

Why is it that women “became ‘ruined’ by sex experience, whereas men became men by the same experience?”

It seems as if “women had nothing but virginity to trade for a bed and food for the rest of their days.” And that is also why “fathers protected the virginity of their daughters as men guard their bank accounts.”

Throughout the book, Marie repeatedly compares prostitution favorably to marriage. She declares that she is proud of her aunt Helen. To Marie Helen’s “profession seemed as honorable as that of any married woman—she made her living in the same way as they made theirs, except that she made a better living and had more rights over her body and soul.” At least, no man dares to mistreat her. Later, when confronted with the tinkering of a possible romance in her own life, Marie tries to untangle her twisted thoughts about marriage:

In my hatred of marriage, I thought that I would rather be a prostitute than a married woman. I could then protect, feed, and respect myself, and maintain some right over my own body. Prostitutes did not have to have children (which Marie considered as the main reason for poverty), I contemplated; men did not dare beat them; they did not have to obey. The “respectability” of married women seemed to rest in their acceptance of servitude and inferiority. Men did not like free, intelligent women...

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89 Ibid., 189.
90 Ibid., 356.
91 Ibid., 107.
92 Ibid., 142.
Women had to depend upon men for a living; a woman who made her own living, and would always do so, could be as independent as men.\textsuperscript{93}

Smedley's seemingly naïve and nonsensical attitude toward prostitution comes from her profound understanding of the socioeconomic reality of women's status at her time. In the early twentieth century, although the demand for women's economic independence was at the very top of the feminist agenda, to ordinary housewives it still remained a radical idea. For centuries, under Anglo-American common law, husbands owned their wives' labor power as well as their property, and in return had the obligation of support. "The marriage contract in its economic aspect resembled an indenture between master and servant. Both parties had rights and obligations: the husband owed the price of his independent superordinate role, which was to support his wife; and the wife owed service (her labor) and obedience."\textsuperscript{94} Influential advocates of women's rights, however, started to make the case for the "necessity and warrant" for economic independence for women and rejected domesticity as a universal model.\textsuperscript{95} In the United States of the early twentieth century when money had increasingly become the measure of a person's value, feminist demands for individual autonomy required an economic basis, and wage earning offered the prospect of individuation and self-support. One of the leading intellectuals in the women's movement during the first two decades of the twentieth century, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, was a prominent spokesperson for women's economic autonomy. To her, the inability to have paying jobs outside the domestic realm "appeared to generate not only money but also the disparities of opportunity, power, and prestige between the

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 189.
\textsuperscript{94} Nancy F. Cott, \textit{The Grounding of Modern Feminism} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) 185.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 119.
sexes. In *Women and Economics* (1898), Gilman stingingly denounced wives’ exchange of sexual services for economic security. At the same time, she also celebrated the potential for marital intimacy between self-supporting women and men.97

Although there is little proof of Smedley’s direct exposure to Gilman’s ideas, she was in circles in which similar thoughts were frequently discussed and she apparently embraced the same beliefs. Smedley believed that in the conventional marriage, women virtually surrendered their personal freedom in exchange for a living. It is not that they would not work once married. It is rather that they were not allowed to work outside of the domestic sphere as married women. Believing in women’s economic autonomy as the basis for one’s independence, and indeed one’s claim to individuality, Smedley fiercely denounces marriage as an institution that forced women to surrender their entitlement to self-sufficiency and their very humanity.

In *Daughter of Earth*, Smedley records her own endeavor to manage relationships based on economic independence. Decided that she can have companionship in marriage and yet make her own living, Marie starts to discuss marriage with her love, Knut. They agree on having no children and each earning their own living. Looking back, Smedley comments on the vulnerability of the relationship: “I really thought marriage without sex was possible—a sort of a romantic friendship, two people working together and remaining friends!”98 On the day Knut is about to go into the desert to work for several months, the two of them decide on a “daredevil” thing—getting married! They get their marriage license in two minutes, and Marie insists on paying half. For she wants to start right, and wouldn’t let Knut pay for her marriage as if she belonged to him. The husband

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96 Ibid.  
98 Smedley, 193.
laughs at the two dollars and a half he saves and decides to have a good meal on the train with it. Smedley treated her own marriage with the same casualness. A few days after getting married to Ernest Brundin, she mailed a postcard to her father, and the marriage was not mentioned at all.99

Unfortunately Marie’s revolutionary marriage does not last long. Despite Marie’s naivety, sex is inevitable. And with that comes pregnancy, which Marie dreads most. To her that means not being able to work and earn money and the responsibilities of childcare, which will ultimately lead to the end of her education and all her dreams of a better life. She almost kills herself trying to get an abortion and insists on paying for the operation herself, because it is her body and she “would let no man pay for it.”100 This time the husband does not joke about the money he saves, but “turned very pale.” After a second abortion, the couple agrees to a divorce “by friendly letters.”101

Some critics have rightly pointed out that the vivid representation of the anguish involved when women are forced to choose between personal autonomy and intimacy is at the center of Daughter of Earth’s appeal to feminists.102 Marie is hopelessly caught in the “essential dilemma of the novel—the incompatibility of love and personhood for a woman.”103 Fighting alongside her Indian nationalist friends in New York, Marie finds herself leading two lives—“a private life and a life to the public.”104 “Believing sex experience to be a thing of shame, a disgusting thing, and still having clandestine love affairs,” Semdley writes, “I felt unworthy of the respect shown me by friends…My mind

