

Fanny Howe: Fictions of Provocation and Resistance

Beginning Oneⁱ

I start my presentation with this mesmerizing, well-known image. What the image says, what it doesn't say, its context, its genesis—provide a touchstone for thinking about Fanny's approach to writing.

When Boyd generously invited me to deliver a lecture on Fanny Howe for the Scrutiny series, Fanny mentioned by email (more than once) that she hoped that I would talk about Palestine—and this is my gesture in that direction. Our mutual commitment to Palestinian liberation and resistance is honored in everything that will be said and left unsaid.



This image was captured this past summer on a beach in the besieged Gaza strip. It is not a photograph, but a still from video [footage](#) taken by French journalists for TF1. During the horrific siege on Palestine this past summer, foreign journalists staying at al-Deira hotel often watched the children of fishermen playing on the beach. Sometimes the reporters and camera operators would go down and play soccer with them.

On July 16th, 2014 the Israeli navy targeted a ramshackle hut [where the fishermen usually store their nets](#). No Palestinian resistance fighters were present on the scene, as numerous eyewitnesses testified. A few seconds later, the Israelis let loose a second attack directly aiming at the fleeing children.

This image is of three of the boys running from the carnage. In the moments before or after the video was taken, four of the children playing on the beach were annihilated. The names of the martyrs, all aged 9 and 10, are Ismael Mohammed Bakr, Zakaria Ahed Bakr, Ahed Atif Bakr, and Mohammed Ramiz Bakr.

I choose to offer this particular image and not the image of the aftermath: the children's bent, dismembered, brutalized bodies in the sand. This highly curated video still was originally tweeted, as far as we can tell, by the Irish Rugby player and Palestine solidarity activist Trevor Hogan.

Last year when I [interviewed Fanny for Bomb magazine](#), I asked her about what she was trying to convey or achieve in her work, and she said: "I suppose I am trying to describe radiance—a preserved radiance—and to show that there is an invisible "elseness" to everything. You go on because of it, but it's the thing you can't quite see."

This image, something of the magic and sorrow in it, provides a visual corollary of that preserved radiance and that “eliteness” that Fanny speaks of. If I could choose any piece of visual work that delivers the paradoxical combination beauty and the grief conveyed in Fanny’s writings, it might be this one. The glow of the yellow sand, a kind of halo for the fleeing children.

The children have become traces on the screen. This image is one of traces left behind from a persistent carnage inflicted on the people Gaza for the past six decades. Like raindrops streaking a window pane, it lifts this moment into permanence.

How to read this haunting and unmistakably beautiful image without context? At first glance and to the uninitiated, this photograph (which is not even a photograph) might read as an offhand, blurry snapshot taken with an unsteady camera. Some appealing beach children witnessed sentimentally from a distance. Reading further you might think of it as a poignant representation of childhood itself, wistful, hazy in detail. A nostalgic moment forever frozen. Without context, a viewer might see it as a representation of a transient, ephemeral joy. Even if you knew of the tragedy surrounding them, you might believe that this was the boys’ last moments of play on the beach.

This is not an image of innocence. This is an image of terror. It was shot seconds after the first explosion landed and the children were trying desperately to escape. Though they didn’t know it yet, they were fleeing the site of a massacre.

The composition of this frame is a matter of chance and craft. It is chance that Western journalists were actually on hand to observe to the casual, deliberate slaughter of innocent Palestinian civilians that has been a nearly daily event for over sixty years—so to have captured this moment at all is a rare occasion. Art and resistance to oppression require someone who is willing to be a witness.

Coincidence (or magic) is also at play in the symbolic elements of the composition. The children’s clothing—the green, red, and white shirts when combined with the looming shadow on the foreground form the colors of the Palestinian flag—lifting this fleeting moment to the level of mythos and national iconography. Fate is already printed here, *maktoob*, written, as if martyrdom was already stamped on this moment.

The children’s faces are darkened, anonymous—like most of the nameless victims of the violence of colonial erasure. Their facelessness makes them more universal. In their impersonal presence they become emblematic of all children—we recognize that these could be any children at all anywhere.

These are some of the elements of chance, but craft is also at work. This frame was clipped at the 43rd second of a video that lasts 1 minute and 12 seconds. Whoever isolated it, and made this image famous, had a keen eye. They also cropped out some foreground and background to bring the children closer.

The editor intentionally captured the matching strides of the children, apprehended midflight like sea birds, the joy of innocence, the tenuous connection to the earth at that instant. The graininess of the

image is part of its quiet splendor. Like Howe's work that is so bewildering, fragmented, and anachronistic— the form comes to us as if through a filter of sadness.

"Beauty" Howe says, "is the presence of something else wanting to be born. It's like a figure that we are rushing for, both to touch and to save. It flies ahead—and we rush after it. We reach for it."

This eternally frozen moment has the quality of a prayer or a sacred text in that it has the potent ability to reach the deepest recesses of human trauma.

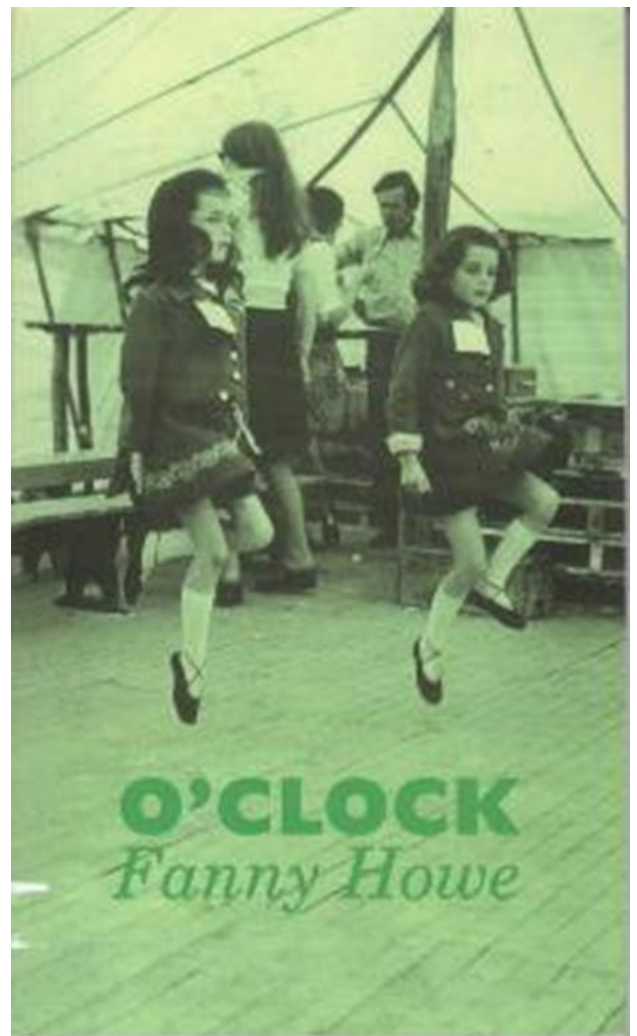
"But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them... like gold in the furnace he tried them, and like a sacrificial burnt offering he accepted them... In the time of their visitation they will shine forth, and will run like sparks through the stubble..."

The combination of mystery and trying to make sense—the interplay between choice and chance is an important theme in Fanny's poetics —especially the necessity of deliberately choosing to remain open to chance. This is a form of meditation and grace, but always the labor follows. (Ever modest and self-deprecating Fanny likes to underplay how hard she works).

Though Fanny makes this practice very explicit in numerous texts, the conjoining of chance and choice is how all art comes into being: the reliance on the arrival of incident or coincidence and then the labor that is required to create a suitable structure. The hard part is to be willing and to find the time and energy to engage in the necessary work.

The image I share here is a composition, which means that has elements of fiction—the fiction or artifice of the frozen moment in time, which is an imaginary figment, an impossibility. It is the artifice that manages to save these children, protecting them for all eternity from inevitable violence. This may be the preserved radiance that Fanny speaks of.

Despite the preserved nature of the image, we do see fate arriving. The children are already silhouettes, thin limbed, almost disappearing. The image already suggests their vulnerability. The cruel shadow looming before them in the



O'Clock cover (Reality Street, 1995). I am taken with the similarities between this image of Irish girls dancing and the image of the Bakr children on the beach. The attention to the fragility and fictionality of an instant in time.

sand and the indifference of the ocean behind them seem to want to swallow them.