100 Smedley, 207.
101 Ibid., 218.
104 Smedley, 360.
was hard and clear and I worked with steady assurance. But My heart was heavy with
guilt.” Freedom and love, it seems, cannot be reconciled. “I longed for tenderness,” Marie
admits, “for love, but these I feared. When one loves, one can easily be enslaved; and I
would not be enslaved. Freedom is higher than love. At least today. Perhaps one day the
two will be one.” Although perplexed, Marie is reluctant to relinquish her right to an
independent love life, and talks dismissingly about the prospect of marriage:

   I thought that I was fairly well insured against marriage because I
had lived with a number of men. No man would marry me after that! Of
course women married men who have led an independent sex life
before—but men didn’t marry women who have. It gave me much comfort
that I would not find it easy to marry even if I fell in love and wished a
child. For I feared that I might one day love a man enough to wish to be
always with him, to tolerate everything. My present life fairly well
eliminated that disaster.105

Having witnessed her mother’s life, Marie becomes very suspicious about the viability of
love in the marriage relationship. Her cynicism again serves as a critique of the unequal
social standards of men and women’s sexual life.

   As secure as Marie may think herself from the danger of getting married, she soon
finds out that love may come at the most unexpected moment. After meeting Anand, a
seasoned political leader among the Indian nationalist in exile, at a social gathering,
Marie soon calls this man her husband. For the first time in her life, Marie actually thinks
that love may be stronger than intellect and the earth is after all “a very beautiful

105 Ibid., 363.
Yet the bliss does not last long. Anand starts to question her previous sex life and tells Marie that he “hopes” none of his countrymen that they work with has been her lover. Marie is at once on the alert. Years before she was raped by an Indian coworker in the movement, but Marie agrees to keep the secret to preserve the man’s credibility. She is shocked, however, when the same man later intentionally boasts the incident to make Anand politically vulnerable. After that, the trust between the couple is forever lost, and life becomes increasingly unbearable. The book ends with Marie’s decision to leave.

In *Daughter of Earth*, Smedley goes to great lengths to establish a complete union of the body personal and the body political. When discussing fictions written by radical women during the 1930s, Paula Rabinowitz points out that it is typical to see “gaps produced by the difficulty of narrating a class-conscious female subjectivity, that is, a narrative detailing the classed body of woman as both hungry and desiring, as both a member of the body politic and a sexual body.” However, *Daughter of Earth* foregrounds the relation of sexuality and political conviction in creating Marie the protagonist as a woman who makes it no secret that she is not ready to sacrifice her sexual body for the sake of her political beliefs. To her, the realization of her political principles is both a premise to and an outgrowth of personal liberation. As Barbara Foley points out, “Marie Roger’s ability to feel sexual passion after a lifetime of defensive distrust is profoundly linked to her confidence in her Indian lover as a political comrade—just as her subsequent withdrawal from the relationship is linked to her realization of his inability to disavow the sexism of his political cohorts.”

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106 Ibid., 373.
107 Rabinowitz, 63.
108 Foley, 238.
to live up to her political belief to challenge the conventional gender oppression in her personal life, Marie offers herself as the ultimate statement of her social ideals.
Chapter III: Class Politics

One of the longtime objectives of feminist theorists is to connect understandings of the “sex-gender” system to changes in the political and economic spheres of society. And many women who are advocates of the feminist cause are also familiar and friendly toward radicalism in politics. As Nancy Cott puts it, “Feminism was born ideologically on the left of the political spectrum, first espoused by bourgeois backgrounds, nonetheless identified more with labor than with capital and hoped for the elimination of exploitation by capital and the intervention of a democratically controlled state.” One of the white cofounders of the NAACP, Mary White Ovington paired Feminism with Socialism in the New Review in 1914, a journal of socialist intellectuals, calling them “the two greatest movements of today.”

Many feminist writers try very hard to embed their critique of gender hierarchy in a critique of the social system, and women’s revolutionary narratives can be an ideal bridge that connects both. Writings of women on the Left, as Rabinowitz rightly points out, “neither depend directly on Marxist theory, which views gender as an add-on to class, nor do they emerge from radically feminist separatism, which adds class onto its dominant gender analysis in order to rectify its own middle-class bias. The narratives by women literary radicals construct a classed female subject whose textual elaboration develops

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109 Nicholson, 93.
110 Cott, 35.
from the (maternal) body of the (fraternal) working class.” And thus they are able to narrate “class as a fundamentally gendered construct and gender as a fundamentally classed one” and bring into being “a theory of gendered classed subjectivity.”

Daughter of Earth, whose publication in 1929 is thought to signal the beginnings of proletarian realism as a literary movement in the United States, is, without a doubt, an archetype in this respect.

As mentioned above, in 1929, New Masses editor Walt Carmon praised Daughter of Earth for having the “broad, healthy stride... of a woman, a proletarian to the marrow, ...a fellow worker...[who] is one of us.” A year later, however, he qualified his previous enthusiasm by claiming that the book was “marred as [a] class novel” because it derived “its bias from the bitterness of a woman.” What Carmon failed to understand, then, is the reality that one’s subject position is always located on contested terrains. The cultural meanings of gender, as well as class, race, sexuality, ethnicity and so forth are in constant flux, and they all work together to create a fusion at a specific moment in time that ultimately matches an individual’s definition of the self. Rather than “marred as a class novel,” or, for that matter, as a feminist novel, Daughter of Earth accomplishes a great deal in revealing the social reality of multiple oppressions of marginal groups.

Marie understands perfectly well that the kind of hardship that her mother, her aunt and she herself have to endure is not predestined for all women. For the first time in her life, Marie finds out one day at school in Trinidad, where she studies with children whose fathers are doctors and do not have to haul sand and brick beyond the tracks like her own father, that good manners means washing your teeth with a toothbrush and bathing daily.

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112 Rabinowitz, 7,8.
113 Qtd. in Foley, 223.
She has only seen her mother put yellow soap on her finger and wash her teeth with it, and would have been ashamed to ask her to buy a brush only to use on her teeth. And daily bathing is also out of the question, as her mother washes clothes only on Monday and the children have to bath in the last, clean rinsing water; "the oldest one bathed first and the youngest one last."\textsuperscript{114} When the teacher goes on to talk about how to deal with sleeplessness, Marie becomes even more baffled. The teacher suggests: "if unable to sleep, one should get up and take a walk; or one should have two beds in a room and changed from one to the other," as "fresh sheets produced sleep." To Marie it all sounds astonishing: "I had never seen sheets on a bed; we used only blankets. And to what bed I should change was a puzzle! For we only had four beds for eight people."\textsuperscript{115} On Mother's Day, Marie's mother "had put on a new calico dress with a belt" to honor the occasion. Yet intimidated by the respectable housewives, she only "stood in the back of the room, apart from the well-dressed women, and her frightened eyes watched as they talked so easily with each other." After that, her mother never goes to Marie's school again.

Growing up in the mining towns of the west, Marie encounters the bleak reality of class oppression first hand. She paints a social picture of the monopoly of power at the mining town of Delagua as follows:

The Company owned all the mines and all the country for miles about. We rented our house from the Company—there were no other houses. The one store from which we bought food and clothing was the Company store—no other was permitted to exist. We paid the high Company prices or we went without. The school building belonged to the

\textsuperscript{114} Smedley, 53.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
Company and the teacher was chosen by Company officials; the saloon where the men gathered and spent their money was leased to a saloon keeper by the Company, and this saloon keeper had to be in “good standing” with the Company. The minister who passed through the town once a month had to preach of God and heaven and not of this earth. The railways leading to the town were Company railways. This Almighty Power issued its own money—script—and all miners and workers were paid with it instead of in American money; the banks in Trinidad cashed it at a 10% discount.\textsuperscript{116}

The miners are tied hand and foot, and there is no way out. “In all directions lay the lands and the towns of the Company, and to the north lay other towns of other Companies with conditions just the same.”\textsuperscript{117} At another mining town Tercio, Marie senses the same atmosphere of “smoldering discontent and hatred…The miners dragged themselves to the holes in the mountain-side each morning, and, black with coal smut, dragged themselves home at night. Their children—boys of ten onward—worked around the mines until they were strong enough to become miners themselves.”\textsuperscript{118} Here life is only a subhuman existence that “meant only working, sleeping, eating what or when you could, and breeding.” And in order to preserve their most valuable asset, the coal, the company is willing to sacrifice anything, human lives included. Marie once witnesses such a tragedy. Hurrying back home to take care of her dying mother, she sees people rushing through the streets, “with horror-stricken faces.” The mine on the outskirts of the town is “belching black smoke,” and miners are penned in the mines. The company decides to

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 102.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 118.
close the airshafts to save the coal, but the resulting fumes would smother the men who
are trapped inside the mine. "Coal was dear...life was cheap" is the cruel reality that
Marie finds out time and again. Economic domination by the company translates into
complete social control, even to the point of assigning value to life and death.

Throughout the book Smedley repeatedly speaks of "the darkness of not-knowing"
as what keeps the working class at the bottom of the capitalist system. Marie the
protagonist once observes: "Too many years have flown since those days, too many
storms have swept over my own personal life, for me to recall fully the depths of non-
knowing that was ours...Because the world of knowledge was far removed from us, we
in our canyon reacted instead of thinking." This "not-knowing" is the result of unequal
economic relationship and leads to further socio-economic domination. One of the storms
that Marie talks about occurs in a larger than life scenario. After losing all their worldly
possessions in a flood, Marie’s father signs a contract to haul coal for a mine-owner.
Before the year ends, the owner, Mr. Turner, comes for a visit and informs John that after
a year’s hard work, he earns hardly anything. Barely literate, John has signed the contract
with a scrawl, which now seems to mock at his "ignorance and defenseless." Claiming
that he is only holding to the contract with John’s signature, Mr. Turner is hardened
against to Elly’s weeping and John’s fierce accusations. Once more the brutal reality fails
Marie’s parents, who are only "naïve folks who believed that a harvest followed hard
labor; that those who work the hardest earn the most."

In her desperate effort to pierce through this "darkness of not knowing," Marie
clings tightly to her pursuit of education. She learns the hard way that those who have

119 Ibid., 133.
120 Ibid., 120.
121 Ibid., 65.
also happen to be those who know, while those who “have nothing and from whom everything is taken away” happen to be those who do not. Indeed, this yearning for knowledge and education, which is induced ultimately by her observations about class oppression, constitutes an underlying theme that goes hand in hand with Marie’s search for a place of her own in the world.