How can something this tragic, be so beautiful?

This has always been the question.

The answer has to do with aesthetic transformation. I find Herbert Marcuse's defense of the revolutionary nature of art to be helpful in understanding. In *The Aesthetic Dimension*, he writes that by virtue of aesthetic transformation, art manages to break through the mystifications of social reality.

"Art," he says, "alienates individuals from their functional existence and performance in society—it is committed to an emancipation of sensibility, imagination and reason..."

A critic may rightly say that this moment of aesthetic transformation cannot and will not help these children in a besieged place that has become nothing more and nothing less than the first concentration camp of the twenty-first century. This is correct. It does not. But it does help those who are living to bear witness better, to come to greater awareness of the invisible despotism that is around us and in us. As the veils of false consciousness are torn asunder, like bodies rendered, the true nature of social reality is exposed and we have no ethical choice but to strengthen our resolve to be more committed, more receptive, more compassionate, and more engaged.

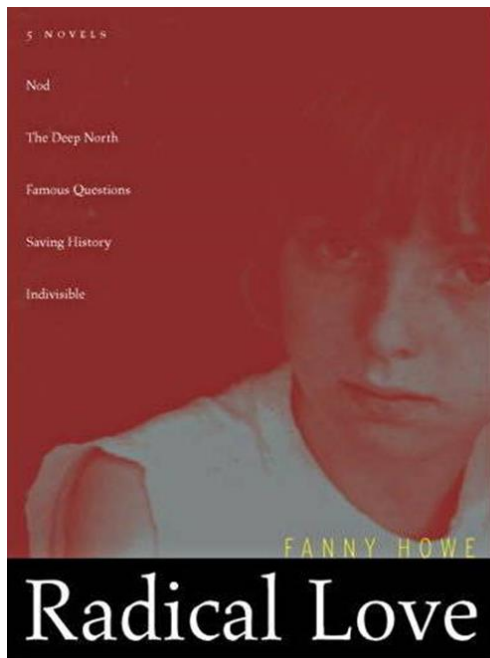
Art is never separate from these political questions, but certain questions return to plague those people who are committed to making art, questions like: What do I choose to witness? What am I capable of witnessing? How do I create or invent forms or structures that can hold and represent these commitments and visions.

I have always been interested in the ways that Fanny Howe has answered these questions through her work. She has done as much as any writer I know to be willing to live out the paradoxical dialect between beauty and trauma. Through a life of dogged and daring enterprise, she has created new forms and structures that make transformative experiences possible.

“Maybe the sacred grove of our time is either the prison or the grave site of a massacre. I have always believed that I must visit those sacred groves, and not the woodlands, if I want to know the truth.”

Fanny Howe, *Indivisible* (466)

Beginning Twoⁱⁱ



There is so much to say about our subject tonight—the beautiful, elusive fiction of Fanny Howe— that it is impossible to be systematic or comprehensive. This presentation will just point to a few ideas that may help spark future conversations. Specifically I want to think about the innovative forms Fanny has developed and how they contribute to a culture of resistance.

One of the texts that I have been re-reading to prepare for this discussion is the novel *Indivisible*. Like most of the novels collected in *Radical Love*, it deals with racially mixed or racially ambiguous characters who are the working poor, living on the fringes of functional society in almost total obscurity.

They are an eclectic and interconnected assortment of unrewarded artists, intellectuals, and spiritual seekers. The female characters have often experienced some type of abuse or trauma and have rag tag collections of children and wayfarers around them.

Indivisible is a speculative and spiritual novel that centers on Henny, a white experimental filmmaker—a foster-mother who lives a questing and contemplative inner life. She might be labeled a loser in that she never ever gets what she wants. Her films are rarely shown, if ever; her finances are a bust; all the outward signs point to a private life that is an accumulation of loss and wreckage.

She is married to a handsome folk musician, McCool, who is by turns charming, dissolute, generous, brutal—but who remains totally blind to the imbalances and criminality he inflicts on people, especially his wife. Like many of the husband figures in Fanny's work, McCool embodies a seething set of contradictions. He is a talented misfit, smart and quick to judge, ultimately not to be trusted. The husband figures like McCool transcend individual mechanism of patriarchal repression, enter into the symbolic, operating as godlike walls of derision, making a mockery of any wish for domestic happiness.