In *Daughter of Earth* education is often considered a class signifier. Newly admitted to the community of “city people” in Trinidad, Marie at once notices the city’s landmarks: “It had a grade school building, and a high school building reared its head among trees on the hill across the river; over there rich people lived. The high school and riches seemed to go together,” Marie comments, “Anyway we, who lived beyond the tracks, knew that we could never dream of going to high school.” The grade school that Marie gets to attend for the first time is already “a sacred place to which it was an honor” for her mother to send the children.

Marie’s yearning for further education owes, in large part, to her mother. Elly only went to the sixth grade herself, but she somehow has great faith in the empowering force of education. Having been cheated the hard way, John takes his family to the town of Delagua and starts all over again. But this time, he decides to “keep books.” Marie is asked to help. Although an eighth-grade student and the most-educated person of the family, she keeps getting a different total each time. “With a flourish to shame” Marie, John starts to add himself but still gets a different result. Annoyed and frustrated, John would “bawl into the kitchen” and asks for help from Elly: “Elly! Come here an’ add this.

122 Ibid., 73.
123 Ibid., 50.
124 Ibid., 53.
Here you’ve got a datter that’s been to the eighth grade an’ can’t add.” Then comes the triumph of the mother. Marie recalls:

That was a proud moment for my mother! She just wiped her hands on her apron and sat down. She added aloud so that we could hear: “two an’ five’s seven, seven an’ eight’s fifteen, fifteen an’ eight’s twenty-three, twenty-three an’ nine’s thirty-two”...and then finally the result. My father stood above her, listening and watching, his eyes filled with the unwavering faith and confidence of a child. From that moment onward his intellectual life lay in my mother’s hands.125

Education, or this power of “knowing,” not only boosts Elly’s power at home, it also elevates her social status. When Marie becomes a schoolteacher at the age of sixteen in New Mexico and makes forty dollars a month, Elly “proudly made shirts and skirts and sent them to her school-teacher daughter!” And since then, whenever she meets the wife of the superintendent of the camp in town, “she did not try to hide her big-veined hands and pass by without being seen, she raised her head proudly and said: ‘Howdy, Mis’ Richards...it’s a nice day t’day, ain’t it?”126 It does not matter that her husband might be hauling sand and bricks for the other lady’s husband, or that she herself makes a living by washing other people’s clothes, Marie being a schoolteacher somehow entitles Elly to interact with the “first lady” of Tercio on an equal ground.

*Daughter of Earth* chronicles Marie’s struggle to realize the potential that education offers to people who strive for upward mobility. Yet once in the company with those that she has always wanted to be, Marie still finds herself nowhere at home. She clearly sees a

125 Ibid, 105.
126 Ibid., 127.
gap between those people who try to mobilize the working class from an aesthetic and theoretical height and those, like herself, know the working class from heart, because they are the home-bred group. Marie recalls one instance that speaks volumes about the difference. When taken to see "a drama of ideas" for the first time, Marie is "bored to death." She admits that she cannot understand "anything on stage that did not have a lot going on: clog dancing, loud music and laughter, rough jokes, gaudy clothing and very extravagant acting. To see people acting naturally and just talking ideas was strange. The play seemed to be about a married woman who saved up money until she could buy a typewriter and by it earn her own living. Such a silly thing to write a play about!" While her more "educated" friends, who Marie thinks live in the world of ideas, are absorbed in the play, she just find the same ideas too "natural" to be made into a play.

If by that time Marie is still too inexperienced and unconfident to critically question the two different approaches, she starts to consider the issue more seriously in New York as an intellectually mature activist. Commenting on those "cigarette-smoking, cocktail-drinking, pinktea-parlor" Socialists, Marie reveals her deeply ambiguous feelings:

Very many of them spoke of grave things in that light manner that is American, apparently never permitting their feelings to be too deeply touched. They skimmed the surface only—perhaps too wise to be drawn beyond their depths... I do not know if they were superficial,—or if they were wise... Many of them belonged to those interesting and charming intellectuals who idealize the workers, from afar, believing that within the working class lies buried some magic force and knowledge which, at the

127 Ibid., 190.
current moment, will manifest itself in the form of a social revolution and transform the face of the world.”

Growing up from among the very people these socialists try to idealize, Marie understands that the working-class are people with body and soul. Just as the body is the site of her feminist politics, so too is it the site of her class politics—the former is about love and desire, the latter is marked by hunger and pain. Yet both are centered by a pursuit of equality. Marie’s political views are derived from her knowledge about people like her father, who, cheated by one mine owner himself yet still with hope to become an employer, would identify with the sheriff and the camp officials when there is a strike by foreign miners. There are also people like her father’s coworkers, who talk about hoping the big bosses of “the Company” were shot and let alcohol drown their disappointment or let poker absorb their resentment. There are people like her mother, who has “instinctive and unhesitating sympathy” for the miners and hates rich or powerful people, but still says “Yes, sir!” and “Thank you, sir,” to whoever pay the wages, because that is considered “necessary.” And finally there are people like her aunt Helen, who holds individual freedom dear to her heart but still hopes that Marie could marry somebody rich after she completes her education.

Growing up observing social realities at home and in the communities to which her family belongs, Marie learns about class struggle and socioeconomic oppression in the ultimate personal manner. Unlike her more sophisticated “socialist” friends, who read about the working class from theory books, Marie offers a unique case of what Antonio

128 Ibid., 239-40.
129 Ibid., 120.
Gramsci calls an “organic” intellectual. Stemming right out of the soil of real working class life, Marie critiques the unjust economic system of the capitalist society and the trappings of upward mobility, yet still demands and claims an education, or, in other words, a fair chance, that allows her, and all individuals, for that matter, to access it.

Examining the conflation of class status with intelligence, Deb Busman observes that in the dominant ideology of a middle-class mythology that oftentimes passes as the natural law of society, intelligence is habitually represented as “somehow belonging to the ‘educated’ individuals of the owning class.” “Denying and undermining the intelligence of certain groups of people has been a long-standing tradition in this country,” Busman points out, “a personal and institutionalized tactic of oppression used to deny the rights and humanity of women, people of color, and the poor and working class.” Marie, however, never believes that intelligence is the domain or prerogative of the privileged and so is able to control her own autonomy of judgment. With the voice of an informed and retrospective narrator, Marie talks about her family influence on her intellectual life:

I recall the rougher, unhappy men in the mining camps, and their silent, unhappy wives. It is with a feeling of sadness and of affection that I think of them now. But there were years when, in search of what I thought were better, nobler things, I denied these, my people, and my family. I forgot the songs they sung—and most of those songs are now dead; I erased their dialect from my tongue; I was ashamed of them and their way

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130 Gramsci, 301.
132 Ibid.
of life. But now—yes, I love them; they are a part of my blood; they, with all their virtues and their faults, played a great part in forming my way of looking at life.\textsuperscript{133}

Marie holds fast to this “way of looking at life” that derives from her personal experience and knowledge. She values it more than any kind of ideological judgments or external leadership.

Fearlessly independent, she is more easily drawn to individuals’ experience than party-line policy. When there is a split into a right and left wing within the socialist party, Marie explains why she joins neither but is compelled to join the I.W.W.:

The entire ideology of the right wing made no sense to me, for it had no vitality, no strength; step by step progress seemed to me short-sighted. And I did not join the left wing because many of its leaders were those brilliant intellectuals who had formerly so aroused my resentment...I did not wish to be led by them, to permit them to tell me what to think or do. It was at about this time that I met many members of the I.W.W., heard them speak, talked with them, and that I became a member of their organization. Its ideology and its form seemed more natural to me than that of any other organization. It most certainly came closer to expressing my own manner of life and thought.\textsuperscript{134}

It is always the personal touch that plays the most important role in Marie’s political conviction. Refusing to resign the right of judgment to any external entity, she locates in herself the authority to define and critique the social reality around her. And the

\textsuperscript{133} Smedley, 126.  
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 346.
development of her “own manner of life and thought,” as *Daughter of Earth* reveals, bears the indelible marks of her personal experience.
Chapter IV: Race Politics

If Marie is born a girl in a working class family and has to confront the social realities of gender and class oppressions, she deliberately chooses to devote herself to the Indian nationalist movement in exile that seems to be completely foreign to her immediate personal concerns. Yet it is exactly her personal experience as a member of one marginal group that allows her to think “outside” her body in much general terms, and to be able to identify with the oppressed people of the world. In addition, the narrator Marie makes it clear several times in the book that working with the group of Indian activists also provides her with a kind of intimacy that has long been lost in her own family.

Critics of Daughter of Earth have mainly focused on the gender and class issues discussed in the book, which is only reasonable, given the social tension on class struggle when it was first published in 1929, and the surging enthusiasm in feminism as “the second wave” made its way through academia in the seventies when Feminist Press reprinted the book. Very few have paid attention to the significance of Marie’s understanding of racial and ethnic issues. Interestingly enough, while Walt Carmon considered the book “marred as [a] class novel” because of its feminist bias, one critic claims that “a preoccupation with class” leads Agnes Smedley to “virtually ignore the issue of American racism.” On the contrary, I argue that racial and ethnic awareness is

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135 Kissen, 426.
always an underlying tension of the book that culminates in Marie’s choice to join the Indian nationalist movement as a life-long career.

It is worth pointing out that to ask any author to address all dimensions of the social reality in a single book is simply naïve and unreasonable. Authors only write about, and can only be good at writing about things that resonate most to them. Great writers, however, stand out and are able to touch the readers with the depth of their understanding and portrayal of their subject matter in question, not the breadth. Yet, *Daughter of Earth* is a rare case where the protagonist’s life stories reflect back on a wide array of social issues that are intricately woven together. Among them is the question of race and ethnicity.

Like many other things, Marie learns about race from her family. Still a child, she notices that her father is a great storyteller. She remembers that people listen to her father’s stories, which are filled with colors and adventures, but they do not always believe what he says. Marie attributes that to the fact that her father’s side of the family is different from her own: “His family was unknown to our world.” Besides, “they” are also said to be “unsteady” and “unreliable,” not farmers like her mother’s folks. 