McCool possesses qualities that redeem him, but he has already knocked the protagonist toward the necessary shattering of certitude.

Henny and McCool don't love each other but they are fated to be together unhappily. McCool carries on a prolonged affair Henny's best friend Libby who has survived paternal incest and lives a life of drug addiction, sexual degradation, and spiritual seeking. Meanwhile Henny's true love is the stubborn, grumpy black journalist named Lewis—who occupies the perfect center of Henny's world of permanent longing and desire. She cherishes Lewis beyond all reason, but their relationship remains entirely plutonic and fraught with near misses of intimacy that sting Henny for life.

The book begins with Henny locking her husband McCool in a small closet where he bumps around for the rest of the novel. She has reasons for thus imprisoning him which don't become clear until much later. While she figures out what to do with McCool and while she decides if she is going to adopt the blind child of a political prisoner, a lifetime of fragmented stories come in and out of focus, progressing, looping forward then back like an enlarging net, spiraling toward an almost mythic intensity.

On the surface of plot summary, *Indivisible* sounds joyless. But this is not the case. Like her previous two novels *Saving History* and *Nod* it is a work of brilliant originality exemplifying what the critic Clive Bell called “significant form”—that is the discovery of “moving combinations and arrangements” that “transport us from the world of man's activity to the world of aesthetic exultation.” One framework for thinking about how Fanny effects the transformation from tragedy to transcendence is by studying the use of form, which serves to estrange us from banality, offering visions of emancipation.

Over the years, I have come to think of Fanny's novels less as novels and more as poetic essays—in the French sense of the verb *essayer*—to test or to try. The limits and capacities of language are that which is being tested. These works can be understood as the hybrid works that postcolonial critics like Edward Said and Homi Bhabha heralded, asking us to take a closer look at the interstices and the borderlands.

Fanny's fictions inhabit and interrogate the borderlands and boundaries in subversive and elusive ways. They straddle the worlds of mystical and secular, abstraction and representation, prose and poetry, creativity and scholarship. While rooted in a lyric and mimetic tradition, her narrative structures are inconsistent with the legacy of the nineteenth century novel and its representation of history as a cumulative, chronological, and scientifically discernible process.

Especially in later works, Howe's chronologies tend to be mystical and arcane; the stories are intercut with acute observations, improvisational tracts, spiritual and theological interpolations, dreamy deliveries of ever-shifting settings, and seemingly illogical juxtapositions. I've often thought of these poetic interruptions of story as analogous to the chorus in Greek tragedy, adding the Dionysian element of music and poetry, connecting the story to the larger world of gods and mythology, amplifying the emotional register, delaying the linear progress of the story. This is only an analogy, because if you read *Indivisible* or any of Fanny's last three novels, most of formal innovation is unprecedented.

In Howe's work we have three-dimensional characters, but they do and say odd things. There are settings, but they are seen as if through a leaky lens that suddenly fills with obstructive elements. Grandiose assertions of fact are like vestigial remnants of nineteenth century omniscience. They are offered with a great deal of verve—only to be pilloried and trampled upon with an almost playful glee. Reversals of dogma, displacements, dislocations. Add here any word that implies estrangement.

These excursions through landscapes of weirdness can be thought of as "open forms," an idea that originates in the world of art and architecture. Open forms are works that are not polished or self-referential, but have many entryways and exits and that point outside themselves. They are suggestive rather than conclusive. In Fanny's case, the forms are raw, untempered and frayed at the edges, like Velcro, producing a stickiness and friction.

By juxtaposing images and ideas and passages that are seemingly unrelated and by doing so repeatedly and even obsessively, Fanny has stamped out a new literary logic that we are forced to reckon with. Her novels may be an attempt to create a linguistic parallel to the kind of multi-layered, evocative work

that visual artists can achieve somewhat effortlessly through collage, photography, film, digital manipulation and chance operations—creating images that are non-hierarchical, layered, abstract, indeterminate—and not reliant on linear time.

During the interview with *Bomb* magazine that I referenced earlier, Fanny told me that she named the collection of her five most important novels *Radical Love* after a series of works by the painter Franz Kline.