“For he was not one of them;” Marie explains, “he was almost a foreigner, in fact. His family was unknown to our world ... a shiftless crew; that was the Indian blood in their veins...you never could trust foreigners or Indians.”

In northern Missouri at the beginning of the twentieth century, one’s racial identity as a Native American is the reason used to explain away personality and character differences. And nobody questions...
that. Even little Marie is taught to identify with the dominant racial group and situate her own father's family on the outside of the boundary that defines her own selfhood.

Beyond her immediate family, Marie is widely exposed to racial and ethnic differences in the western frontier. Growing up in mining towns throughout the West, Marie is used to the sight of miners meeting on the front porch of the saloon and before the Company store, "speaking in many different languages—Polish, Czechish, German, mingled with English." The town officials call them "ignorant, lousy foreigners," and the store and saloonkeepers think they are "dangerous customers" because they do not understand their languages. Yet it is those foreigners who actually risk their lives in mining, something the Americans dread and try everything to avoid. When staying at a friend's ranch in Arizona, Marie notices "a rambling shed—the Chinese laundry" on the main street. There she learns to "swear in Chinese and to sprinkle clothing by squirting water from [her] mouth,—both no easy accomplishments." Smedley's biographers also point out that the school that she went to in Trinidad has annual photos and lists of graduates that showed "remarkable ethnic diversity: Blacks and Hispanics mixed with whites, whose numbers included many recent Slavic and Italian immigrants." Growing up in the Western frontier, where different racial and ethnic groups intermingle on a daily basis, Smedley is exposed not only to the social reality of interaction among diverse racial and ethnic groups but also the tensions therein.

Even at an early age, Marie is extremely aware of the complexities of the "color scheme" in life and the class significance it embodies. She repeatedly talks about her

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138 Ibid., 101.
139 Ibid., 171.
140 MacKinnon and MacKinnon, 7.
141 Smedley, 51.
mother’s hand as “so big-veined and worn that they were almost black.”142 Yet the little girl who holds Marie in amazement because her father is a doctor is remembered as nothing but whiteness. “Her skin was white, her hair was thick and nearly white, and her dresses, shoes and stockings were always white.”143 When her fascination leads Marie to follow the little girl home, she finds out that the latter lives “in a large, low brick bungalow surrounded by a lawn with many flowers. The grass was cut as smooth as a window pane, everything was peaceful, orderly and quiet. Even the fence and gate were painted white.”144 Even in the microcosm of a western mining town, blackness symbolizes a world of hardship and misery while whiteness that of peace and comfort. Color and its socioeconomic significance are deeply embedded in Marie’s outlook on life in her formative years.

If she learns about issues of race and ethnicity in real life, Marie shapes and expresses her position on them in the classroom. As a student on the campus of the University of California, she attends a class in anthropology when a student claims that one can just look at people of color to know that they are inferior by nature. There are, in the same classroom, “a thin, dark man from India,” “a Negro girl” and “an American Indian.” It is Marie, however, who rises and challenges the student. When asked by the same person whether she would marry a Negro, Marie replies, “I’d rather marry some Negroes than some white men I know!” After that class, she flings around the campus feeling as if she could “tear the trees from the earth by their roots.”145 As indicated in the student’s challenge to Marie, interracial marriage is the ultimate test for social and

142 Ibid.
143 Ibid., 52.
144 Ibid.
145 Ibid., 216.
personal toleration for racial difference at that time. Defying the taboo of miscegenation, Marie flaunts her revolutionary position by approving the very fundamentally personal act of embracing racial difference.

Her belief in the equality of all human beings leads Marie to not only argue with her fellow student but also challenge university professors. After moving to New York, Marie goes to evening classes at the city's university. In one of the evening lectures, the professor, blonde and "immaculately clad," who is also an adviser to a big international rubber manufacture, tells his class that an eight-hour working day is not possible in the industry. The African Negroes work in harsh environments from dawn to dark so that the price of rubber can remain low in the States. And they actually don't mind it a bit. A clash is inevitable:

Without thinking I arose to my feet, and protested:

"I don't believe you. I think if those men work under such conditions their hours should be very short and they should be paid very much. Why do you try to tell us they don't mind it?"

"They do not mind it," he assured me with conviction. "In fact they like it. I have even seen one of them stand and take a good licking, then trot off, perfectly satisfied."

"I do not believe you! Even were it true, we should be ashamed!"

"But I have seen it, I tell you! You judge them as if they were like you or me."
"How do you know what they feel or think—what do you know of their suffering—what could you know? And do you believe that Negroes are less sensitive than we are just because they are black?"

"I have worked with them. I’ve seen them do things and tolerate things we would never tolerate. They don’t feel as we do. An eight-hour day to them is an unheard-of thing; it would cut their wages in half, and they would not stand for it."

I was filled with rage, but my mind could not find replies...

In this exchange of ideas, the reader is introduced to a grown-up Marie who no longer speaks of "educated" people with unwavering admiration but is an independent thinker who is confident and feels comfortable questioning people of authority on issues she deems of fundamental importance. While the "blonde" professor assumes a common ground with his students on the basis of shared racial identity, she chooses to extend her sympathy and a basic respect for humanity to people across the racial boundary. Marie’s growing racial awareness allows her to critically re-evaluate education.

Marie’s decision to make the Indian nationalist exiles’ struggle for their country’s independence her own cause speaks volumes about her take on issues of racial equality. She is first initiated into the movement at a lecture given by an Indian scholar on the campus of her school in Arizona. Marie recalls her first impression of the speaker: he is "a tall, dark, elderly man with a thin face and earnest eyes. He passed me as I stood on the steps of the main entrance. Something about him made me feel very sad. Perhaps it was that he was a man of color in a land that judges men by color. Or that he belonged to

146 Ibid., 261.
the subjected, and was being humiliated.” Here is somebody who, rather than “ignore the issue of American racism,” taps into the very reality of racial inequality in the country and the world.

Maturing intellectually as well as emotionally, Marie starts to see how even national identity is racially constructed. In the fanfare of “patriotic” sentiments in the middle of WWI, Marie finds her anti-war position on the defensive. In her office, one word of criticism would propel some girl to charge: “If you don’t like this country, why don’t you go back to the one you came from?” At that Marie will reply: “The one I came from! My people were so American that this was their country before any white men came here.”

Marie has traveled a long way from the little girl who sees her partially Indian father as foreign to her own world to a young woman who totally embraces her Native American ancestry and takes pride in it. When she is arrested because her involvement in the Indian Nationalist movement, Marie is more directly questioned on her patriotism:

“Have you no love for your country?” [the secret service agent] exclaimed passionately. “Don’t you want to help us expose this terrible plot against your country?”

... “You are a white woman! ... I ask you—will you help your country?”

... They told me I was a white woman! So was my mother who lay under the earth...so was Helen...so were all Helens and the mothers of my class! My country! Their country!

“Think of your country!” the official again cried.

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147 Ibid., 219.
148 Ibid., 282.
“You are not my country!”

Again the official tries to appeal to Marie’s racial identity as evidence of her obligation to a government that has forgone the commitment to its own people. Marie, on the other hand, has long figured out the underlying reality of one’s racial identity and is committed to a cause that is larger than herself. “It was but chance that I was born white and not black; free and not slave;” she declares, “I believed that a truth is a truth only when it covers the generality, and not just me.”

Differentiating between the ruling class and the country, Marie is able to side with people who share with her the experience of oppression, even though they are a world apart. Earlier Marie’s Indian mentor Sardarji asks her whether she can understand his love for the soil of his country. Marie makes it clear that the soil of one’s country is not identical to the government. “Love my country, Sardarji—do you mean the soil?” Marie tells her mentor, “Yes, I love that. I love the mountains of the West. And I love the deserts. But what most people mean by country is the government and the powerful men who rule it. No. I don’t love them. But the earth—yes. This is our earth.” Even her “socialist” friends sometimes cannot understand her passion for the Indian cause, and claim that only a “nut” can work for such a distant thing. Marie replies with a true internationalist spirit, “I am not working for individuals. I am working for the idea of liberty… I have no country… my countrymen are the men and women who work against oppression—it does not matter who or where they are. With them I feel at home—we understand each other. Others are foreign to me.”

\[^{149}\] Ibid., 326. 
\[^{150}\] Ibid., 262. 
\[^{151}\] Ibid., 276. 
\[^{152}\] Ibid., 355.
Besides “the idea of liberty,” Marie is also able to find personal fulfillment in her work with the Indians. Throughout her life Marie has needed and longed for the warmth of human affection. “I had always instinctively drawn closer to people,” she professes, “searching for warmth, tenderness, affection... Among the Indians I found much that I was seeking—a warmth, an intimate closeness that was not just sex, a gentleness.”

Sardarji, her Indian mentor and initiator who leads her into the cause, personifies that for which Marie has been searching. Living intimately with Sardarji and his other two Indian students, as if “they were [her] father and brothers,” Marie sinks right into the make-believe domestic atmosphere, and even feels that “they belonged to [her].” She remembers that when she and the boys are in the middle of a play-fight about their study, Sardarji would always end the argument like a father disciplines his naughty kids: “At it again! Leave the house, all three of you... and don’t come back... at least for two hours! I have a right to a little rest in my own house!” And the three of them would find themselves “contemplating the icy pavement below.”

When entrusted with a list of addresses of Indian revolutionaries, Marie readily agrees to protect the information, partly because she knows that they are her mentor Sardarji’s countrymen or even coworkers. Looking back on her own resolve to protect the Indians, Marie detects a wish on her part to redeem the wrongs that she believes she has done to her own family members. “I recalled that once I had deserted my littler brothers who needed my help and protection,” Marie explains. “I had been selfish and in my drive to save myself had sacrificed them... Then I... decided that I would not again desert anyone who trusted and needed me. To me the Indians became a symbol of my duty and responsibility. They took

153 Ibid., 357.
154 Ibid., 268.
the place of my father, of my brother who was dead and of the brother of whose destiny I was as yet uncertain.” Janice and Stephen MacKinnon have concluded that Agnes Smedley’s political commitment “sprang basically from personal rage over the indignities she and her family had suffered in the mining towns of the West.” It is logical to assume that Smedley’s protagonist Marie would also derive strength and political conviction from the warmth and tenderness of a surrogate family that she finds in the company of her Indian comrades.