By making this connection through naming and referencing, Fanny links her works with several vocabularies, most notably the vocabulary of political radicalism and its suggestion of militancy, but also the vocabulary of abstract expressionism, an art movement often assailed from the Left for its distance from the everyday struggles of the working class.



Painting Number 2, Franz Kline

Avant-garde modernism has famously been critiqued for its lack of a political subject—and rightly so—after all, we should not stop asking the questions that help us to grasp the purposes of art. Given the urgent crises of our times—the state of permanent war, the rise of a repressive surveillance state, cultural and ethnic erasure, the specter of global warming—and given the rise of a new brand of invisible fascism that has taken root in our institutions and discourses, it is only natural to wonder whether experimental art—or any art for that matter—serves a meaningful social function.

I want to use the rest of time allotted tonight to say yes it does. I would like to swing the dialectic in the other direction and say yes—even abstract, non-representational art serves a vital social function—not just to animate our senses and bring respite to our weary days. Experimental art works also can

serve as “the negation of the conformist mind;” (Marcuse). They allow us to experience social contradictions directly and estrange us from those conditions.

In his 1951 essay “Cultural Criticism and Society” Theodor Adorno argues that traditional culture has become neutralized and worthless. The dominant discourse has become totalizing. He writes: “All phenomena rigidify, become insignias of the absolute rule of that which is.” In this materialist vision, shaped by the intensity of his study of fascism, Adorno paints an almost dystopian portrait of the power of propaganda and the impossibilities of individuation within it.

In a separate but related essay “The Autonomy of Art,” Adorno delineates the way art’s vital and dissident function is only realized when it maintains its absolute disconnection from a reified social reality. “Art will only live on,” he says, “only as long as it has the power to resist society.” Defending radical modernism and taking aim at the German expressionists, social realists, naturalists, he also condemns any artistic movement that by “siding with dubious political interventions find themselves regularly enmeshed in false consciousness.”

Marcuse takes up Adorno’s defense of modernists like Beckett and Kafka who seemingly lack an overt political subject, but who nevertheless expose society’s oppressive contradictions. Marcuse tells us that the subversive power of art is in the aesthetic transformation. Through its transcendence of social determination, it lays bare the mystifications of ideology, breaking “the monopoly of established reality...to define what is real.”

I think this framework is useful in thinking about Fanny’s fiction, which as I said earlier, hasn’t gone completely off the grid at the symbolic level. She hasn’t completely discarded conventional elements of realism as some modernists and postmodernists have --and she hasn’t discarded politics as a subject. Her novels are informed by a long-standing identification with Leftist tendencies and movements. They grapple with issues of race, class, and gender, and in fact one could argue that what they are really doing is describing the spiritual fallout from the systematic destruction of the Left in the U.S.

The works return again and again to meditations on religious ideas, but very much in the Catholic Worker, Liberation Theology vein, that is to say that they take the Beatitudes to heart —valorizing the position of the meek, the poor, the servants, the slaves, the ones who are forced to accept loss and trauma as their daily bread. These fictions are placed at the the site of the defunct body where there is the possibility of access to a boundless spiritual world.

Once you decide to love the diseased, the downtrodden, and the afflicted, this love will bring you in such close proximity to suffering that you have no choice but to recognize the moral poverty and affliction in yourself. Radical love is an equalizer that destroys illusions of difference. If you follow the proposition *Love thine enemy*, this will be a shattering experience that will subvert any sense of entitlement. This elimination of the Other can only and inevitably lead you to Communism. These ideas are some the Catholic politics at work in Fanny's fiction.

Despite these political elements, Fanny's works do not adhere to any Marxist or theological doctrine. They are radical in the sense that they stand in fundamental opposition to power, to the production of power, to the spectacle of power reproducing itself. They survey power as if from a hidden GoPro cam attached to the underside of language itself. Their commitment is to a dialectics of naming and unnamings, positing then contradicting, swirling up dust storms of dissidence in the process. The jarring, seemingly irrational structures that Fanny has invented pry apart the logic of capitalism, and the logic of cultural hegemony, which is a logic of amnesia and denial rather than the practice of mindfulness and observation.

If the objective social reality that we face is the expansion of what Guy Debord characterized as the 'Society of the Spectacle' or what Baudrillard theorized as the 'Simulacrum' —a hyper-mediated regime of false consciousness that is totalizing, Fanny's work provokes radically divergent aesthetic responses. It keeps us guessing, contests the logic of easy consumption. It encourages praxis, demanding a new kind of transaction with the reader. It requires a suspension of the reader's need to know. It is fugitive by design.

In *Indivisible* the story is quiet one. It is the story of a consciousness, Henny's consciousness, circling back in time, remembering, inquiring, trying to get at the spiritual meaning of radical loss, radical loneliness. We are totally deterritorialized and the question isn't, for example, what will happen to Henny or what will become of McCool who has been bumping around in the closet, but what will happen me, the reader?

I am forced confront my assumptions and certainties, my positioning in the world. Where am I standing? From what angle do I view suffering? From what position do I speak, and in the name of whom?

Though describing marginalized communities, the narratives never descend to the level of a prurient gaze offering digestible sentimental lessons about The Other. Mystical at their core, asserting the oneness and the incomprehensible nature of the world, these works thwart the very framework that keeps the other as other...It otherizes the self to the point of non-recognition. By shattering the illusions of the ego, it shatters the necessity of human cruelty.

These fictions make no attempt at presenting themselves as lyric inevitabilities the way the Western genre of realism has tended to do. Realism strives to make the story feel as if the hand of god had hewn the work in a single deft gesture. Fanny is not interested in this creating this illusion. She deploys elements of realism, yes, that provide a level of comfort which is quickly shorn away, effectively shifting the focus away from the ego, from notions of mastery and prowess—and into the area of praxis, practice, dialectical engagement.

Rather than closed, polished forms, these open forms consciously present themselves as assemblages. When I say the word assemblage, I want to conjure the idea of an assembly process, to think of labor, of making labor visible—not veiling it—but exposing the seams of the work in a deliberate way—to make the reader conscious of the choices, conscious of the writer as a worker--a worker whose work is assert the value of the life of the mind and the imagination; to assert the necessity of the contemplative life and to insist that the human condition will not be defined by physical subjugation; that human possibility is limitless and irreducible.

In *Indivisible* Henny says: “To tell someone that a person contains a blueprint of the cosmos can be misleading because the person can’t just lean over and read it. The blueprint doesn’t exist without someone beaming the light on it and I hate to say it, but this operation takes a lifetime of excruciating searching.” In other words, someone has to shine the light, someone has to do the searching.

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A poet friend of mine once said to me that she can’t read Fanny Howe’s work because it makes her feel stupid. I don’t have this reaction because maybe I’ve accepted my limitations, but I understand where she’s coming from. Fanny’s work is always puzzling and interlaced with arcane holy-talk. Any attempt to find systematic ways to understand it and pin it down are doomed. You will either find joy in getting lost in a dazzling accrual of poetic interventions, or you will not.

In *The Autonomy of Art* Adorno writes that “freedom from repression can be represented only by what does not succumb to repression.” As a reader I take courage in Fanny’s radical obedience to the cause of freedom and her refusal to submit to repression.

Fanny resists. She opens the way for us. Her work makes a range of things audible and visible that were previously inaudible and invisible, by naming and creating a structure in which strangeness of vision finds a place. What she has chosen to witness are acts and occurrences that take place outside the realm of conscious power; these are what the character Tom in *Indivisible* (and *Saving History*) calls

Salvation History—the history of revelations—the ones that “are unrecorded and obscure.” These revelations are like gusts of wind that fill the sails or winds that hold up planes and birds.

She has chosen not to pour her talent into a pre-made, easily commodified form, but rather carved out a creative space that has allowed for her to address all that she wants to address. In the interstices of the story, the fragmenting of the story, the slow revelation, a radiant portrait begins to emerge from the distorted reflections if you are patient. Like an impressionist painting, you have to move forward and pull back a few times to get the full effect.

In *Indivisible* Henny, the lonely experimental filmmaker says that her films are about seven things: “1. geographic cures as religious acts; 2. parental betrayals and lies; 3. the nearly unsupportable weight of the world’s beauty (God); 4. how to stay uncorrupted; 5. a political act as a gesture of existential discomfort; 6. childhood for children; 7. race in America.”