155 MacKinnon and MacKinnon, 27.
CONCLUSION

Readers, especially readers in academia, tend to come to a text with preexisting expectations and agendas in mind. They usually try to distill out of the text something that will go along with and bend toward their prefabricated schema. Consequently it is no wonder that feminists will focus on issues of women’s oppression in *Daughter of Earth*, while scholars with socioeconomic concerns higher up on their priority list would naturally hail portrayals of the awakening of the protagonist’s class consciousness in the same book. However, the self is shaped by a diverse variety of characteristics that include but are not limited to gender, class and race. What Agnes Smedley wants to accomplish, as a writer at the very starting line of her professional career, is to tell a personal story about how a political conviction is gradually developed. As Paula Rabinowitz rightly observes, in this book, “Gender restrictions, poverty and sexual vulnerability mark the points of development for the young working-class female subject. Her consciousness is elaborated within a network of social and familial ties that bind individual subjectivity to psychic, social, and economic formations.”

In identifying the Indian Nationalist movement as her ultimate mission, Marie the protagonist arrives at an extraordinary unity of both repudiating and embracing her immediate personal interest. Released from jail, Smedley is invited to join Margaret Sanger’s birth control movement, which appeals directly to the feminist side of her,

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156 Rabinowitz, 99.
which, in a sense, defines her very being. Yet it is not to happen. Marie contemplates the reason:

Someone has said that one loves most where one has suffered. That may be true. But I do not know if I suffered more in jail than I had suffered in my childhood and girlhood. I remember little but suffering in my life. The Indian work was the first thing I had ever suffered for out of principle, from choice. It was not just living, just reacting to life—it was expression. It gave me a sense of respect, of dignity, that nothing else had ever given me.\(^\text{157}\)

Finding “happiness and expression,” and, to use academic jargon, “agency,” in the Indian work, Marie/Smedley is willing to forsake struggles of a more personal nature, like the emancipation of the working class and the liberation of women. However, her involvement in the Indian work is also the result of her idolization of the Indian scholar Sardarji. Marie admits “the bond of love, of gratitude, of affection, that held [her] to him swept beyond him to his people and his movement. This bond has endured the strain of class, of political and of intellectual differences.”\(^\text{158}\) We may as well add gender and sexual difference in there. She is able to achieve a state of empathy with the Indian exiles not only because they are all “oppressed people,” but also because she finds the “warmth and tenderness” she has been seeking in the people that she works with, whom she loves “with the love [she] [has] never been able to give to [her] brothers, to [her] father, to [her] class.”\(^\text{159}\)

\(^{157}\) Smedley, 149  
\(^{158}\) Ibid., 357.  
\(^{159}\) Ibid., 359.
At the very beginning of the book, Marie talks about her obsession of a "crazy-quilt" as a little girl:

I recall a crazy-quilt my mother once had. She made it from the remnants of gay and beautiful cotton materials. She also made a quilt of solid blue. I would stand gazing at the blue quilt for a little time, but the crazy-quilt held me for hours. It was an adventure.

I shall gather up these fragments of my life and make a crazy-quilt of them. Or a mosaic interesting pattern—unity in diveristy. This will be an adventure."160

It has indeed been an adventure, for both the author and the reader. Liz Stanley once contemplated: "‘The past’ is not a time and place that ‘exist’…—it does not go on its own sweet way whether I visit it or not. Its time is over and done with and it exists now, only in and through representational means. Its ‘then’ no longer has existence except through ‘now’ and those moments of apprehension which are concerned with it."161 By revisiting her past, Smedley was able to not only make sense of but also represent it in a way that allows her to actively engage in a meaningful present and future.

Smedley’s adventure, however, did not end with the writing of the book. She was at a turning point when she wrote Daughter of Earth. Her marriage was falling apart. Her credibility in the movement to which she had devoted herself was jeopardized. She suffered a few nervous breakdowns and was receiving psychoanalysis treatment. Yet by putting her life stories on paper, she was able to see the important aspects of her life and

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160 Ibid., 8.
how and why she got to where she was. Almost like going through a reincarnation, Smedley came out of the book self-consciously transformed and went on to operate at a global level. At the peak of her fame, Smedley was considered the John Reed of the Chinese revolution.\footnote{MacKinnon and MacKinnon, 1.} She lived in China from 1928 to 1941 as a correspondent and reported a nation in war and transformation for news agencies that included the \textit{Frankfurter Zeitung}, the \textit{Manchester Guardian}, the \textit{Nation}, the \textit{New Republic}, and the \textit{New Masses}. Smedley was among the first group of westerners who went to the headquarters of the Chinese Red Army in Yanan and urged other western journalists to see the reality of Chinese revolution for themselves. She published several books on the Chinese socialist movement and a biography of Zhu De, who later became the head of the People’s Liberation Army. Her ashes are buried at the Cemetery for Revolutionaries on the outskirts of Beijing. And to this day, Smedley is still dearly remembered by the Chinese people.

But before all that happened, when her life was in crisis, Agnes Smedley tried to revisit and comprehend those moments in her life that had been in the darkness through the representational means of autobiographical writing. As a result, she achieved a sense of self that is molded by her personal travails but also represents her metamorphosis into a politically informed individual functioning actively in the public sphere. Patching up together past moments of her life, Smedley illustrated how life can be just like a colorful crazy-quilt and that differences of gender, class and race are “as shadows on the face of a stream, each lending a beauty of its own.”\footnote{Smedley, 279.}
Selected Bibliography


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