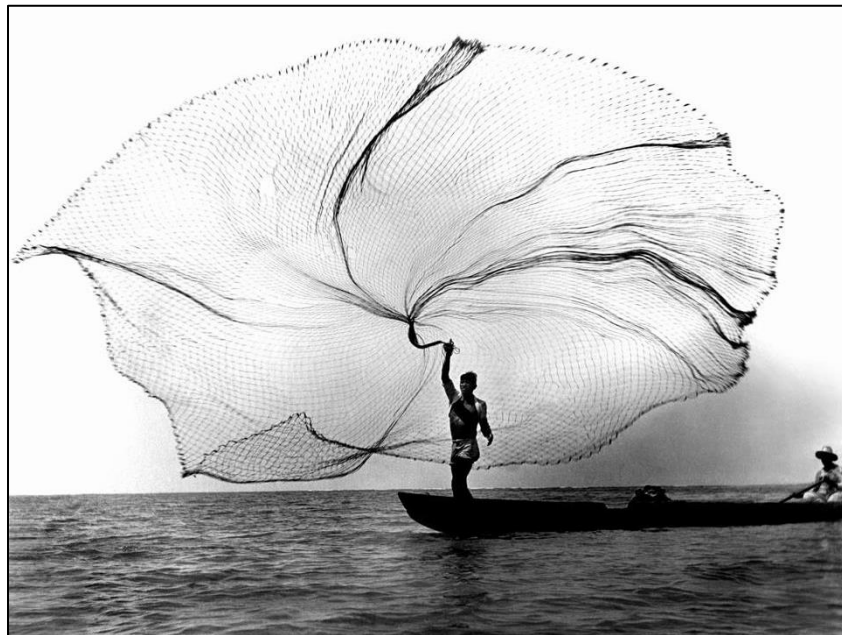
The key for me right now is number 4. How to stay uncorrupt. Through her subversive forms, her perpetual shift in gaze, Fanny shows points at the ways escapes becoming corrupt—and encourages us to do the same.

I didn’t say as much about *Indivisible* as I intended. In the end, Henny decides to release and then exile her pathological husband once and for all—to send him far, far away. This is her second decisive choice in the book. Her first choice is to decide to mother the blind child of the political prisoner Gemma, even though Henny is middle aged and her child rearing days should be behind her. Henny herself has been spiritually and emotionally motherless, so this intervention signals the important possibility of change and evolution. The child’s blindness represents a reversal of what it means to see and to witness. He is a visionary of the inner life and is born to turn a blind eye to the social and racial divisions of the world.

Lewis the black journalist who is Henny’s impossible love has been paralyzed from the waist down while reporting in a war zone in Africa. It is Lewis who observes that the redeeming aspect of blindness is that the blind person can’t see color differences. He can’t see race. In this sense blindness is a virtue.

I spoke earlier of choice and chance. Fanny's choice to make the child blind to the outer world can be seen as the assertion of the inner life that has been negated in our capitalist Society of the Spectacle. It is a valorization again of the Beatitudes and call for us to free ourselves to witness in different more intuitive ways.

I want to end with another image that think of Fanny and her work. It is a photograph taken in 1939 by Leo Matiz off the Caribbean coast of Colombia.



It is difficult to tell if this fisherperson is a man or a woman or black or white or what. The human figure is the skilled and seeking axis upon which much greater things happen. A net is made of string and air. The fact that something so useful can almost entirely be made of air is a paradox.

The net is cast to its full and marvelous extension—it is unskinned by a skilled, anonymous hand. Soon a school of fish will be trapped in its malleable form, massacred and consumed. This the photo is reminiscent of the image of the children in Gaza, the inevitable is inscribed in the context of what we are seeing, even when we do not see what comes next.

But there is a magical moment of string and air and shadow captured before the kill...or in those beautiful children's limbs dancing, hovering forever in our memory. The moment of innocence is a fiction, but also not a fiction because we can recognize its truth and cannot deny that the pursuit of art is to offer the solace of aesthetic transformation and provoke the desire to chase after beauty whenever and wherever we can.

ⁱ This brief essay was published in *Sundial* (November, 2014) as part of the Scrutiny Seminar Series hosted by the Center for Marxist Education in Cambridge, MA. <http://damnthecaesars.org/sundial.html>

ⁱⁱ This part of the essay is the seminar I presented live on Saturday, November 8, 2014.